Claire Allen

Daniel Adleman

WRR407

29 April 2024

#diyDSM-5: The rhetoric of self-diagnosis in the age of social media

Since their inception in the late 2000s and early 2010s, social media have become integral to the ways in which people experience and interact with culture. As a result, culture itself has begun to change, shaping itself around the novel tools that have come into existence with rapidly accelerating technological development. Whereas "Web 1.0" allowed users to create sovereign digital spaces from which they could interact with the Internet, the connectivity of "Web 2.0" erased the existence of digital sovereignty altogether, networking the spaces that users had created and putting them in perpetual interaction with and observation of one another (Tolentino, 2020). Although it began as a method of connecting the IRL[1] existences of people, the Internet soon blossomed into a space entirely its own; indeed, the inception of Web 2.0 created a space on which people could build digital lives entirely unrelated to their real, physical ones.

In particular, the entrance of Instagram into the public consciousness marks the beginning of a great change in the way people perceive themselves and others, and this change continues to culminate in ways that can be observed online. Founded in 2010, Instagram is an image-based social networking platform on which users may interact with each other through their self

[1] The acronym "IRL" stands for "In Real Life," and is usually used on the Internet to distinguish between one's digital and 'real' life. Because one's digital life is increasingly becoming part of their 'real' one, largely as a result of the phenomena I discuss here, I will use this term to refer to the 'real', physical lives of users throughout this paper.

constructed profiles. These profiles typically reveal a user's identity through visual content and some basic personal information (users can include their name, a short bio, and links to other sites or pages as they wish. They can also choose to connect their email or phone number to their account (Instagram, 2024)). While Instagram was preceded by other social media platforms, it is distinguished by its basis in visual content—whereas other platforms, such as Facebook, heavily feature text posts, Instagram users are largely limited to posting only photo or video content to their profiles.[2]

Social media have long been used by members of different subcultures to find community and interact with each other. Specifically, they have provided the space for many people struggling with mental health disorders to identify and converse with one another. In the early-mid 2010s, this was most prominently found on Tumblr, a microblogging site created in 2007. Unlike Instagram, Tumblr was text based, allowing its users to post images or videos if they wished but centring around blogging and the typed word as its primary form of content. Additionally, Tumblr was not a platform that put particular focus on its users' IRL identities—a user could easily remain anonymous on Tumblr, if they so desired. It is likely because of this easily maintained anonymity that communities centred around mental illness and self harm flourished on Tumblr. Users could talk about their ailments with others who understood their problems, for free, without revealing their identity to their interlocutors. However, as is the case with many forms of digital media, Tumblr eventually became obsolete, and the communities that it supported migrated onto other platforms (Statista, 2024). It seems that now, the content of these communities has settled on Instagram. Given its close proximity in age to Tumblr, and its

[2] In 2016, Instagram added a "Stories" feature which allows users to create text posts—however, these posts do not appear on users' main profiles, and are only public for 24 hours unless designated otherwise by the user. More information can be found at https://about.instagram.com/features/stories.

popularity among similar generations (DemandSage, 2024) (Social Shepherd, 2024), this transplant is not necessarily surprising. However, the visual nature of Instagram, its relative eschewing of anonymity, and its operation as a non-forum based platform—which does not create the same space for subcultural or communal discussion, but networks the online community by centralizing the platform around profiles rather than pages and blogs—are insidiously changing the ways in which this content operates.

On Instagram, users are their IRL selves first. Rather than separate their online and offline selves, they must bring their offline selves into the online world. Before they can be their interest, or their hobby, or a participant in a discussion, they must exist as their own name and their own face.[3] It is widely known that many users hyper-curate their Instagram profiles, perhaps altering their appearance in photos or performing a version of themselves that is not entirely authentic. However, it is particularly dangerous for these tendencies to collide with the (now networked) communities centred around mental health disorders that were born on, and subsisted through the Internet. Due to the nature of Instagram as a platform that demands its users to be themselves first—rather than allow them to more easily anonymize their profiles and create a degree of disconnect between their IRL-selves and their online-selves—many users who encounter content created about mental health disorders and their symptoms may begin to characterize themselves in the context of that disorder and its symptoms in an effort to appeal to an unseen audience and compulsively apply a label to any adverse feelings they experience. For users who have a mental health disorder, constant exposure to content which relates to and builds an audience around their disorder may cause them to eschew healing and healthy coping in

[3] Of course, there is always possibility for anonymity—however, Instagram's centralization of the profile and role as a visual, personal social media platform still implicate anonymous accounts in the system that demands identity-first interaction.

favour of remaining relatable to others within this community and to continue to be validated as suffering by this content and its audience. For users who do not have a mental health disorder, exposure to this content and recognition of its audience may cause them to begin recognizing or emulating disordered symptoms within themselves, despite their not having a disorder, in order to satisfy an imagined viewer and fit themselves into the rigid categories of mental health that exist in online discourse. In both cases, exposure to content related to mental health disorders on a platform that privileges those who command an audience can cause users to view themselves as ill, even if they have every reason and right to believe they cannot be. This phenomenon has transformed self-diagnosis of mental health disorders into a rhetorical issue. As something that now involves the recognition of one's symptoms in others, the persuasion of oneself and of others that these symptoms have manifest in a similar way in oneself, and the subsequent self-labelling that occurs, self-diagnosis of mental health disorders is now conducted through rhetoric and persuasion, rather than through professional medical or psychological discussion and analysis.

Hypochondriacal habits and their online manifestations

In her 2005 book, *Health and the rhetoric of medicine,* Judy Segal argues for hypochondria as a rhetorical disorder, as opposed to a psychological or biological one:

> Contemporary hypochondriacs are people who have become persuaded in the absence of an organic precipitating cause that they are ill. Often, external agents who publicly advertise diseases and treatments have persuaded them that they are ill; in private, and often in the middle of the night, hypochondriacs have persuaded themselves. Hypochondriacs bear the burden, then, of persuading physicians and others (family

> members, for example) that they are in need of care. Only rhetorical resources are available to them for this purpose (74-5).

Essentially, Segal argues that hypochondria subsists through a cycle of recognition and persuasion. The hypochondriac recognizes a disease in another person; the hypochondriac then persuades themselves that they recognize this disease within themselves; then the hypochondriac must persuade others outside of themselves that they have this disease. She also discusses the tendency of hypochondria to conform to what is 'fashionable'. Quoting James M Adair, she notes that "hypochondria itself is a somewhat nebulous disorder that enters the public imagination and finds adherents: 'Fashion has long influenced the great and opulent in the choice of their physicians…it has influenced them also in the *choice* of their diseases'" (80).

On Instagram, especially when it comes to content related to mental health disorders, the same hypochondriacal tendencies can occur in users. However, they do not necessarily stem from the compulsive need to diagnose oneself from which the hypochondriac suffers. The Instagram user does not automatically become a hypochondriac when they log onto Instagram; rather, they adopt the same processes of recognition and persuasion to place themselves within illness narratives that they witness on social media. Content surrounding mental health disorders on Instagram sometimes tends to centre around a message of 'normalization'. In an effort to raise awareness of and break the stigma around mental health disorders, creators on Instagram and other social media post content that discusses mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety, through a lens of normalization—and although this is often well-intended, it may ultimately cause more harm than good. A study from 2023 which compared reactions to content that normalized anxiety with reactions to content that simply raised awareness for anxiety showed that, when presented with content that normalizes anxiety, participants would expect

anxiety disorders to be more common, and would be more likely to consider their own anxiety as disordered (Hasan et al., 570). The study notes that, while the normalization of mental illnesses and disorders can increase the chances of those suffering to seek help, normalization leads to an increase in self diagnosis and can cause users to believe that normal feelings of anxiety are indicative of a disorder (570).

Aside from messages of normalization, the very activity of users within these communities may not only lead them to think that they have a mental health disorder when, in reality, they have little reason to believe so; it can also cause users to tie up their identity with narratives of mental disorder, causing users both with and without mental health disorders to characterize themselves as ill in order to maintain their created identities online. On algorithmic social media, such as Instagram, users can easily fall into echochambers which reinforce their own beliefs and opinions, limiting their exposure to opposing or contradictory content. An echochamber is defined as "an environment where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own," and can occur anywhere that information circulates (GCF Global, 2024). The nature of the Instagram algorithm is conducive to the creation of echochambers—it automatically feeds content to users that is extremely similar to that which they have already seen. Thus, the issue of the echochamber becomes far more prevalent—users can fall into echochambers entirely by accident, simply because they engaged heavily with a particular idea or style of content on social media. In her book, *Blog Theory,* Jodi Dean discusses the creation of echochambers online through the Žižekian concept of the decline in symbolic efficiency:

> If the efficiency of a symbol designates its mobility, its ability to transmit significance not simply from one person to another but from one setting to another, the decline of

> symbolic efficiency points to an immobility or failure of transmission…sometimes it's difficult to tell when a blog or a post is ironic and when it's sincere…Terms and styles of expression that make sense to an "in-group" can shock, insult, or enrage folks who just happen upon a blog (Dean, 5).

She proposes that this decline in symbolic efficiency creates gaps between communities online that make it increasingly difficult for them to understand each other. In extreme cases, symbolic efficiency may decline so greatly that groups online may no longer want, or see the need to understand each other. This contributes to users becoming isolated, constantly seeing the same subject matter regurgitated on their feeds—as a result, they become surrounded by content which inundates them with awareness, and sometimes normalization, of mental health disorders. When immersed so deeply in such content, users may begin to see their online selves as existing within the context of it; and on a platform that holds user's IRL-identity at the heart of their online ones, this immersion can lead to a harmful self-characterization in which users, both on and offline, begin to view themselves and their mental health through a lens of illness or disorder.

Isolation and loathing as a result of the influencer economy

The creation of a community, both on and offline, stems from the impulse that people have to fit in with each other. In order to build connections with others, people may show different aspects of their personality more prominently depending on the people they are with. This is normal behaviour, but on social media, it mutates. Specifically on Instagram, the counts of likes and followers that define one's profile, and which serve as tangible and objective markers of one's online popularity, can begin to influence one's thought and self-perception. As a result, many users glamorize their lives online, giving others the impression that their profile

reflects their IRL-self when in reality, it is “about as realistic as a movie set” (Australian Government eSafety, 2023).

This impulse towards glamorization has even caused a new standard of beauty to emerge. Jia Tolentino writes about this in her 2019 article, *The Age Of Instagram Face.* She writes on how the photo filters that users have access to on Instagram and other social media, such as Snapchat, allow them to tweak their photos and make themselves more conventionally attractive with a few taps and button clicks. She suggests that this power has led to the development of something called ‘Instagram-face’, which she describes as “a young face, of course, with poreless skin and plump, high cheekbones…catlike eyes and long, cartoonish lashes…a small, neat nose and full, lush lips. It looks at you coyly but blankly, as if its owner has taken half a Klonopin and is considering asking you for a private-jet ride to Coachella” (Tolentino, 2019). She also notes that, while this face is distinctly white, it has a racially ambiguous quality, its individual features having evolved in diverse ethnic groups and not naturally occurring together. It’s reminiscent of Kim Kardashian, whom Tolentino refers to as “patient zero” for Instagram-face—most importantly, it cannot be achieved without some sort of cosmetic intervention.

In the second half of the article, Tolentino writes about consultations that she goes to with plastic surgeons in Los Angeles. She writes about how procedures such as fillers and Botox are becoming routine for many young women, especially in Los Angeles. She writes about how her friends have begun to undergo these procedures regularly themselves, and how for some days after her consultations, she “avoided looking too closely at [her] own face” (Tolentino, 2019). She does all of this without judgement, but it becomes clear throughout the article how her proximity to this artificial beauty begins to take a toll on her:

> As I drove back to my hotel, I felt sad and subdued and self-conscious. I had thought that I was researching this subject at a logical distance: that I could inhabit the point of view of an ideal millennial client, someone who wanted to enhance rather than fix herself, who was ambitious and pragmatic. But I left with a very specific feeling, a kind of bottomless need…which I had not experienced in a long time (Tolentino, 2019).

Tolentino writes poignantly about the intense standards of beauty that are active on Instagram, the exorbitant highs that users (particularly women) must climb to in order to meet them, and the crushing lows that may await them if they don't. This phenomenon is something that permeates Instagram and social media at large. The hyper-curated nature of many online profiles, especially of celebrities and influencers, causes many users to feel inadequate about their profiles and their lives. Arguably, this cycle contributes to the increasing levels of self-diagnosed mental health disorders, like depression and anxiety, that have been observed as a result of social media; users see the cosmetically altered standards of beauty that dominate Instagram feeds, they do not recognize themselves within them, and their self-esteem subsequently plummets.

In theory, users can alter their presence on social media in order to subvert the gaze that imposes this Instagram beauty standard upon them, by posting and performing themselves in a way that aligns with how they want to be viewed rather than what they think their audience wants to see. However, in practice, this subversion cannot exist. In their 2021 study, *The filtered self: selfies and gendered media production,* Laura Grindstaff and Gabriella Torres Valencia conduct a series of interviews to investigate the selfie as a form of gendered media production and determine its ability to perpetuate or purge the patriarchal gaze on digital and social media. They discuss that selfies are more of a 'do-it-yourself' medium of production than other forms of production that have existed throughout history—often, people (more often, women) take selfies

of themselves, for themselves, sometimes not even posting them to be viewed by others (Grindstaff & Torres Valencia, 734). They also cite theories that selfies "strike back" at mainstream beauty standards and culture by giving women control over the way they showcase themselves (735). However, their study ultimately finds that selfies, like all other forms of media production, must be considered in the cultural contexts under which they circulate, and that while they may induce a sense of empowerment for the individual who is able to choose how she is perceived, such an action alone does very little for the collective empowerment of women and to deconstruct the systems of oppression under which they live. In the short term, posting a cute photo of oneself with an Instagram filter feels good, empowering. In the long term, it fuels the patriarchal gaze that has subjugated women for centuries.

As a result of this beauty standard being set by people who can easily afford to spend time, money, and cosmetics on their looks, 'Instagram-face' is entirely unattainable for most. For all, it is unattainable without cosmetic surgery, makeup, filters, or some combination of the three. The power that these influencers have over their audiences, and within culture in general, makes any given Instagram user painfully aware of the existence of this beauty standard, and of the fact that they do not meet it. It is because of this that the intense hyper-curation of identity and profile on Instagram continues—in an effort to meet this standard, normal people living normal lives take measures to make their Instagram profiles appear as perfectly glamorous as possible. Whether it's choosing to post about a particularly lavish trip or event, or only taking selfies with a full face of makeup on, the condition of Instagram is such that its users feel compelled to appear almost untouchable to their audience, when in reality, their lives between posts are perfectly average. It is this falsification that causes users to feel ashamed of their on and offline

selves—and, in an effort to name and understand this shame, they may turn to social media, and eventually to self diagnosis.

Isolation, loathing, and the relief of self-diagnosis rhetoric

Together, these two phenomena—users' hypochondriacal recognition of illness symptoms within themselves as a result of consuming Instagram content, and users' exposure to a beauty standard on Instagram which, as a result of its impossible expectations, causes their self-esteem to plummet—work together to create a condition where users seek answers in self-diagnosis. Users may turn to self-diagnosis as an easy explanation for the symptoms they begin to observe in themselves as a result of content exposure, and to simultaneously understand their lacking self-worth that results from increased observation of oneself through the lens of the Instagram beauty standard. When faced with the novel negative emotions that exposure to Instagram can induce, users turn to what such Instagram exposure has led them to believe is the answer—self-diagnosis of a mental health disorder which they have come to understand through the Internet and Instagram content.

Thus, the self-diagnosis of mental health disorders is becoming a rhetorical issue rather than a medical or psychological one. Similar to Segal's theory on hypochondria, self-diagnosis has become rhetorical for the continuous convincing of oneself and of others that it involves. Users spend time online, within a world of impossible and unnatural standards; they feel badly about themselves for not meeting these standards; in the same realm, they encounter content that describes their symptoms of sadness and self-loathing; they continue consuming this content, and continue recognizing their symptoms among this content until they begin to consider them as more than symptoms, but as a disorder. Subsequently, the user diagnoses themselves with a mental health disorder, having successfully convinced themselves through the content-feedback

loop that they have symptoms enough to be considered disordered. Should they ever seek professional diagnosis, they will not present their symptoms to a medical or psychological professional to begin the diagnostic process; rather, they will present a medical or psychological professional with the disorder itself, and give extensive persuasive reasoning as to why they believe they have this disorder and require a diagnosis of it.

Ultimately, however, the biggest problem with self diagnosis is that it locks users in a narrative of disorder, causing them to characterize themselves as disordered or ill rather than consider how they can work towards recovering in productive, meaningful ways. On Instagram, the solution is not to heal; it is to label. When users experience a symptom of a mental health disorder as a result of existing online, such as a lowered sense of self-worth, and when they subsequently encounter content about this symptom, such content compels users to label their symptom rather than attempt at healing it. This compulsion towards labelling encourages users to self diagnose, effectively placing them into a narrative of illness in which they do not belong. A self diagnosis gives users a labelled reason to believe that they are ill, that there is something wrong with the way they think, when in reality what is wrong is the structure in which they have been placed on Instagram that compels them to feel this way. Therefore, rather than focus on an attempt at healing or healthy coping, users become tied to their labels—in their minds, they view themselves as sick, and even if this is true in some cases, to attach oneself to a label of sickness, and to define one's life in a narrative of sickness as a result, becomes a hindrance to one's health. To attach oneself so closely to a label in search of an answer to one's ailments, as Instagram demands, causes users to live their lives believing they are sick and must always be sick, rather than allowing them to believe that, with time and effort, they can heal and live healthily, with or without a mental health disorder.

Conclusion

Overall, Instagram does not easily allow users to interact in a healthy way with content relating to mental health disorders. The nature of Instagram as an algorithmic platform shaped by the influencer economy places users in cycles wherein the beauty standards of social media make them feel badly about themselves, thus they seek comfort through content, and as a result begin to see their feeling badly as a symptom within a disordered or ill narrative. Ultimately, this cycle causes users to view themselves as sick, both online and offline, engaging them in the rhetorical process of self-diagnosis and putting a label between them and their healing and healthy coping.

Although this paper focuses primarily on Instagram, there may be other avenues worthy of study on platforms such as TikTok, which caters to a younger demographic and is video-based. Additionally, further study of the content found on Tumblr would also be valuable, especially since the content on that platform based around mental illness and self-harm came to create its own subcultures, which created and posted content to their communal audiences based on their shared experiences (Seko & Lewis, 2021). Ultimately, Instagram remains a point in the infinite network of the Internet, and while it is a significant point indeed, it remains kinetic and spreading through networks, to and from other points and platforms, continuously linked with the active worlds that surround it in the Internet space.

Ultimately, the Internet and social media are dramatically changing the ways in which users consider mental health disorders and illnesses. While they have done a great amount of good by raising awareness of these disorders and allowing those suffering to gain easier access to effective help, they must also be considered for the fundamental ways they are changing how users view themselves, and subsequently, how users view their symptoms of disorder and illness. Users on Instagram who are put into the rhetorical process of self diagnosis may appear to find a

temporary answer to their symptomatic questions; however, this answer is currently one that forces them into close association with labels, placing them within narratives they may not identify with, and causing them to lose sight of their path to recovery.

Works Cited

"About the Instagram Company." *Explore News, Careers & More | About Instagram*, 2024, about.instagram.com/about-us.

Dean, Jodi. *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*. Polity Press, 2011.

"Digital Media Literacy: What Is an Echo Chamber?" *GCFGlobal.Org*, GCFGlobal Learning, 2024, edu.gcfglobal.org/en/digital-media-literacy/what-is-an-echo-chamber/1/.

Dixon, Stacy Jo. "Topic: Tumblr." *Statista*, 2024, www.statista.com/topics/2463/tumblr/.

Grindstaff, Laura, and Gabriella Torres Valencia. "The filtered self: Selfies and Gendered Media production." *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 24, no. 5, 31 Jan. 2021, pp. 733–750, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2021.1874480.

Hasan, Farah, et al. "Normalizing anxiety on social media increases self-diagnosis of anxiety: The mediating effect of identification (but not stigma)." *Journal of Health Communication*, vol. 28, no. 9, 13 July 2023, pp. 563–572, https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730.2023.2235563.

"Pressures from Social Media." *eSafety Commissioner*, 2023, www.esafety.gov.au/young-people/pressures-from-social-media.

Segal, Judy Z. "Hypochondria as a Rhetorical Disorder." *Health and the Rhetoric of Medicine*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2005, pp. 74–90.

Seko, Yukari, and Stephen P Lewis. "The self—harmed, visualized, and reblogged: Remaking of self-injury narratives on Tumblr." *New Media & Society*, vol. 20, no. 1, 28 July 2016, pp. 180–198, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816660783.

Shepherd, Jack. *25 Essential Instagram Statistics You Need to Know in 2024*, Apr. 2024, thesocialshepherd.com/blog/instagram-statistics.

Shewale, Rohit. "Essential Tumblr Statistics 2024 (Users & Traffic)." *DemandSage*, 12 Apr. 2024, www.demandsage.com/tumblr-statistics/#:~:text=Let's%20take%20a%20look%20at,users%20in%20the%20United%20States.

Tolentino, Jia. "The Age of Instagram Face." *The New Yorker*, 12 Dec. 2019, www.newyorker.com/culture/decade-in-review/the-age-of-instagram-face.

Tolentino, Jia. "The I in the Internet." *CCCB LAB*, CCCB Lab, 20 Feb. 2020, lab.cccb.org/en/the-i-in-the-internet/.