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Pop Culture Intersections

The Misconception of College Life: How Popular Media is

Making it Worse

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Abstract:

This article explores the misconceptions of the life of a college student and the daily struggles that get overlooked. Colleges provide support for the most prevalent cases of mental illness but disregard those who do not display these obvious signs. This focus on only those with extreme needs leaves the majority of students feeling lost and not knowing where to go for help; their feelings are not warranted and unless they are suicidal, it is not of a concern. I will argue that on top of the stresses of acclimating to college, daily work and social pressures, social media has become an additional, significant source of stress inducer for students. Students feel like they cannot ask for help because they risk ruining this “perfect college image” that is displayed all over social media. By examining this lesser publicized problem, I will show that forms of popular media and social media are ruining the college experience for many and not addressing the issues of lower levels of mental illness.

Introduction:

Context: Ultimate Result of College Depression

Suicide is an important known cause of death among college students. In fact, 6% of undergraduates and 4% of graduate students in 4-year colleges have “seriously considered attempting suicide” in the past year according to The College Degree Search (*Crisis on Campus: the Untold Story of Student Suicides* 2015). Even the suicide rate among young adults, ages 15-24 has tripled since the 1950s. This makes us wonder how young people with so much talent and promise could end their own lives. Second only to accidental death, suicide is a leading cause of death among college students. Each year about 10 to 15 percent of college students

seriously think about suicide and approximately 2 to 4 percent will actually make an attempt. Inside Higher ED estimated that in any given year approximately 7.5 suicides occur for every 100,000 college students, a figure that translates into nearly 1,400 suicides annually (Schwartz, *Suicide Realities* 2010).

While any death of a young person is heartbreaking, in comparison to the number of college students in America, suicides are numerically rare. Statistics show that the number of suicides on campuses has remained relatively stable over the past 10 years (Schwartz, *Suicide Realities* 2010). This suggests that colleges and their faculty may be doing a better job at identifying and treating the underlying causes of suicide, such as depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and substance abuse. Educational outreach programs also seem to be effective in assisting students, faculty and administrators to identify psychological problems and decreasing the stigma often associated with seeking treatment. While all of these observations and statistics indicate that things are being done to address the issue of suicide on college campuses, the efforts and preventative programs target only the most extreme cases. “Depression and loneliness are important factors to consider in understanding suicide risk” especially when it comes to college students (Chang et al., *Depression, Loneliness, and Suicide Risk among Latino College Students: A Test of a Psychosocial Interaction Model* 2018).

Scholarly Debate: Misconceptions About Depression

While progress has been made to share common misconceptions about depression, there are still steps that need to be taken. However, there are some effective movements in play. The depression awareness organization Blurt launched the #WhatYouDontSee movement, which aims to show that "depression can hit anyone, at any time, regardless of age, gender, and

personal circumstances," says a Blurt blog post (Barnes, *People Are Using Social Media To Share Common Misconceptions About Depression* 2017). Depression is an invisible illness and one that you can't tell from just looking at the outside who is suffering (Greenlee & Hyde, *Suicide and Depression in Older Adults: Greater Awareness Can Prevent Tragedy* 2014). While there are a select few people that open up about their depression, they often receive reactions like "you don't look depressed" (Barnes, *People Are Using Social Media To Share Common Misconceptions About Depression* 2017)." Comments like these are ones that exacerbate the stigma and make people feel like depression should be something that should be hidden. While this movement has made progress at bringing awareness to the concealment of depression, work still needs to be done to encourage the belief that no one should feel ashamed about their depression. The hope is that as it is being recognized as a legitimate disability and a condition you cannot blame yourself for, it is accompanied by the understanding that depression's invisibility doesn't make it any less of a devastating illness.

Mental illness, while the word suggests a severe condition, spans a wide range of conditions where one's mental health is jeopardized. More formally, mental illness is defined by the National Alliance on Mental Illness as "A wide range of conditions that affect mood, thinking and behavior" (*Mental Health Conditions* 2019). These states range from mild anxiety to depression to the extreme illnesses that lead to suicide. I am approaching the perception of college life from the perspective of mental health; among the range of possible afflictions, anxiety and depression are two of the more common amongst college students. Numerous studies have found that less than 50 percent of depressed college students seek help, and not all manifest obvious signs of their depression. In addition to the everyday struggles of college life, this

hidden issue takes a toll on the mental health of students, only to be exacerbated by societal perceptions and students' efforts to manage and control the perceptions they make upon others via social media.

Heading into college as a freshman, most students begin their experience with a preconceived idea of what the next four years of their lives are going to be like. And while everyone, including the media, seems to tell you the same thing, it is most often not the case. College is supposed to be a state of limbo in which you're meant to figure out what the next, independent chapter of your life will look like, but often that four-year college plan comes crashing down. Even the media portrays college to be one big party and implies that you have to figure out your life, your career, make lifelong friends and have amazing experiences and that it all comes easily. I want to expand on these misconceptions of college life and bring to light the realities of the struggles of a regular college student, one who might be suffering from a form of mental illness, no matter how minor.

Argument: Additional stressors that aggravate conditions

Colleges provide support for the most prevalent cases of mental illness but disregard those who do not display these obvious signs. This focus on only those with extreme needs leaves the majority of students feeling lost and not knowing where to go for help; their feelings are not warranted and unless they are suicidal, it is far less of a concern. I will argue that on top of the stresses of acclimating to college, daily work and social pressures, social media has become an additional, significant source of stress for students and has made students feel as if their issues are not validated. Students feel like they cannot ask for help because they risk ruining this "perfect college image" that is displayed all over social media. By examining this lesser

publicized problem and the students who milder cases of mental health, I will show that forms of popular media and social media are impacting the college experience for many and not addressing the issues of lower levels of mental illness.

Background: Expectations

The pressure to perform, to have the “perfect college experience” and to achieve begins before the college years, setting a stage for the anxiety and depression that can often follow. In high school, many students feel that they are not really taught how to get into the right college, despite counselors’ efforts. There are the lucky few who are able to hire a tutor, but most students will often admit that they try to learn the college preparation process as they journey through it. Especially during senior year, the focus in high school is all about building toward college applications, studying for the SAT or ACT, bettering your GPA, applying for scholarships and getting into the perfect school. The prestige behind many institutions fosters competition to beat out other students, or encourage students to set unrealistic expectations that only lead to disappointment or depression. College campus tours themselves, in an attempt to convey the school in the best light, all add pressure to the college application experience. In addition, those visits don’t give us more than a small amount of true insight to college life, so we turn to the media.

There are many great examples of Hollywood embellishing the truth about college and college life. From portrayal of unique college acceptances in films like “Admission” and “Legally Blonde” to classics like “Animal House” and “Pitch Perfect”, we learn that college should be one big party, and fraternities and sororities are the crux of college life. Legally Blonde shows us that all the main character, Elle Woods, had to do to get into Harvard Law

School was submit a video of herself in a bikini as her admissions essay explaining why she's going to make an amazing lawyer. While a club can be a valuable experience of your college life, Pitch Perfect myopically puts an acapella music group as a top priority, one where the members of this club forget about their social life, school work, and are consumed with the group's goal to be the best. Getting into a Greek society is also frequently presented on screen as the most important thing one can do in college, and the pressure to "live" this type of life only adds to the stress behind the transition to college itself. The biggest, weirdest lie that film has portrayed about college life is that students don't have to study. This is, to put it mildly, incorrect. Real college students are regularly brewing pots of coffee, making notecards and trying to figure out if they can squeeze in another trip to the library before a big test. Students also have to worry about parental expectations while away at school. The burden of living up to these expectations, while homesick, can take a toll. The cost of tuition, books, room and board can be staggering and stressful to worry about. In reality, college life finds students extremely stressed out and often miserable; many at best not sure where they are heading, and at worst, some watch their future plans crumble around them. It is no surprise that Hollywood doesn't make the truth the topic of its films; reality isn't nearly as glamorous.

Along with many popular movies, there are other forms of media that portray college in a misconceived light. Music is another example of how we might begin to get the wrong impression of college before we even enroll. American hip hop recording artist Asher Roth's song "I Love College" makes college seem like the best place in the world, filled with endless parties, alcohol and promiscuous girls. The song even included lyrics like "time isn't wasted when you're getting wasted" and the music video itself shows a wild party with alcohol and

nearly naked girls (*Asher Roth – I Love College* 2009). Asher Roth even expresses that he never wants to leave and asks “do I really have to graduate or can I just stay here for the rest of my life?” The song-writer implies that his song is related to the time Asher spent at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. In an interview with Asher Rother and Shawna Ortega from Songfacts, Asher explains that he

“wrote this record kind of like how it really is... college is the first time you're out of your parents' house, it's the first time you're out on your own. I think that it's a very important time for you to kind of mess around, and make some mistakes, and step out of your comfort zone. And that's when you start to grow” (Songfacts, *I Love College by Asher Roth* 2010).

Asher encourages this behavior and acts like everyone should enjoy college as much as they can and forget about all of their responsibilities as if they don't exist. He tries to give the behavior merit by suggesting that is part of the adolescent growth process. However, Asher fails to add a chorus about life when you get kicked out of college for failing grades, fail to pay for tuition, or end up sick or injured as a result of endless partying.

The entire college experience is most certainly not negative. College is supposed to be fun and the place for you to be on your own, meet those lifelong friends, figure out your career and enjoy yourself, and many of these experiences are real. Living on your own for the first time brings about so many new and exciting experiences to be had. There are parties to go to, clubs to join, friends to meet, and memories to be made. A huge part of college is experiencing new things while there are less consequences. Living on your own in college is different too because you don't have to worry about filing taxes, picking kids up from school, or paying off a

mortgage. College is a great time in life to get out there and have fun but what can't be forgotten or overshadowed by the positive stereotypes is that there are different responsibilities and pressures that come with college life.

Reality is that college is a stressful time in most students' lives. These stresses: low acceptance rates, competition among peers, pressure to perform, grades, tuition and financial pressures cause college students to now face the added complications of the results of these stresses: depression, anxiety, substance abuse and eating disorders. According to the American Psychiatric Association's 2008 survey, 30% of students are so depressed that they find it difficult to function at school. An astonishing 49% admit to experiencing an overwhelming amount of anxiety and 6% consider suicide (*College students' mental health is a growing concern, survey finds* 2013). Ironically, the alcohol consumption that many college students turn to as a way to "relax" or enjoy themselves, often makes the problem worse. Many of these young people seem unaware of the fact that the type of alcohol consumption portrayed in the movies further complicates their depression and anxiety. It is a common feature of major depression for people to drink to excess in an attempt to self medicate, yet, this just results in increasing their feelings of hopelessness.

When people are depressed, they may experience other health or mental health problems. To relieve the misery of depression, some turn to drugs or alcohol. However, these habits can be abused and when people use alcohol or drugs, depression can further develop. "Alcohol use among college students is a major public health problem in the USA" (Jang & Hong, *Do Addictive Behaviors Matter for College Students' Depression and Suicidal Ideation?* 2017). On the surface, it may seem like a good idea to get high, to have fun, to relax, and to escape, but

there are major consequences of consuming large amounts of alcohol. Like depression, alcohol and drug abuse is serious. It is important to recognize the symptoms of behavioral changes and changes in overall personality, which the Mental Health of America recognizes to be declining grades, loss of interest in family and friends and to get help (*Alcohol, Substance Abuse and Depression* 2015). It is common to find alcohol use in college students, particularly during their first year as they are trying to find their way. While it is common to resort to alcohol use, depression and alcohol go hand in hand.

“For many years, I, like lots of others, used alcohol as a socially acceptable method for feeling better. The problem was, the aftereffects were unimaginably worse than the temporary high. When I cut out excessive boozing, things got better. A lot better. And that's no surprise, considering what the research suggests about drinking and depression”

-Hannah Sentenac (Sentenac, *Drinking, Depression and Their Dysfunctional Relationship* 2017).

While stress is customary throughout college, the solution is not to turn to drugs and alcohol for help, it will only make things worse.

Stress is a normal and necessary part of life, and it is expected in college. It is this pressure, and the resulting fight-or-flight response that pushes us to take on the challenges in our world. While it can manifest differently for each individual, the National Institute of Mental Health notes that everyone feels stress at some point in their lives, regardless of age, gender, or circumstance (*Health Topics*). However, this natural reaction has certain physical effects on the body like increased heart rate and blood circulation. This response is suitable for single instances, or periods that require high adrenaline, but is not meant to be a sustained condition.

Normal stresses help us to perform, but abnormal stresses are those created by unrealistic images in movies and posted throughout social media. Today, there is a mental health crisis facing America's college students with "depression affecting 34.5% of US college students," but because of the average age of most students, and how college life is shown in movies, television shows and social media, their mental illness often goes unnoticed (Acharya et al., *College life is stressful today – Emerging stressors and depressive symptoms in college students* 2018).

Sustained efforts are needed to address the continual prevalence of different stressors and associated depressive symptoms faced by college students.

In my study of mental illness, particularly depression in college students, I wanted to discuss how social media is making students more depressed. Despite the popularity of social media platforms and the rapidity with which they've inserted themselves into nearly all facets of our lives, it is not fully recognized how they affect us personally: our behaviors, our social relationships, and our mental health. With the stage set by the media and unrealistic posts for comparison, college students' now have the added stress of creating their own idealistic perception of their lives on social media. This social phenomenon has been called the "Compare and Despair Effect." Take 37 years old, Dan Bilzerian for example (Garner, *Top 10 rich kids of instagram -- who to follow* 2018). This American poker player and actor makes us envy his life by continually sharing photos of how he is living the high life by showing off his stacks of cash, posing with hoards of picture perfect models, firing guns and posing with a fleet of sports cars (*The most extravagant people on Instagram: The Gentleman's Journal: The latest in style and grooming, food and drink, business, lifestyle, culture, sports, restaurants, nightlife, travel and power.* 2017). While this lifestyle is only available to a select few, we follow Dan on Instagram

to live vicariously through his unrealistic and unachievable life. It comes down to the fact that we're all a bit insecure about our own worth and so we look around us for a frame of reference to assess how well we're doing, whether that be in work, wealth, love and life (Warrell, *Compare and Despair: Escaping the Comparison Trap* 2017). Psychologist, Leon Festinger calls it the "Social Comparison Theory" (*Leon Festinger's Social Comparison Theory* 2018). And while it can be helpful in motivating us to stretch and improve ourselves, often it leaves us feeling like we're just not measuring up on some parameter.

Feelings of inadequacy, when coupled with daily stresses, only serve to make things worse. Especially at college, social media is a source for us to "stay in touch" with everyone we went to high school with. It gives us insight to what everyone is doing and they all appear to be having the time of their lives. On social media you'll see the wins, the exotic vacations and parties; scrolling through the seemingly unending snapshots of success. So when you feel like something in your life isn't going right but everyone is posting about wonderful theirs is, it leads to isolation and depression.

Dr. Michelle Drouin from Purdue University Fort Wayne and Parkview Research Center sought to discover whether social media was a source of support for college students who are in distress or whether social media was the stress inducer Drouin, Dr. Michelle, Lauren Reining, Mindy Flanagan, Maria Carpenter, and Tammy Toscos (*College Students in Distress: Can Social Media Be a Source of Social Support Latest. 2018*). It examined undergraduates' social support sources, including social media sources and their preferences for social media features. A survey was performed to see whether college students felt anxious or depressed, whether they sought help and where they turned for support. This survey discovered that students with low levels of

depression and anxiety might use social media as a resource but those with high levels of depression and anxiety found social media to be more of a stress inducer. Overall, the argument concluded that social media is not a great source of support if you are struggling with mental health issues and you should perhaps look into more professional support sources.

College campuses offer other sources of support for students if they prefer to have a face-to-face discussion or just need some advice. Stress is the largest mental health issue on college campuses and universities and attempting to address this issue. However, from students' perspectives about college mental health, they still want more information that includes the primary mental health issues affecting students. The student awareness itself of campus mental health resources is lacking and there needs to be more outreach to ensure that they are getting the resources they need to help with their mental health.

The "Undergraduate students survey their peers on mental health" assessed students' perspectives about mental health on a university campus. It was observed that "with growing numbers of students seeking help from college counseling centers combined with a staffing shortage and increasing wait times for appointments, there is an increasing need for primary level prevention efforts using a public health approach to promote better mental health on college campuses" (Gibbons et al., *Undergraduate students survey their peers on mental health: Perspectives and strategies for improving college counseling center outreach* 2018). With mental health being the main concern during young adulthood with an increase in academic loads, social needs, and career search, college students are seeking to find help and demand more service than what is provided.

Rather than only stating that social media is a contributor to depression, it would be more productive to identify how it might be used to help, rather than aggravate this situation. While social media has evolved, it has evolved in a negative way - more anonymity, easy way to make things disappear, more judgemental behavior. To combat these elements that only aggravate depression, it should be used as a diagnostic tool rather than an inadequate source of help and support. Every day, people post their most personal thoughts on their Facebook feeds, entrusting the internet with information they would never confide to an actual person. While those posts may seem like meaningless noise to other users, the authors of a new Proceedings of the National Academy of Scientists study discovered they were digital cries for help. Hidden in the language of these posts, they found a way to identify users struggling with depression, even if the users themselves don't know it yet (*Facebook Language Predicts Depression in Medical Records. 2018*). This new algorithm can predict future depression diagnoses by identifying certain key words and phrases that people use in their Facebook status updates. As University computer scientist H. Andrew Schwartz says, "The words indicative of depression suggests both that people are reaching out with how they feel, but there are also differences in style that seem less about reaching out, such as greater use of self reference" (*Facebook Language Predicts Depression in Medical Records. 2018*).

Depression is disabling, but treatable, but it is also extremely underdiagnosed. This study suggests that an analysis of social media data could be used to screen consenting individuals for depression. Further, social media content can be used to point clinicians to specific symptoms of depression. The Proceedings of the National Academy of Scientists tested their algorithm by analyzing the Facebook posts from 683 users, 114 of whom were eventually diagnosed with

depression by doctors (*Facebook Language Predicts Depression in Medical Records. 2018*). In particular, the content of the posts made prior to each user's diagnosis were analyzed to assess whether a person's social media presence could predict who was already struggling with depression and to test whether the depression-predicting algorithm really worked. This study demonstrates one thing: while the social media posts have communicated many things, it took an algorithm to really understand what they were saying.

As mental illness issues are becoming more critical and concerning, more suicidal thoughts are arising on college campuses. However, there is still a lack of prevention and care in reducing college suicides and many "students remain unaware of the availability of campus counseling" according to Doris Larovici and her article "Perspectives on College Student Suicide" (Larovici, *Perspectives on College Student Suicide 2015*). While there is possible treatment and counseling resources might help suicide prevention, not much is being done world wide to make these resources readily available. Even though suicide awareness has changed over the years new availability of information and has influenced the ways colleges in the US deal with suicide and suicide prevention, there is still more that needs to be done. With new technology, access to the internet and social media has never been so popular and has made a difference with how students communicate their emotions (Brusilovskiy et al., *Social Media use, community participation and psychological well-being among individuals with serious mental illnesses 2016*).

According to the UC Davis Magazine, colleges across the country are facing an increasing demand for mental health services (*State of Mind 2019*). We have begun to see progress throughout college campuses such as UC Davis as they respond to the issue by hiring

more counselors, adding new ways to speak with counselors and increasing their promotion of existing resources. “We want our students to feel like this is a welcoming community, however they present,” said Emily Galindo, interim vice chancellor for Student Affairs and chair of that group, the Basic Needs Oversight Committee. I believe that all campuses should begin to make similar changes outlined by UC Davis: hiring additional case managers, moving mental health professionals to a more central and welcoming location, and taking more drastic steps to form a group that would convene when a student dies (*State of Mind* 2019). Given that “campus student suicides arouse much public interest and concern because the act itself is perceived to be a rejection of all that university life strives to be for bright and ambitious young adults,”(Brown, *College Can Be Killing: United States College and University Responses to Student Suicide During the 20th Century and Early 21st Century* 2014) more of these efforts needs to be taken throughout college campuses. These efforts can be in the form of counselors and on-site professions offering new sources of outreach to students, whether that be through social media, brochures, etc. to connect with them, indicate that their needs are recognized and understood, remind them to take care of themselves and ultimately become a mindful resource for students on campus.

UC Davis has made strides to tackle the stigma of mental health by talking about it openly in many forums. The college performed a Q&A session in March with students on Instagram in which they answered a query about “imposter syndrome,” the feeling of being inadequate (*State of Mind* 2019). By using the common resource of social media, this Q&A was effective at reaching students without overwhelming them in the process. By starting to take steps to break down the stigma, Dennis Heitmann, the retired senior director of counseling and

psychological services at Pennsylvania State University and a member of the American Psychological Association, he noticed that “students are much more comfortable approaching the counseling center and asking for help. They don’t see it necessarily as a sign of weakness” (*State of Mind* 2019). In fact this article even cites a noteworthy example of Alex Fisher-Wagner, a YouTuber and student at UC Davis who created a 10-minute video where he talked about temporarily withdrawing from his channel because of anxiety and other mental health issues. We begin to see the barriers of mental health broken down as more and more students begin to use the resources that surround them to

An effective partnership of support and experiential sharing can be created with social media. It has provided avenues for students to open up, like the many Reddit threads on depression or loneliness (*State of Mind* 2019). The stigma of seeking help could be mitigated when students see therapy appointments plainly visible on friends’ shared online schedules. Resources centered on and encouraging discussions on mental health and the resulting reduction in stigma is uptick in students seeking treatment. According to Dennis Heitzmann “What we find ourselves in the midst of right now is probably the greatest expansion of counseling and psychological services in my experience, and probably in the history of student mental health.” It is encouraging to see that inroads are being made; however, the bulk of media portrayals, negative press and statistics indicate that more work needs to be done.

Social media can also be used as a source of hope. Motivation post saying “There is hope, even when your brain tells you there isn’t” -John Green or “Healing is not linear” (*Positive Inspirational Quotes for People with Depression*). These phrases could change someone’s life around so we shouldn’t quit making an effort just because the effects aren’t evident. Digital tech

now plays a big role in the lives of young adults, especially college students with depression, but this resource needs to be used as a strong source of support for the good of the population with mental health in order to prevent lower levels of mental illness.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, it is now time to read between the lines of social media, and to realize the impact it may be having beyond seemingly mindless communication and entertainment.

Depression is a very real problem among college students; so real that it impacts nearly 40% of a campus on average and it has led to suicide. I have expanded on the misconceptions of college life portrayed in film and social media, and brought to light the realities of the struggles of the regular college student, many of whom suffer at least a minor a form of mental illness. By examining this lesser publicized problem, I hope to draw attention to the situation, and encourage universities to address the health of its students in all areas, physical as well as mental. This suggests an expansion into how preventative measures can be taken, what can be done to provide support, and ultimately how to prevent lower levels of mental illness.

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