MEMORY IN THE WILD

Trauma, Meaning, and Media Practices

by

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ABSTRACT

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This study looks at the highly personal and individual experience of trauma as it occurs in the context of a rapidly increasing digital world. While Self-disclosure is not an unusual practice on social media (Masur et al,. 2023), trauma disclosure is certainly a practice that is still not entirely explored. Therefore, this study explores the ways in which expressions of trauma and suffering are taking place today on social media using Instagram as the main platform of study. The researcher argues that the way people live in media (Deuze, 2012) includes their attempt to bring their inner world of repressed trauma into a two-dimensional space that makes their pain visible. The data in this study reveals the different ways media technologies are being utilized as an external resource to navigate the heavy tasks of cognitive and emotional coping after trauma. As such, I argue that the concept of *living in media* now extends to the most strictly private experiences of grief, death, illness, pain, and suffering. More specifically, I argue that people resort to Instagram as a popular digital media platform to bring their traumas to public and collective witnesses and command recognition for their pain.

CREATED IN THE KEY OF LOSS

In Loving Memory of

My Sister
Mayar Hesham Abaza 1983-2022
My life-long companion in every sad and happy breath!
my heart irretrievably shattered in her loss

My Mother
Suraya Tageldin Youssef 1946-2018
Whose love and devotion made everything possible

My Father
Hesham Bahgat Abaza 1946-2002
He taught me to be fearless

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

If I trace how I came to trauma as a research interest, I wouldn't start with trauma, but with loss. My first step would be my sense of difficulty in articulating the complexity of great loss, which set me on a long journey with complicated grief that paralyzed me in my life. Simply, I would start with feeling sad. A sense of deep sadness, that when it hits at a young age, is often dealt with without any tools or resources to help one navigate it with care. When great traumatic loss occurred back-to-back in my life, many years of profound grief eventually led me to this work. I became invested in learning how my past informed my present, and the way it contributed to my everyday distress. Further, I became very invested in learning what I needed to do to cultivate more ease and more stability, in my body and in my life. As such, my personal life became deeply entwined with my academic and creative work.

Trauma is often indescribable and unrepresentable (Scarry, 2006), so the emotions associated with trauma can be easier to articulate. However, "because the symptoms and emotions associated with trauma can be extreme, most of us (and those close to us) will recoil and attempt to repress these intense reactions. Unfortunately, this mutual denial can prevent us from healing" (Levine, 2023.p.32). In my experience, when solid and safe relationships were taken away from me, I needed alternative spaces to connect with others who were in similar circumstances. I needed to witness others surviving what I could not bear to carry. Alternative spaces for me were either ones where I could practice my creative work, or digital spaces where connecting with others was only a double tap or a comment away. Because Instagram is the only social media platform I use on a regular basis, it became a space for me where I self-soothed and

regulated my sadness. I found myself connecting with creators who were skilled at articulating the pain born from vulnerable life experiences. From there, I noticed how trauma, grief, loss, illness, death, and many other forms of suffering became parts of social life that we now *live* in media (Deuze, 2012). In my journey of becoming an academic scholar who studies the world through the lens of media, I became compelled with trauma and media and the way they relate to one another. Therefore, my investigation of trauma has become an exploration of how traumatic experiences are visually or otherwise expressed on digital media platforms. Specifically, because of the way media technologies now penetrate every part of modern-day living (Deuze, 2012). This was driven by my frustration in the way public culture holds the grief and the vulnerability of a traumatized individual where they are consistently encouraged to distract themselves and move on as fast as possible. Seven days after my mother suddenly died, I was not just expected, but momentously encouraged to go back to work. As though my world had not just drastically change. When my sister died shortly after, very few people were able to sit with me in my continued, unreserved nervous break downs. '*You need a distraction; you need to think about something else'* is the most repeated advice I received in the midst of the greatest most intense pain of my life. Levine (1997), a psychologist who pioneered Somatic Experiencing Therapy explains this lack of tolerance for intense emotional pain in our culture by saying: "there is a lack of tolerance for the emotional vulnerability that traumatized people experience. Little time is allotted for the working through of emotional events. We are routinely pressured into adjusting too quickly in the aftermath of an overwhelming situation" (Levine, 2023.p.32).

When I sensed that pressure to quickly adjust to normalcy after traumatic loss, I certainly retreated into my own pain. In time, and through this work, I was able to slowly nurture

myself out of deep emotional and physical depletion by understanding my body and the way it responds in hardship to the contentious moments of life. I write this dissertation to bring together pieces of knowledge that I wish someone had explained to me when I was in the deep trenches of suffering. I write to highlight the significance of just labeling your difficult emotions; to emphasize the importance of creating a home alongside your pain. I write to reveal some ways by which an individual can give their pain an external container to live so it does not live permanently in their body.

1.1 TRAUMA AND THE SELF

Over the course of a lifetime, many people will experience significant trauma. In fact, most people will experience at least one traumatic event that is disorienting to their nature and disruptive to their lives (Manici & Bonanno, 2006). In this work, I define trauma as an incident that causes a shattering in an individual's sense of well-being– as a result of this shattering, the person experiences the world with a traumatized nervous system marked by a prolonged sense of dissociation. In Chapter 2, I lay out all the interdisciplinary theories I examined in this work that led me to this definition. For instance, in psych theory any event that disrupts or radically challenges our assumptions about ourselves and about the world, is considered by definition a trauma (Janoff-Bulman, 1989. p.116). This means that a wide range of negative life experiences can fall under the category of trauma when they affect an individual's ability to cope (Manici & Bonanno, 2006; Park & Ai, 2006). The process of coping after trauma has now become less discrete as many trauma sufferers attempt to document their pain in media spaces. Some scholars argue that media artifacts are extensions of the traditional therapeutic practice that

takes place between clinicians and clients (Cvetkovich, 2019). Others claim that media users are taking advantage of new technologies and media platforms to "manage their emotions and their relationships" (Madianou and Miller, 2012. p.172). Deuze et al (2012) proposed the idea of 'living in media'. Central to his argument is "the ways in which social life is lived in different forms of media practices and mediated interactions" (Madianou & Miller, 2012. P.174). This dissertation explores the way people engage with trauma and meaning-making through social media platforms with a focus on Instagram as the main platform of study.

The process of coping after trauma is a transformative personal process that often influences one's sense of identity as well as their relationships with other people. In trauma literature, this process is often known as resilience (Manici & Bonanno, 2006). A big part of resilience and healthy coping is creating new meanings around the trauma that took place and the suffering that ensues. Mckee (2003) claims that "how we make sense of our own lives, and of other people's, has vital implications for our own well-being and for how we treat others" (p.44). Egnew (2009) argues that suffering occurs where meaning ceases to exist. Therefore, the process of discovering meaning helps the traumatized individual transform and transcend their suffering (Egnew 2009, 172). However, "because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable, and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all" (Cvetkovich, 2019. P.254).

In this work, I look at media artifacts, in the form of Instagram pages, profiles and posts, as spaces that serve as records for trauma. I examine the way digital media artifacts reveal the affective nature of trauma, and how the act of expression, and the act of witnessing, are key in navigating intense suffering. My interest in trauma and media is motivated by the idea that media

practices can “expand the category of the therapeutic beyond the confines of the narrowly medicalized or privatized encounter between clinical professional and client” (Cvetkovich, 2019. p.303). This motivates me to investigate the way media practices and media artifacts reveal the way trauma “refracts outward to produce all kinds of affective responses” (Cvetkovich, 2019. p.483). In my analysis, I demonstrate Kaplan’s claim where she argues that “telling stories about trauma, even though the story can never actually repeat or represent what happened, may partly achieve a certain “working through” for the victim. It may also permit a kind of empathic “sharing” that moves us forward, if only by inches” (Kaplan, 2005. P.37). In doing so, I highlight the way trauma, meaning, and media interact, and as Rajabi (2021) notes, bring this interaction to the “forefront of scholarly pursuit” (p.11).

1.2 MEDIA, AFFECT, AND TRAUMA

In order to examine the way trauma has overlapped with media practices, my dissertation looks at expressions of trauma in different Instagram text that includes static and dynamic content (image, video, text, audio, story). I examine the ways in which expressions of trauma and suffering are taking place today on social media using Instagram as my case study. My inquiry places great emphasis on the idea that people’s stories can stand alone as sufficient data that is descriptive of a particular experience, namely a traumatic experience and the meaning-making process that ensues. Therefore, I analyze different narratives of trauma expressed on Instagram to explore the meanings they reveal. My study explores the way media artifacts hold the memory of trauma and reveal its affective nature. Guiding this research, I ask:

How do these expressions tell stories about the reality of coping with trauma, how do they relay suffering, and how do they make sense of it?

Chouliaraki (2020) claims that victimhood is the structure of affective communication, she views affective expression of suffering as a method by which the author claims the right to victimhood. As such, she regards the human condition of vulnerability (or affective claims to suffering) to be a mobilization tool to forge political community (p.13). Her interest lies in the way human pain facilitates its own politics of emotion that "shape the contemporary self as a victim" (p.13). However, my inquiry calls for extending the lens of affective communication to the experience of coping with trauma without claiming victimhood as a social status. Using an emotionally attuned scholarship model, I center affective communication in my research as a tool by which the contemporary self attempts to re-establish safety and connection after trauma. I employ what Chouliaraki (2020) refers to as 'a genuine pedagogy of feelings and introspection' (p. 14) to a broader view of affective communication that regards expression of pain and suffering as a tool for personal well-being rather than political mobilization. In doing so, I hope to emphasize the importance of emotional knowledge in academic scholarship using a framework that correlates expression of pain with meaning-making rather than the politics of victimhood.

Accordingly, exploring the pedagogy of affect and utilizing affective approaches to my research aims to produce more contextualized and embodied knowledge on trauma as it is experienced in the body and refracted (or lived) in media. By analyzing digital media artifacts, I demonstrate the way digital platforms such as Instagram act as a space for holding the imprints of trauma. In doing so, I attempt to offer a "framework for thinking about the bodily and social nature" of trauma (Gould, 2009. p.273).

1.3 RATIONAL AND EMOTIONAL MEANING MAKING: KNOWLEDGE CREATION IN MEDIA

Trauma, meaning making, and coping practices are some new things that can be noticed on Instagram. By meaning-making practices, I mean the process by which each individual attempts to assimilate an overwhelming experience within their world view or resolve the shattering of their world view in the aftermath of trauma (Ferreira-Valente et al., 2021; Janoff-Bulman, 1989). This process looks different from one person to the other depending on how their body seeks to find balance and safety; "it can be either automatic (i.e., unconscious) or deliberate (i.e., conscious effortful processing). It includes a search for comprehensibility/significance and cognitive or emotional processing" (Ferreira-Valente et al., 2021 p.2297). That said, designing this research has been an interesting and challenging endeavor. This is because trauma and meaning making are experiences that could be studied from both artistic and theoretical viewpoints. And so, it has been a tug of war between the rational and the emotional parts of my brain; each one steering me down its own path of knowledge creation. Ideally, I would employ both: traditional scholarship methods alongside creative scholarship methods for comprehensive knowledge creation on a subject that I believe is truly imminent.

For the purpose of this work, I study expressions of trauma and meaning in digital media texts. My goal is to examine the way trauma and meaning-making practices have overlapped with media practices as they continue to evolve with the expansion of digital culture and technology. I seek to understand the many ways in which affective expressions of trauma and suffering have taken place on social media. My inquiry places great emphasis on the idea that people's stories can stand alone as sufficient data that is descriptive of a particular experience. This falls within Patton's (2002) perspective on stories as tools for meaning-making. In his book *Qualitative*

Research and Evaluation Methods he writes: "Narratives and stories reveal and communicate our human experiences, our social structures, and how we make sense of the world. The flow of a story—beginning, middle, end—is essentially a sense-making structure. As we interact with each other, we create and tell stories. Qualitative inquiry focused on capturing and analyzing those stories reveals our quintessentially social nature" (p. 131). That said, in this dissertation I analyze narratives of trauma expressed on Instagram and examine the way digital communities interact with these expressions.

Many scholars have recognized the knowledge-value in the narratives we present about our lives (Spiers & Smith, 2016). Some who were particularly interested in filmic expressions have specifically emphasized the value of our *Storied Selves* (Hearing, 2015. p.87) to bring forward the significance of personal stories in creative academic research. In other words, "how can we use these stories as a source of understanding?" (Hearing, 2015, p.87), whether they be stories of teaching (Preskill & Jacobvitz, 2000), stories of and by students (Barone 2000, 119-31), stories of participants in programs (Kushner 2000), stories of fieldwork (Van Maanen, 1988), stories of relationships (Bochner, Ellis, and Tillman-Healy, 1997), or stories of illness (Frank 1995, 2000). The way we analyze any text that carries a story can make the story itself the object of study, and a source of much valuable knowledge. It is through the analysis of the narrative that I aim to offer insight into the way we can use stories to "think and analyze holistically" (Patton, 2002. p.59). What do these texts reveal about the authors and the worlds from which they came? How can the narratives they are telling offer an understanding of the life and circumstances that produced them?

According to a review published by the Canadian Journal of Education, scholars who are interested in affect or emotion as a primary source of knowledge often find greater value in conducting practice-based research. By assessing the works of contemporary scholars who adopted a practice-based approach in their scholarship, they found that they were often the ones interested in "verities of the human condition: love (Lee, 2004); death (Dunlop, 1999); memory (Norman, 1999); suffering (MacPherson, 2000); power (Chapman, 2001); fear (Fisher, 2003); loss (Crook, 2001); desire (Pryer, 2002); hope (Thompson, 2001); and so forth" (Dissanayake, 2003, p. 15)" (p.1237).

In the following paragraphs, I outline the original scope of this work and explain the reasons why it had to be scaled down in this study. The initial structure of my project was designed to employ a practice-based research method alongside the traditional qualitative methods. In following the traditional research route of "data generation techniques and procedures, the selection of data sources, and sampling" (Mason, 1996, p.19) I aimed to engage with traditional scholarship as we formally know it. On the other hand, in following a practice-based method, I intended to create space for a more fluid process of inquiry where the practice of art-creation informed and directed this part of the research. My goal was to provide a "basis for reflection" (Hearing, 2015, p.88) on my own journey as both filmmaker and researcher navigating that dual dynamic in the process of knowledge production. In doing so, I hoped to explore the nuances and limitations of creative scholarship if it were employed side-by-side with traditional academic scholarship.

Accordingly, the scope of my work was split into two parts. The traditional scholarship part employed discourse analysis, case study, and comparative analysis to examine the discourse

of trauma and meaning making in digital media as it compares to long-form media (e.g. documentary film). The creative scholarship part would employ a practice-based method to add a dynamic process of inquiry where I utilized "the elements, processes, and strategies of artistic and creative practices in scholarly investigation" (Sinner et al, 2006, p. 1234). My hope was to explore the use of filmmaking or visual storytelling as tools for research to explore the narratives and meanings I have about the traumas in my own life. And so, this creative method was incorporated to allow me to reflect on my firsthand experience with regaining balance and coherence through trauma expression in my media practices. Accordingly, the inferences here would have come from my very personal experiences of trauma and the way I expressed them in media. In doing so, I hoped to demonstrate the way creative methodology can help us process the ambiguities of our own journeys.

However, this ideal scope that I had originally designed for my work needed to be adjusted in order to fit a very tight timeline of completion. After thorough contemplations and revisions with my advisor, we have decided to scale down the scope of my study and revise the purpose of this dissertation. Considering the current timeline that is limited by the lack of additional funding, this dissertation now focuses on exploring expressions of trauma in the digital space using Instagram as the main platform of study.

The research strategies employed will only come from traditional scholarship strategies versus a hybrid model of both traditional and creative scholarship. Accordingly, the methodology employed is also derived from traditional methodological approaches as opposed to a hybrid model of methods. In other words, only three qualitative methods will be employed to examine a set of Instagram data, and no practice-based component will be incorporated thus far. The final

product will be this written dissertation that explores the way social media is being utilized to navigate traumatic life experiences. As such, this dissertation seeks to bring the topic of trauma and meaning to the media studies scholarship in order to show the way media technologies have reshaped the practice of coping with trauma.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The way trauma is understood and discussed in contemporary media can be traced back to media and cultural theorists. Walter Benjamin implicitly theorized trauma when he wrote: "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (Benjamin et al., 1999). Benjamin implies that the way we remember an event from the past; the story that is stored in our body is more important than the specific details of the event itself. Benjamin also used the "category of *shock* as a way of describing modern life, particularly in urban contexts, in an effort to characterize its effects on the senses" (Cvetkovich, 2019. p.17). Following Benjamin's interpretation, Fassin and Rechtman (2009) described trauma as "the sudden emergence of memory at the moment of danger" (p.16). Trauma expert Gabor Mate simplifies this interpretation in his work by saying: "trauma is not what happened to you, it is what happened inside of you as a result of what happened to you" (Mate, 2022). In other words, perception is what matters. This essentially became the mainstream understanding of trauma (Aiyana, 2020) due to the popularity of Mate's work along many other admired clinicians in mainstream trauma culture. Scholars who are interested in studying trauma offer more in-depth explanations and detail the characteristics that pertain to the traumatized self. Their research offers insight into the way trauma has developed its status in the digital space today.

My work primarily explores the way the digital media space is used for the processing of traumatic life events. Focusing on Instagram as the main platform of study, I look at the way it performs as a digital media platform in holding the memory of trauma. In doing so, I examine the

media created in the various formats that Instagram affords its users (image, video, text, audio, story) and I analyze the way they reflect trauma and the cultures that create it, but inevitably fail to hold the suffering that happens in the aftermath of it.

As such, in the literature review that follows, I outline the way media technologies have afforded trauma sufferers spaces for processing traumatic life events. I start by discussing the meanings of the term trauma between theoretical and lay thinking. I review the theories that explain how trauma is formed and experienced mostly on the individual level, and lightly on the collective and cultural level. Following that, I outline the characteristics of trauma and profile the traumatized self. I discuss the way trauma is experienced in the body, and how it essentially causes a loss in a robust sense of self. I survey the ways the traumatized self utilizes technology and media to navigate and cope with trauma, and how trauma, pain, and suffering have become aspects of life that are now *lived in media* (Deuze, 2012). Finally, I introduce the concept of *living in media* and the impact of sharing the voices of traumatized individuals who have taken on the digital space to declare and manage their suffering. I briefly talk about the importance of affect and the significance of emotional scholarship in producing valuable knowledge in media discourses and trauma discourses.

2.1 TRAUMA BETWEEN THEORY AND COMMON SENSE

In the task of tracing an accurate definition of the term trauma in an attempt to find connections between the proper meaning of the term and its popular meaning, I found that pinning the term to one definition would be a mistake. I realized that the best way to introduce the term trauma is by offering an overview of how the term floats between theoretical and

contemporary common-sense thinking. Trying to fit the term under one specific discipline and remove it from the other does nothing but limit the understanding of the term, and by extension the understanding of what a traumatic experience feels like. As such, this chapter considers the different thinking models that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of trauma, how it is experienced, and how it returns.

One of the theories that I discuss at length is Janoff-Bulman's (1989) scholarly approach that regards any event that disrupts or fundamentally challenges one's assumptions about themselves and about the world, to be a trauma. This scholarly approach is claimed by American sociologist, and prominent social theorist Jeffrey Charles Alexander to be inspired by *Lay Trauma Theory* (Alexander et al., 2004. p.2). Lay theory refers to the common-sense understanding of the term and the way it is used to refer to the distresses of every-day life. In essence, lay theory considers trauma to be an event that shatters an individual's sense of well-being, "in other words, the power to shatter—the "trauma"—is thought to emerge from events themselves" and the instant, absent-minded reaction of an individual to such power is described as "being traumatized" (Alexander et al., 2004. p.2). This is a brief example that demonstrates how understanding the term trauma is an elaborate task because of the way the term is embedded in both scholarly thinking and everyday language. As such, I think it is imperative to set a primary intuitive understanding of the term. Alexander (2004) writes: "when bad things happen to good people, they become shocked, outraged, indignant" (p.3). When an event takes place that sharply destabilizes a person's identity and basic needs, it is not surprising that this person will be traumatized as the immediate consequence.

In contrast to lay theory and the common-sense thinking model, there is psychoanalytic theory where the term trauma mostly lives in research that outlines the way trauma impacts the mind and the body. In this model, scholars dive into the neuroscience of the brain and the nervous system and offer an in-depth academic thinking model that explains how the body behaves when trauma remains unresolved. For example, a significant body of research that became a New York Time's best-selling book is Bessel Van der Kolk's textbook *The Body Keeps the Score* (Show', 2021). In his research, Van der Kolk stresses the phenomenon of dissociation in trauma, which is the way trauma essentially produces dissociated or disconnected selves when it stays unresolved (Van der Kolk, 2015). According to this model of thinking "when bad things happen to good people, […] they can become so frightened that they can actually repress the experience of trauma itself. Rather than activating direct cognition and rational understanding, the traumatizing event becomes distorted in the actor's imagination and memory" (Alexander et al., 2004. p.5). In other words, trauma creates a particular form of memory marked by incoherent fragments of an event that stayed repressed and stored in the body. Given the popularity of Van der Kolk's work, the theory of dissociation and other scientific terms became popular in mainstream trauma culture and common in every-day language. I will discuss this thoroughly in later sections of this chapter; however, this brief is to show how psychoanalytic thinking started informing "both contemporary lay common sense and academic thinking" (Alexander et al., 2004. p.5).

The concept of trauma quickly started to bleed into more academic disciplines beyond the clinical. For instance, humanities scholars used theories of trauma extensively when studying the Holocaust, film scholars became influenced by trauma in the 1990s and some started applying

trauma theory in cinema studies (Kaplan, 2005). Leading the growth of trauma theory in various humanities disciplines is perhaps Cathy Caruth who became the leading figure in psychoanalytically informed literary theory and humanistic approaches to trauma (Alexander et al., 2004). Caruth who was heavily influenced by Freud and other French psychoanalysts rooted her definition of trauma in their work, and therefore endorsed the theory of dissociation (Kaplan, 2005). Her popular definition of trauma as found in her collection of essays *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* is: "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or set of events, which takes the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors from the event" (Caruth, 1995. p4). She explains that Freud associated this delayed response to "the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (Caruth 1995, p2). The inability to leave the event behind is due to a disruption in the brain's ability to grasp the suddenness of the event. According to Caruth, this suddenness precludes the mind from fully assimilating the event, and thus it continues to return in the form of belated "repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (Caruth, 1995. p4).

In that sense, psychoanalytic thinking became an enormous influence in both lay thinking and academic thinking. Literary scholar Ann Kaplan who explores the relationship between the impact of trauma on people individually and collectively claims that trauma produces "a special form of memory" (Kaplan, 2005. p.34). She references Van der Kolk's work to emphasize the way clinicians and trauma practitioners used neuroscientific theories to explain how trauma registers in the mind and the body. They claim that "in trauma the event has affect only, not meaning. It produces emotions—terror, fear, shock – but perhaps above all disruption of the normal feeling of comfort. Only the sensation sector of the brain—the amygdala—is active

during the trauma. The meaning-making one (in the sense of rational thought, cognitive processing), namely, the cerebral cortex, remains shut down because the affect is too much to be registered cognitively in the brain" (Kaplan, 2005. p.34). Further, Kaplan notes that "Pierre Janet and Freud grasped this process intuitively but could not prove it without the tools of postmodern science" and "Caruth, taking these theories for granted, argued that just because the traumatic experience has not been given meaning, the subject is continually haunted by it in dreams, flashbacks, and hallucinations" (Kaplan, 2005. p.34).

To explore those ideas further, the following section in this lit review offers a deep dive into these multiple theories to illuminate the way trauma is experienced and repressed in the body. And how this repression essentially disrupts one's self-identity and sense of self. It explores polyvagal theory in detail to bring in the neuroscientific perspective on trauma and highlight the concept of dissociated selves.

2.2 TRAUMA AND THE LOSS OF SELF

A healthy individual is described as someone who lives with a strong sense of safety and security within themselves (Janoff-Bulman, 1989. p.116). Security, order, love, and connection are basic human needs that are required for a person to develop a healthy relationship with the world and allow an individual to experience the world with a balanced nervous system (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Alexander et al., 2004; Mate, 2012). Safe and steady nervous systems are claimed by attachment theorists to develop in early childhood through responsible and reliable caregiving (Bowlby, 1969; Erikson, 1950, 1968). This means that children require a steady uninterrupted flow of care, love, and protection from their caregivers for them to grow up with a sense of

security that allows them to develop positive assumptive worlds (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). In this environment, they become individuals who hold positive assumptions about themselves and people around them, and about the world at large. The content of people's assumptive worlds or world schemas was proposed by psychology and brain science specialist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman in her effort to explain the psychological imbalance that ensues from trauma.

Janoff-Bulman (1989) breaks down the concept of one's assumptive world into three primary categories: "(1) Perceived benevolence of the world, (2) Meaningfulness of the world, and (3) Worthiness of Self" (p.117). These are presumably the core elements she claims, of the way a person perceives the world; it is how one forms their *basic conceptual system* (p.117). In short, she claims that the fundamental assumptions that one holds about the world is that the world is benevolent and meaningful, and the self is worthy. This is the standard model that includes three main categories.

The first category is about whether a person holds a positive or negative perception of the world. To what extent do they believe in the goodness of people, in the prevalence of justice, and in the likelihood of good positive outcomes, (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). The more an individual believes in the benevolence of people, the higher their assumption of the goodness of the world at large. Having this positive outlook makes one less likely to believe that they will get hurt. The second category is about meaningfulness, which is essentially about one's values and beliefs. Most people hold the belief that the way they behave in this world dictates what happens to them, what they get and what they do not get is all related to how they choose to behave and exist. If they exist in decency and uphold high moral standards, they become minimally vulnerable. In other words, a person's behavior and choices are assumed to dictate their

outcomes. Essentially, this is about controlling how vulnerable we are by making good choices. The third and last major category is the way an individual views themselves and their worth. The way an individual views themself is considered a determining factor in how vulnerable they are in this world-- meaning, if they believe they are good and deserving of good things, they are subconsciously inviting luck in their lives, and therefore inevitably experience a good life. If they make good choices, they reap good outcomes. Janoff-Bulman summarizes this standard model using eight primary categories, she writes: "considered in total, there are eight primary postulates in our conceptual system: benevolence of the world, benevolence of people, the distributional principles of justice, controllability, and randomness, and the self-relevant dimensions of self-worth, self-controllability, and luck" (p.119). In essence, most people believe they can indirectly control outcomes in their life because they assume justice and equilibrium in the world at large. While many of those examples may seem obvious, it is important to understand this conceptually in the context of trauma, as it is in the shattering of those fundamental schemas that psychological disequilibrium takes place (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; 1992).

Accordingly, a person starts experiencing the world with an imbalanced body and mind. This is known in psych literature as unresolved trauma (Van der Kolk, 2015; Menakem, 2009) and it is claimed that unresolved trauma doesn't change or heal over time unless it is addressed (Van der Kolk, 2015). When trauma remains unaddressed, then it inevitably becomes a reason for a person's prolonged suffering. Bessel Van Der Kolk reframes Freud's intuitive idea that suggests a breaching of the mind after trauma (Alexander et al. 2004) by saying that trauma causes a loss in proper functioning of the brain; it disrupts not only the mind, but also the relationship between the mind and the body (Van Der Kolk, 2015). This means that in a traumatic event, the human

brain experiences a disturbance in the way it normally functions, and therefore, it fails to reconcile what it knows with what is happening during and after trauma. In his popular book *The Body Keeps the Score* Van der Kolk writes: "trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way the mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think" (p.21).

When one's capacity to think is compromised, they unsurprisingly lose trust in the beliefs or fundamental assumptions they hold about the world. This is considered a cognitive crisis that causes a loss in their robust sense of self (Van der Kolk, 2015. p.249). In other words, they become *traumatized,* and this reaction is a natural response to the shattering of what they know (Chouliaraki, 2020). When basic assumptions about the world are shattered and lost, traumatized individuals are only left with the hard challenge of reconciling them with the misfortune they experienced. This is why any event that causes this sense of shattering is considered a trauma (Janoff-Bulman 1989; Chouliaraki, 2020).

The traumatized self can therefore be described as "a self that has been shattered, following an overwhelming experience of violence or loss; an experience that cannot be rationalized yet recursively returns as a haunting feeling to disrupt the coherence of our existence" (Chouliaraki, 2020. p.13). Vast literature dating back to Freud, and a revised edition of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic Manual refer to this sense of shattering as a phenomenon of dissociation (Kaplan, 2005). This means that trauma is principally an event that produces dissociated selves. Cathy Caruth reiterates this concept when she writes: "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth, 1995. p.5). This haunting

unresolved image is essentially what produces a body that is dissociated from itself and from reality.

Because the brain is connected to every major organ of the body, it is not surprising that the body becomes deeply affected by a traumatic experience. LePera (2021) notes symptoms such as racing heartbeats, shortness of breath, and digestive problems to be easily manifested when the body is in a dysregulated state. Many contemporary psychologists address the concept of a traumatized nervous system in their research under a theory known as polyvagal theory (Menakem, 2009). For instance, Resmaa Menakem offers a deep dive into the neuroscience of the brain and how it connects to the body to emphasize the cognitive dissonance, and the unconscious emotional fears, that send the body into its psychological defense mode after trauma. This is how he explains it in his work that is focused on examining the psychological damage caused by racism in America. He writes:

> New advances in psychobiology reveal that our deepest emotions—love, fear, anger, dread, grief, sorrow, disgust, and hope—involve the activation of our bodily structures. These structures—a complex system of nerves—connect the brainstem, pharynx, heart, lungs, stomach, gut, and spine. Neuroscientists call this system the *wandering nerve* or our *vagus nerve*; a more apt name might be our *soul nerve*. The soul nerve is connected directly to a part of our brain that doesn't use cognition or reasoning as its primary tool for navigating the world. Our soul nerve also helps mediate between our bodies' activating energy and resting energy. This part of our brain is similar to the brains of lizards, birds, and lower mammals. Our lizard brain only understands survival and protection. At any given moment, it can issue one of a

> handful of survival commands: *rest, fight, flee, or freeze*. These are the only commands it knows and the only choices it is able to make (Menakem, 2009. p.19).

The term polyvagal, therefore, refers to the vagus nerve, which is the nerve that links the brain to every system in the body (LePera, 2021). This means that when the vagus nerve is activated because of real or imagined danger, it immediately sends the body into dysregulation. In essence, polyvagal theory illuminates the way traumatic reactions are correlated with a sense of survival and safety. They are not just emotional reactions that lack logic; they are protective mechanisms that come from the body's wisdom. When a person is stuck in an unending loop of trauma responses—meaning their body consistently goes into its defensive mode due to unresolved trauma, the nervous system becomes overactivated and perceives everything in life as a threat. According to Menakem, this is a completely subconscious experience; the body doesn't really know any other response. And this is how a traumatized individual becomes dissociated from themselves (Menakem 2009; LePera, 2021; Van der Kolk, 2015).

Polyvagal theory appears in much of the content I analyze in this study in the way people speak about the body's survival mode and the coping strategies it develops in the aftermath of trauma. By examining a generous selection of viral expressions of pain and trauma on a popular social media platform, I was able to note some terms that became common in the digital conversation on trauma and the body. Some of the most repeated terms are survival mode and trauma responses. I became curious about the theoretical root of these terms and how they made their way to popular trauma culture. Polyvagal theory offers an in-depth explanation that links the brain to every major organ of the body, and therefore explains the way the body

becomes deeply affected by a traumatic experience. It places the emphasis back on the body and encourages a framework of thinking that is guided by its wisdom.

By thoroughly examining digital trauma content on Instagram, I claim that trauma sufferers are now resorting to digital media platforms as alternative spaces for vulnerable expression to reconnect with their lost selves. In doing so, the traumatized individual is able to start the process of building a new self-identity that is able to survive the hardship of trauma. The challenge of rebuilding a new self with revised assumptions and beliefs is a heavy cognitive task; it is perhaps the reason why talk therapy is prevalent in Western culture because it addresses trauma with a strong focus on cognition. While restoring our cognitive faculties is essential, focusing only on the mind sounds inadequate in resolving trauma. The approach that implies that trauma can be resolved by restoring reason in the traumatized brain assumes that "trauma is perceived clearly by actors, their responses are lucid, and the effects of these responses are problem solving and progressive (Alexander et al,. 2004. p.3). As a consequence, a culture that favors practicality in healing trauma became common, and this led to a lack of tolerance in public culture for vulnerable expression (Levine, 1997). People are often encouraged to move on from their pain as fast as possible, distract themselves, and get back to normal. If anything, it sounds like this would contribute to further dissociation from self.

Given that the theory of dissociation dates back to early European psychoanalysts such as Pierre Janet, Josef Breuer, and Freud (Kaplan, 2005. p.34), humanities scholars who were interested in developing a trauma-informed approach to literary and cinematic theories applied it in their work. For instance, leading trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, who focuses on the language of trauma accepted the concept of dissociation as central in trauma. Her most famous definition

of trauma refers to trauma as "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or set of events, which takes the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors from the event" (Caruth, 1995. p.4). Further, she notes "the pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of the experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time but only belatedly in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (Caruth, 1995. p.4). In other words, trauma is about the way the body stores and remembers a traumatic event over the many years that follow the actual happening of a trauma. This is how psychoanalytic concepts started garnering interest in other disciplines such as communications, literature, and cinema. Trauma slowly weaved its way in anthropological and social science circles (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). In their book *The Empire of Trauma* Fassin and Rechtman assume that "the notion of trauma has become a general way of expressing the suffering of contemporary society, whether the events it derives from are individual (rape, torture, illness) or collective (genocide, war, disaster)" (p.19-20). This ultimately led to the birth of a popular trauma culture where a new language was being created that redefines one's relationship to hardship and subjectivity (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009).

The following section outlines the way social media platforms have contributed to mainstreaming the vocabulary of trauma in the digital space. It discusses the ways traumatized individuals have utilized the digital space to register their emotional and cognitive challenges and give texture to their traumatic memory. In doing so, ad hoc digital communities of trauma started to form, and trauma found its way into social media platforms that are now *a significant part of social life* (Deuze et al, 2012).

2.3 THE TRAUMATIZED SELF AND SOCIAL MEDIA

More than two decades ago; trauma was rarely discussed outside the mental health field, and rarely outside the psychiatry and psychology circles (Fassin & Rechtman 2009). The term trauma was only understood in a limited sense where it was mostly used to explain the mental state of soldiers returning from war, victims of devastating accidents, natural disasters, etc… (Van Der Kolk, 2015; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). In today's media landscape, the act of expressing suffering has become less discrete because of new media technologies that steadily give rise to new genres of expression (Cvetkovich, 2019). By media landscape, I mean the ever-evolving media environment that includes both traditional media, as well as new media that house digital media as a significant part of social life (Deuze et al, 2012).

Early media research repeatedly stressed that media and technology is what shapes cultures and societies (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1970). Contemporary researchers challenged that argument when they considered media and technology as systems that connect with a larger social system (Slater and Tacchi, 2004). In other words, the argument on media has evolved into one that regards media as an extended space for social life, and not a force that manipulates social life. For instance, Madianou and Miller (2012) recently proposed the theory of polymedia (*many* forms of media) in which they argue that media users are taking advantage of new technologies to "manage their emotions and their relationships" (p.172). In other words, managing difficult feelings is being proposed as an implicit function of new media spaces. Rajabi (2021) argues that "digital users who come to the internet after trauma engage digital media to reorient themselves and their shifting physical, mental, and emotional landscapes to the world around them" (p.7). This means that the traumatized individual who is struggling with emotional

and cognitive dissonance after trauma is potentially utilizing the digital space to regain balance and coherence in their lives. Some scholars even proposed the idea of *'living in media'* (Deuze et al, 2012). Central to this argument is "the ways in which social life is lived in different forms of media practices and mediated interactions" (Madianou & Miller, 2012. P.174).

Trauma, grief, loss, illness, death, and many other forms of suffering are all parts of social life that we now *live* online (Deuze et al, 2012). For example, Social Media Mourning (Baglione, Girard, Price, Clawson & Shih, 2018), the way bereaved individuals use social network sites to navigate bereavement, recently garnered enough attention in communications research when mourning practices started occupying the digital space, thus creating a virtual communicational dimension for grief and bereavement (Pennington, 2017). This has transformed the grieving experience to become "more visible" rather than an isolating and "strictly private" experience (Pennington, 2017. P14). Furthermore, scholars who analyzed memorial websites (Clark, Burgess, Laven, Bull, Marker, & Browne, 2004) and others who analyzed web cemeteries (Roberts, 2006) have looked at how social network sites impact the way people navigate relational loss (Rossetto, Lannutti & Strauman, 2014).

In this work, I argue that the way people live in media (Deuze, 2012) includes their attempt to bring their inner world of repressed trauma into a two-dimensional space that makes their pain visible. Media scholars who have considered a trauma-informed approach in their work such as Rajabi, (2021) claim that "suffering is a human condition that demands to be seen" (p.6). Similarly, Chouliaraki (2020) described the traumatized self as a "vulnerable figure that needs to communicate its suffering to command recognition" (p.16). Chouliaraki's (2020) interest in vulnerability lies in the human-rights narrative that centers the protection of the vulnerable self,

especially if it lacks the power to express. However, she contrasts that narrative with the psychotherapeutic narrative that considers the vulnerable self a self that seeks empathy and personal well-being in its expression (p.16). This means that Chouliaraki views the traumatized self from two separate viewpoints: one regards pain as a private emotion, therefore considers vulnerability as a therapeutic interaction. The other regards vulnerability as a social position, therefore, situates the traumatized self as a self injured by social and structural conditions that create personal suffering. The first one stems from psychotherapy, and the second one stems from human rights narratives. The human rights narrative is concerned with discourses of revolution and reformation and the psychotherapeutic narrative is concerned with healing and personal well-being (Chouliaraki 2020, p.15). The two narratives differ in the way the rights narrative focuses on protecting the vulnerable, while the psychotherapeutic narrative focuses on validating the vulnerable and holding their pain. As such, the therapy narrative relies on empathy as the principal affect, while the rights-driven narrative relies on the "affective register of indignation" (p.16). Both narratives, however, assume "that the self is fundamentally a vulnerable figure that needs to communicate its suffering to command recognition" (Chouliaraki 2020, p.16).

This work is rooted in the psychotherapeutic narrative, and therefore, examines the way the traumatized self authors media that is inspired by the wounds it subconsciously harbors. In doing so, I demonstrate the way trauma sufferers utilize the digital space in finding meaning, and creating a myriad of digital media artifacts that hold the memory of their trauma. In the words of Rajabi (2021) "trauma, in this study, serves as a catalyst through which to explore how digital media operate for users during contingent life moments" (p.7).

Looking at contemporary society through popular social media platforms, I notice the many ways trauma and suffering are being expressed. Whether the trauma is physical or psychological, individual or collective, incidental or ongoing, what is expressed in the digital media space is shared: suffering. By observing that exposed suffering, one can visualize the imprint of trauma and the way it differs from one person to the other. For example, some people lean toward an anxious expression of pain where obsession and rumination are evident, while others lean toward cynicism and shutting down where anger is mostly the dominant emotion. Some people prefer to avoid emotions all together and express their suffering in ways that relay strength and triumph over their trauma, while others remain stuck and haunted by their past. Technology continues to surprise the world with all the things it has made possible-- it has now given us unlimited access to an 'uncharted landscape of suffering' (Rajabi, 2021. p.4).

This landscape offers valuable insight into the behavior of a traumatized self, and how the body continues to hold the memory of trauma. It has made it visibly clear that people are unable to survive trauma when there isn't space for them to suffer. As such, I became compelled with examining the way a traumatized individual who is struggling with the consequences of trauma takes to media technologies to manage their intense feelings. I focused on Instagram as a popular digital space to look more closely at the way digital media correlates with social life. Madianou & Miller (2012) described the digital space as a person's repertoire of media and feelings, they write: "for each individual, polymedia represents their personal repertoire of communication media and of emotional registers" (p.180). Further, Dueze (2012) even claims that people are no longer just consumers of media, however now they orient to media "as producers via the mass personalization of our media environments". In essence, through

affective engagement in media spaces, the traumatized self attempts to manage some of the overwhelm and regain internal coherence that had been damaged by trauma. Kaplan (2005) notes that when victims of traumatic experiences put their experiences out into the world, they do so for two reasons: “to organize pain into a narrative that gives it shape for the purpose of self-understanding (working their trauma through), or with the purpose of being heard, that is, constructing a witness where there was none before” (p.20).

To illustrate this, Miller (2016) who researched the use of social media for a duration of 18 months in nine different parts of the world concluded that people who struggle with chronic or terminal illness resort to social media for cathartic expression. Some patients who struggle specifically with terminal illness use social media to openly discuss their situation with their knowledge of their soon-to-come death. Miller notes “this can also help overcome the reluctance of other people to engage with the topics of death and dying” (Miller, 2016.p.146). In that sense, the cathartic use of social media is not only helping the struggling individual, but also creating a more accepting culture of difficult, vulnerable, and intense emotional experiences. According to Pennebaker (1997) “the act of disclosing trauma is seen to have beneficial effects, in the form of both health benefits and peace of mind” (Asplund Ingemark, 2014. p.8). This was illustrated in Miller’s study through many cases. For instance, Elaine, a breast cancer patient spoke about the benefits of social media engagement during the different stages of her cancer, she mentioned that her social media use mostly lifted the pressure of having to deliver the tough news in-person. That way, she didn’t have to deal with neighbors or relatives not knowing what to do, or how to respond to the news of her cancer (Miller, 2016). In another case, social media use that included posting about illness and death helped in reuniting a patient’s divided family. As a result, she

argued that social media (especially Facebook) had been "instrumental in transforming this period of her life before she died, allowing her to use her experiences to educate and uplift others" (Miller, 2016. p.147). Moreover, the study also mentioned an IT professional who used social media not just to inform his family about the progress of his treatments, but also to keep track of these developments himself (Miller, 2016). Therefore, there were many ways that people going through the trauma of terminal illness found support, peace of mind, connection, and validation in the digital space.

In the past few years, with the prevalence of death due to the COVID-19 pandemic, affective communication, grief, and vulnerability have become key aspects of digital media spaces (Chouliaraki, 2020). For many people, witnessing expressions of trauma and suffering can trigger intense emotions in the body (Kaplan, 2005). Some scholars argue that this resonance of emotions is useful, as it creates connection and offers a sense of validation for the hidden pain that remained unacknowledged (Chouliaraki, 2020. p.14). Rajabi (2021) explains this interaction by saying that observing trauma in media "elicits an emotional, empathetic response that enables the spectator to not feel the protagonist's trauma; rather, 'they feel the pain evoked by empathy—arousing mechanisms interacting with their own traumatic experience' (Kaplan 2005, 90)" (p.10). In other words, the pain we feel when we witness someone's trauma is possibly triggered by our own unresolved traumatic pain. Additionally, trauma scholars and clinicians argue that in making pain visible, people may become more *viscerally acquainted* with the discomfort of suffering (Kaplan, 2005; Van der Kolk, 2015. p.299; Kirmayer, 1992). Thus, reiterating the physiological need behind choosing to make trauma visible. Mental health conversations and even therapy have now become explicitly and implicitly embedded in media

platforms (Chouliaraki, 2020). This undoubtedly makes *Trauma and Media* a fertile field for research and discovery.

In this work, I seize the opportunity to explore the way those recent theories apply to Instagram as an important social media platform. I ask in what ways do Instagram users utilize Instagram for managing their intense pain? How do they use the platform to produce media that is motivated by their trauma? How does the act of creating and sharing on the platform contribute to the emotional wellness of those users? What do these media artifacts reveal about trauma and the cultures that produced it? Accordingly, this work explores the nuances and limitations that Instagram offers as a space for affective expressions of trauma. It explores the peculiar capacity of the digital space in serving as an external container that holds the memory of trauma.

In the following section, I outline some concepts that encourage the externalization of traumatic memory and discuss the way they apply to the digital space.

2.4 MEMORY IN THE WILD AND INSTAGRAM

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok have become "lively online environments where intimate storytelling and self-presentation is practiced as a natural extension of daily life" (Masur et al., 2023. p1). In that way, digital connectivity has afforded people digital spaces to share their most personal stories and speak openly about their trauma. In doing so, they no longer carry their pain solely in isolation. Cognitive psychologists refer to this as "memory in the wild" (Hoskins, 2017, p.18) which is a concept that deserves some dwelling. Memory in the wild is a concept that regards the mind as an internal storage system, and media

technologies as an external storage system. The idea is that by having two storage bins for our memories, our minds tend to function significantly better in the way it handles memory. Psychologist Merlin Donald explains this in his work when he claimed that the mind is able to accomplish considerably more in its "'reflective power', as 'arbitrator' between internal and external systems of representation, and in enriching our awareness. He argues that "awareness now finds itself juxtaposed between two simultaneously present storage systems, one internal and biological, the other external and technological, each with long-term and short-term aspects" (2001, 311). He goes on to say: 'The external memory field is really a sort of cultural Trojan Horse into the brain… Temporarily it translates all the advantages of external storage media—permanence, accessibility, refinement—directly to the brain… This magnifies the mind's cognitive power and amplifies the impact of representational objects' (2002, 316)" (Hoskins, 2017. p.19).

In that sense, cognitive science recognizes the impact of media artifacts in the way they support brain functions, specifically when it comes to memory. This means that technology and media spaces are, in fact, being used as tools to navigate (or hold) memories that are too intense for the brain and the body to hold on their own. This can be viewed as an aspect of coping. Folkman et al (1986) defined *coping* to be the "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding one's resources" (Folkman et al, p. 993). As such, the way media technologies are being utilized as an external resource to navigate the heavy task of reframing and reshaping one's world after trauma deserves to be investigated.

In mental health literature, *coping* (Levine 1997; Janoff-Bulman 1989; Menakem 2009; Van Der Kolk, 2015; LePera, 2021) is what a person does and how they behave to regain coherence and a sense of safety after trauma. Coping strategies are also referred to as *trauma responses* (Menakem, 2009) and they are often described in the literature using the 4Fs: fight, flight, freeze, and fawn which are physiological reactions experienced in the body. Other coping strategies may include emotional detachment, rumination, cognitive dissonance, obsessive thoughts, numbness, or as mentioned, complete dissociation (Van Der Kolk, 2015, LePera 2021). Having thoroughly examined trauma content on Instagram, I argue that the use of Instagram can be considered in and of itself a behavioral act of coping. I use Instagram as an example of a digital media platform that demonstrates the way media artifacts reveal variations of coping strategies as they are experienced in modern culture. Additionally, I examine the way the concept of coping is being discussed in the digital space.

Instagram started off as a social media app that is "conducive to posting pictures from one's mobile phone and linking them to specific (hash-)tags. This has led to various Instagram-specific practices, such as the regular posting of selfies and the designation of such via respective tags (e.g., #me, #selfie, or #selflove)" (Masur et al,. 2023. P.4). This led to the rise of a negative correlation of the platform with the mental health of young adults, especially when it comes to social comparison and self-esteem (Festinger, 1954). However, there seems to be a shift in the relationship between Instagram and its users (Staniewski and Awruk, 2022) and research on such shift is still in its infant phase. The platform, nonetheless, has quickly become the most interesting digital media platform (Staniewski and Awruk, 2022) with an estimate of one billion global users (Omnicore, 2021), half of which spend a minimum of 30 minutes on the platform daily (Verrastro

et al, 2020). Predominantly, the platform is known for creating and sharing visual content with the option of written captions accompanying the visuals (Masur et al,. 2014). It is a digital space that is accessed for free and is available for anyone to post content about anything (Staniewski and Awruk, 2022). Trauma content is not excluded. In my process of analyzing content on the platform, I have noticed the way the evolution of tools and features on the platform has contributed to the diversity of content created. My work demonstrates the way this diversity of content has contributed to a meaningful change in the way users utilize and relate to the platform in its most recent years

A recent study that explored Instagram behavior patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that 96.2% of account users engaged with mental health content via the hashtag #mentalhealth (Boschet, Lee, Shen & Zhang, 2021. p.62). Further, the study revealed that Instagram mental health profiles were mostly "associated with positive sentiments" (Boschet, Lee, Shen & Zhang, 2021. p.54). And another study reported a "positive impact of Instagram on mental wellbeing" (Staniewski & Awruk, 2022. p.1). Therefore, it is safe to say that Instagram, as a popular digital platform, offers so much space for personal expression, relational and personal stories, and now it holds space for trauma and traumatic memories (Staniewski & Awruk, 2022).

As we continue to live in cultures and systems that are traumatizing to many, perhaps it is in the speaking and witnessing of trauma that we might learn about our pasts, and about each other. When trauma becomes more visible, it can potentially facilitate a culture that "takes on the responsibility of bearing witness" (Felman and Laub, 1992: 85) of what traumatized individuals felt they bore on their own (Pinchevski, 2011). The growth of trauma expression in

the digital space could be the first step towards building a public culture that is more emotionally intelligent. Digital connectivity has certainly allowed us access to an infinite landscape of suffering, which has made it visibly clear that people are unable to survive trauma on their own. When we see that at almost every tap or every swipe, perhaps this will encourage a moral responsibility in our society not to overlook someone's suffering, "as Luciano Floridi argues: 'the more any bit of information is just an easy click away, the less we shall be forgiven for not checking it. ICTs are making humanity increasingly responsible, morally speaking, for the way the world is, will be, and should be' (2014, 42-3)" (Hoskins, 2017. p.4). In that sense, the intersection between trauma and media becomes a topic with imminent need for further investigation in the media studies scholarship.

2.5 LIVING IN MEDIA

A vast number of studies consider social media to be the present or the current station on the train of new digital technologies (Miller, 2016). Some scholars argue against this assumption and write more about how social media is not just a momentary tool, but rather "a mode of social life and an aspect of relationships" (Miller, 2016. p.6). Miller explains that most academics, regardless of their stance on social media, think that it would be absurd to disregard the impact of technology on the way people choose to live their lives. Deuze (2012) argues that media have become so inseparable from us as users and consumers, that we "no longer *live with media*, but *in media"* (p.1). Revealing aspects of one's personal life and aspects of oneself has quickly become a common practice on social media platforms (Taddicken, 2014). People build and sustain social media pages that continuously mirror and reflect their lives through verbal and

visual posts (Masur et al,. 2023). “They further reveal parts of themselves through comments on their own and others’ posts **(**Masur et al,. 2023. p.2). In other words, media can no longer be viewed as just a form of technology that is external to our lives, but rather a space that is an extension to all aspects of our physical modern-day lives.

Making this distinction is important because it situates media and media interactions as lively aspects of our social lives, rather than external elements to it. This concept was the result of scholarly thinking that looked at the intersection of the digital space with social life with an advanced perspective that appropriately recognizes the merging of media in all parts of social life (Deuze, 2012). For example, some scholars used the term “mediatization” to introduce this perspective in a way that proposes that “contemporary society is permeated by the media, to an extent that the media may no longer be conceived of as being separate from cultural and other social institutions” (Hjardvard 2008, 105). This dissertation thereby extends this perspective with a specific attempt to reveal the way media has penetrated the personal experiences of trauma and loss. It considers the way social media spaces hold the potential to reshape the way public culture responds to those experiences.

Media Studies scholars have long studied media in terms of production and consumption as the main categories of research, doing so “within the parameters of the capitalist (and distinctly cosmopolitan) project, rather than within the material practice or lived experience of how people actually use and make media” (Deuze, 2012. p.4). But looking at media as an extension of our physical lives, and as a space where we continue living extends a creative lens to our lives. Some might argue that the way people post about their lives in the digital space is only an aspect of self-branding, or a carefully curated version of one’s life (Duffy et al., 2017). But

even so, curated media practices allow us to have a better sense of our life experiences, as Alexander (2004) puts it “it is only through the imaginative process of representation” (p.8) that trauma sufferers have a sense of the experience (p.8). The opportunity to view our realities as if they are scenes “one can zoom in or out from as viewed through a camera (or by swiping one's fingers on a touchscreen display) or move up or down in like we are used to when channel surfing” is arguably beneficial to our ability to grasp the range of our life events (Deuze, 2012. p.5). The way one chooses to present their life on media platforms actually requires “a set of life skills that are premised on a multimedia literacy: an ability to both “read” and “write” media” (Deuze, 2012. p.5).

As such, living and curating aspects of life in media arguably enhances our physical life skills; it enhances our emotional range, communication skills, verbal skills, and many more because of the creative skills required to maintain a life in the digital space. If anything, it enhances our awareness of our own lives. Couldry (2010) takes this perspective one step further and argues that what people produce in their media landscapes directly impacts our social, political, and cultural realities. He articulates the value of one’s personal voice and the value in the way they choose to narrate their lives. When I apply his perspective to my inquiry of trauma, I can claim that the voices of traumatized individuals and what they choose to share publicly about their trauma can potentially impact the way public culture perceives trauma. Theoretically, it can create new social norms and change the way public culture holds grief and suffering toward a more emotionally aware perception of such experiences.

2.6 AFFECT, EMOTION, AND MEDIA

Affect scholars such as Deborah B. Gould described the relationship between scenes of affect, feeling, and emotion and academic work to be an *uneasy* relationship (Gould, 2009. p.93). While Gould research was focused on politics and social movements, much of her inquiry was about the relationship between affective stimuli and political activism (p.97). In other words, she was concerned with the way feelings and emotion compel thought and action. She argued that the literature in her field, the field of social movements, did not account for feelings and emotions when discussing the realm of politics. In fact, emotions were grounds for argument dismissal in research, and so they were either neglected or totally avoided by social movement scholars. Nonetheless, Gould argued that the practice of meaning-making (even in politics) is never without feelings; she believed that because meaning-making is a practice that is incited and shaped by emotion, that this should be enough reason to "invite scholarly attention to the affective dimensions of sense-making" (p.214). Accordingly, she focused her work on integrating feelings and emotions into the conceptual frameworks that failed to account for them when analyzing politics. As such, an emotional turn in scholarship became more significant, and movement scholars considered affect with more respect in academic works.

Just as Gould injects emotion into social movements, integrating feelings and emotions in the media studies scholarship is equally important. Given how trauma and meaning are closely intertwined, therefore, whatever stimulates the practice of meaning-making needs to be integrated in research about trauma for comprehensive knowledge creation. As Gould argued the practice of meaning-making is incited and shaped by emotions, therefore, trauma is best studied using scholarship that is attuned to feelings. Gould refers to this as the *emotional turn* in

scholarship (p.244). She argues that a scholarship model that focuses on affect is distinguished because of the space it gives scholars to account for both emotion and reason (Gould, 2009). Therefore, academic scholars who participated in the emotional turn did so on the premise that emotions are part of all aspects of life, and therefore cannot be neglected or ignored (251). They understood that humans are "both rational and emotional, having the ability to reason, to think strategically, to assess and pursue their interests, to feel, and to emote. Even more, drawing from neuroscientific research, which has found that rationality requires emotion (e.g., Damasio 1994, xiii)" (Gould, 2009. p.255). Accordingly, emotion in this scholarship model is considered key to the way humans understand themselves and their worlds. They are key to the way they identify their likes and dislikes, their joys and pains, their needs, and the practices they need to engage in to meet those needs. As such, human experiences and meaning cannot be studied without affect. And trauma cannot be studied without meaning. This makes affect a crucial aspect of studies on trauma as it allows for acknowledging emotion as an ever-present feature of human life that has the power to bring value to academic scholarship.

Media artifacts such as photographs, video, memoirs, film, and digital media products all serve as archives for trauma (Cvetkovich, 2019). Cvetkovich claims that such artifacts hold the memory of trauma because of the way trauma is "embedded not just in narrative but in material artifacts, which can range from photographs to objects whose relation to trauma might seem arbitrary" (p.258). She argues that because these artifacts are saturated with "emotional, and even sentimental value" (p.258) they can be considered a genre of expression that brings trauma to public and collective witnesses (Cvetkovich, 2019, 256). Therefore, as media scholars, we can safely argue that media artifacts are a valuable resource that reveal how moments of daily

emotional distress are connected to moments of extreme trauma. They also reveal the way personal trauma can be created or exacerbated by structural conditions and cultural practices.

As such, the trauma narrative in the media studies scholarship has potential to expand in two directions: one that centers human rights and collective expression of vulnerability, and the other one centers individual trauma and personal expression of pain. In my process of researching trauma and the way it is situated in different works, I became compelled to center my work in the psychotherapeutic narrative of trauma that mostly explains how people live and experience the world. Especially how people live *affectively* (Cvetkovich, 2019, 486). As a media studies scholar, I'm interested in the way trauma embeds itself in media artifacts through the emotional expression of their authors. Therefore, my investigation of trauma has become an exploration of how personal traumatic experiences are visually or otherwise expressed on digital media platforms. While rights-driven media scholars connect trauma to the structural and cultural conditions that create it (Chouliaraki, 2020), I'm interested in situating my work in the psychotherapeutic potential of media spaces. As such, I investigate trauma from an arts-driven perspective in which artistic media practices are used as tools to surpass personal traumatic suffering.

In that way, my work situates the vulnerable self as a self that cultivates new social norms to facilitate a culture that is more tolerant and more accepting of affective living. Through expressions of pain and suffering, the vulnerable self brings personal trauma to public witnessing and demands space in public culture for individual traumas to be seen, not to promote victimhood, but to employ media technologies for personal and emotional well-being.

2.7 CONCLUSION

Trauma is a human experience that leaves a significant imprint in the human body (Menakem, 2009). Much of psychology and trauma literature suggest that humans need predictable care in childhood for them to develop trust, safety, and a positive outlook on themselves and the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). When an individual comes face to face with a traumatic event, whether it happens in childhood or adulthood, their basic sense of trust is lost. As such, a traumatized individual experiences a loss in proper brain functioning, and in turn a disruption in the body occurs (Van der Kolk, 2015). Further, when people are not given enough time and the necessary tools to deal with the intense emotional consequences of trauma and regain a sense of trust, trauma remains unresolved. This is how cultures and social systems contribute to furthering trauma by being oblivious, indifferent, or intolerant of intense emotional pain (Levin, 1997). With time, unresolved trauma becomes stuck in one's body and causes a state of chronic dysregulation. Put simply, emotional pain that remains unresolved stays in the body and the subconscious, and it will continue to find ways to project itself in an attempt to find a resolution. Fassin and Rechtman (2009) call this the resurfacing of a painful past in "veiled or violent form in the body or the mind" (p.8).

Accordingly, the concept of trauma has been thoroughly studied in medical research, psychology, and psychiatry discourses where it originates and lives as a concept and a theory (Rajabi, 2021). Because of the enormous influenced of psychoanalytic thinking on scholars who were keen on applying a trauma-informed approach to their work, trauma garnered a lot of interest in social science and anthropological research (Alexander, 2004; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). In media research, trauma was loosely explored in television and misery memoirs where

the popular culture of trauma was potentially born (Rothe, 2011). However, with the profound shift in the way media is being consumed as technologies continue to advance and grow, there is an equal shift in the ways relational and personal communication are both practiced and experienced (Madianou & Miller, 2012). This includes affective expressions of trauma as they are practiced and received on digital media platforms today.

Looking at digital media artifacts allows media scholars with an interest in trauma to explore the way digital media serves as a space that holds the imprints of trauma. In doing so, media scholars are able to demonstrate the way media technologies have actively become archives for the memories and internal struggles of their users. As such, they've become extensions of personal and social life. Living in media is a concept that was proposed and developed by media scholar Mark Deuze who argues that digital and social networks function as "the living archives of social reality" (Deuze, 2013). Viewing the digital media space as a space where we can see some aspects of our real lives and the lives of others allows us to think of media technologies as tools affording us to create art inspired by our lives. This work looks specifically at trauma as a human experience that motivates media creation in the digital space.

Allowing space in media scholarship for emotionally attuned research on trauma and media, media scholars can likely claim trauma from the medical and scientific disciplines and situate it in the context of modern-day culture and society. In doing so, we create space for new models of thinking to emerge that can serve as the foundation for positive change in public culture.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGIES

This dissertation examines the way Instagram as a digital media platform is being utilized in processing traumatic life experiences. To examine the diversity of content included in this study, I employ three types of qualitative methods. I explore my data set using textual analysis, narrative analysis, and comparative analysis to examine the way trauma is expressed on Instagram. The hybridity of my methods lets me engage thoughtfully and thoroughly with different forms of content and explore the meanings they reveal.

I use purposeful sampling to select the texts that are aligned with the theories that broadly and specifically inform my work. Patton (2002) refers to this sample as a sample that becomes, by definition and selection, representative of the phenomenon of interest (p.238). In this case, the phenomenon of interest is trauma on social media. The analysis of narratives allows for deriving intertextual meanings (Rose; 155) based on interpretive sensitivities. This creates space for intuitive thinking because interpretive sensitivities come from intuitive readings of the text examined. This strategy falls under Rose's method of intertextuality and the way it is employed for its interpretive power. In *Visual Methodologies* she suggests that "successful […] analysis depends less on rigorous procedures and more on other qualities" (156). Among those qualities she mentions craft skill (Potter, 1996:140), scholarship (Gill, 1996:144) and interpretive sensitivities (Phillips & Hardy, 2002: 75). This means that intertextual meanings are inferred not just from theory and critical thinking, but rather from combining qualities of theory, craft, and intuition. Patton (2002) reinforces this idea by calling it a holistic way of thinking (p.58). He notes that holistic analysis allows us to think in new ways about the relationships between parts and

wholes (p.58). In essence, the way we infer meaning from stories, particularly, from the texts that tell the stories, is what narrative analysis offers as a method of inquiry (Patton, 2002). And so, it allows room for both intuitive thinking and critical thinking to be part of the analysis which will be a significant approach in this study.

In short, because "different sense-making systems demand, or allow different ways of thinking about the relationships between people and things" (Mckee, 2003. p.8) I employ a variety of qualitative methods in my work. The hybridity of methods lets me engage thoughtfully and thoroughly with media texts and explore the meanings they reveal. The structure of this project demonstrates the value of trauma expression on Instagram and the knowledge it informs in both media and trauma discourses. It examines the ways trauma and meaning-making practices are represented in media text without critiquing whether those representations are accurate or not. Rather, it focuses on "how these texts tell their stories, how they represent the world, and how they make sense of it" (Mckee, 2003. p. 17). Guiding my process are the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between the behavior of a trauma-sufferer in the digital media spaces and meaning-making?
2. What is the relationship between affective expressions in digital media spaces and coping with trauma? What do these expressions reveal about the reality of coping with trauma? How do they relay suffering, and how do they make sense of it?

3.1 METHODS

3.1.a CASE STUDY

Using purposeful sampling, I analyze six Instagram pages that illuminate the experience of trauma in modern-day societies. By examining those pages and the techniques of their creators, I explore the way trauma expression and meaning making are being practiced on a popular social media platform.

By examining both static and dynamic Instagram text (image, video, text, audio, story) that uses a narrative technique to illuminate the experience of trauma in modern-day societies, I demonstrate the way trauma and meaning have been shown on Instagram. Not just through visuals but through the narratives constructed to curate impactful content. My analysis will therefore illustrate the invisibility and visibility of trauma. In other words, I will discuss the way trauma is an invisible force that shapes one's life; it shapes the way people live, the way they love and the way they make sense of the world. I will also discuss the way digital connectivity has afforded people tools and digital spaces to make their traumas visible. Accordingly, the posts included will be purposefully selected for their focus on themes of trauma, coping, and how the body stores the memory of trauma. The idea is to examine how the experience of trauma is presented differently in different content. In doing so, I demonstrate the way users have utilized Instagram as a platform, and narrative as a technique, to deal with the intensity and the emotional overwhelm of the trauma experienced.

Patton (2002) regards *narrative analysis* (p.115) to be a method specifically applied to stories or narrative data. Shaw et al (1998) argues that "that stories are more memorable and better support learning and understanding than non-story narratives" (Patton, 2002. p.42). As

such, my goal is to demonstrate the way trauma expression on Instagram has created safe digital communities for people to understand their traumatic histories and find support as they navigate the aftermath of trauma. It looks at how meaning-making practices, and co-regulation practices are experienced through the process by which the authors present their narratives and explain the cultures that create it.

3.1.b. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS:

Using textual analysis, I examine how the visibility of trauma, the narration of pain and suffering, can all be of service to the process of finding meaning, and coping of trauma. In doing so, I outline the different tools and methods each creator has utilized to mainstream their trauma expression. The content I look at varies from visual posts, written posts, memoir, and memory posts, as well as recovery and psycho-educational content. In this process, I analyze the way creating and sharing trauma content can be potentially beneficial to the suffering individual and the digital community that builds around their choice to express that suffering on a public forum.

Many media studies writers often analyze media texts against reality (Mckee, 2003). This means that they measure media text in terms of its accuracy in representing real life. Ellis (2000) argues that the most common public mode of thinking about media texts is a mode that views them in relation to "how accurately they tell the truth about reality" (13) in (Mckee, 2003:16). However, the way I examine Instagram posts here is different. I am not concerned with the accuracy of the traumatic experience being expressed, I am more concerned with the way Instagram is being used as a tool to hold the trauma and make sense of it. In essence, the point of my study is not to analyze what qualifies as trauma and what doesn't. The primary motivation

for my research is to analyze the implicit and explicit expressions of trauma on a popular social media platform. I do not dispute the popularity and perhaps the uninformed use of the term, nor do I dispute the way trauma can produce exaggerated or inaccurate expressions. Those arguments have their logic, but they are not mine. My work aims to demonstrate the way media artifacts hold expressions of trauma, and the role of those expressions in coping with or surviving traumatic life events. As such, the case of Instagram is meant to illustrate the way digital media technologies have become spaces where some people live and embody their traumatic experiences, and the way those spaces are used to process emotions and make sense of the world.

SAMPLING

For my preliminary sampling, I use hashtags to target content that fall under the categories of: #trauma, #meaning, and #healing. I narrow down the results to a sample group of mental and emotional health accounts that are mostly led by verified authors and/or artists. Attention will be paid to trauma-specific content created by creators of color, though I will not completely exclude content created by white creators, especially when it comes to global experiences such as #grief and #nervoussystem adaptations. I narrow down that sample by selecting the ones that fit under the themes: #trauma #traumarecovery #memory #grief and #nervoussystem. I filtered down the results to the number of accounts I, myself, follow on a regular basis and engage with their community. This sample consists of 54 accounts that discuss trauma through different forms of expression, they are information-rich with substantial

engagement[1]. According to the bio line descriptions available on each page I categorized this sample by themes:

1) 25 accounts can be described as mental health accounts led by certified therapists.
2) 11 accounts can be described as artistic led by artists and/or authors posting emotional content.
3) 8 accounts can be described as spiritual or restorative content.
4) The remaining accounts were excluded for irrelevance.

The final sample for analysis was purposively selected by virtue of its capacity to provide richly textured information in regards to trauma and trauma expression. This is decided based on the alignment of the selected content with the main theories I discussed in the literature review chapter. I finalized my sample to fit two main categories: *1. Artistic or Creative Instagram Practices and Trauma,* and *2. Professional Instagram Practices and the Genre of Instagram Therapy.* Artistic or creative Instagram practices refer to practices that are characterized by affective expression of painful narratives and articulating the effects of such pain on a person's mental health, and how that shows up in everyday life. Professional Instagram practices refer to practices that are characterized by a critical sense of understanding trauma, and a sense of rationality in expressing it. Artistic Instagram practices reveal the way people utilize the platform in coping with trauma. Professional Instagram practices reveal the genre of Instagram therapy.

[1] Engagement rate will be determined using the standard engagement metric in the social media marketing industry.

3.1.c. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Lastly, through comparative analysis, I articulate the similarities and differences in the representation of trauma and meaning as they are shown in different Instagram text. Just like media practices have evolved with technology, trauma and meaning-making practices similarly continue to evolve. Because I argue that traumatized individuals now seek the digital space to process their pain, I look at the way different forms of Instagram practices present the experience of trauma in different ways without questioning their accuracy. The point is to understand how the process of representing a story, or reconstructing an event produces new meanings about someone's world. And meaning in this instance is indicated by affective markers that reveal a sense of coping for the media creator and for their audience. This is how trauma inspires media artifacts that act as spaces for holding it. It is how trauma inspires genres of expression that "brings into being collective witnesses and publics" (Cvetkovich, 2019. p.256). As such, by conducting a comparative analysis, I demonstrate the way media technologies continue to produce new literacies in the context of trauma, meaning, and culture.

3.2. JUSTIFICATION OF METHODS

There is a growing body of work that suggests that media technologies have afforded us a virtual space to perform and live our lives (Masur et al., 2023; Miguel, 2016; Deuze et al, 2012; Hearing, 2015). Central to this argument is "the ways in which social life is lived in different forms of media practices and mediated interactions" (Madianou & Miller, 2012. P.174). For example, a recent study by Moore, Magee, Gamreklidze, and Kowalewski (2017) demonstrates that ordinary grieving rituals have transformed into rituals that are frequently practiced on digital

media platforms due to their potential to provide varied emotional support (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Clark et al., 2004; Roberts, 2004, 2006). Rose (2007) writes in *Visual Methodologies* that "human subjects are produced through discourses. Our sense of our self is made through the operation of discourse" (p.143).

The way the digital space has played a major role in my own bereavement journey certainly inspired me to study it further. During my personal experience with traumatic loss, I sought out digital communities of support as safe spaces to deal with all the psychological consequences of my trauma. In those spaces I found ways to express the contradicting and competing narratives in the lived experience of a person overwhelmed by the trauma of sudden death. This inspired the early questions that guided the development of my research: Is there a way to use *storytelling* as a method in conducting academic research? Is there value in reflecting on one's own experience in a way that qualifies that reflection as method of inquiry?

Many scholars have made distinct observations in regards to stories being data for knowledge (Denning, 2001; Armstrong, 1992; Preskill & Jacobvitz, 2000). Linguistic scholars such as Richard Mitchel (1979) notes: "Our knowledge is made up of the stories we can tell, stories that must be told in the language that we know… Where we can tell no story, we have no knowledge" (Patton 2002, p.196). Therefore, I felt drawn to the idea of examining the different ways people tell stories about their lives, and the digital space certainly makes this possible because of how people openly share content that is inspired by personal experience. In doing so, I realized that the way "we make sense of our own lives, and of other people's, has vital implications for our own well-being and for how we treat others" (Mckee, 2003, p.44). The more I learned about trauma and meaning, the more I started to notice it on social media, sometimes

in my own activity, and most often in the content I consume that is created by other individuals also attempting to reconcile their own suffering. Accordingly, this project was born to demonstrate the way the digital content that people produce can be the safe space where they process and cope with their suffering.

CHAPTER 4

CREATIVE INSTAGRAMMERS AND TRAUMA

"Trust your body, it tells the truth. Question your mind, it often lies" (Turecki, 2021). I was browsing my Instagram "explore" page one morning, and this quote instantly got my attention. The emphasis on the body's wisdom mirrored how I struggled with my own racing mind. I spent a good amount of time scrolling through the author's page exploring the content she created. Jillian was not a big content creator at the time, but she talked a lot about the wisdom of the body and the power of intuitive thinking. From there, I discovered a new side of Instagram; a world of content ranging from posts on self-love, family history, trauma in our daily lives, to generational trauma, and more densely written posts on the nervous system, the body, and the many ways it keeps the score. As an avid Instagram user, I became very interested in investigating the new genres of content emerging on the platform.

In this chapter, I examine different types of Instagram posts that reveal the various ways the platform is being used for expressing and coping with trauma. The selection of tools available on the platform motivates artistic and creative users to express themselves in distinct ways, therefore inspiring a wide range of media artifacts to live on the platform. This range allowed me to engage thoroughly with multiple forms of Instagram posts (text, illustrations, stills, narratives, carousels, reels) and explore the meanings they reveal. As such, this chapter demonstrates the way social media technologies have become spaces where some people live and embody (whether consciously or unconsciously) their traumatic experiences, and the way those spaces are used to process emotions and make sense of the world.

The content analyzed here is marked by its affective nature and the raw presence of its authors who create media that is prompted by trauma or descriptive of the way the body and the mind cope. The authors follow a similar blueprint for their practice on the platform that is characterized mainly by personal and self-disclosure. Personal disclosure refers to the revelation of what would be considered private and intimate life matters (Lee et al., 2018), and self-disclosure refers to the revelation of self in day-to-day living (Luo & Hancock, 2020). As such, these authors create content that is motivated by and reflective of their personal suffering and reveals the way they handle this suffering in their day-to-day lives. The chapter thus features four different Instagram content creators, each one using a distinct creative approach that discloses the experience of trauma and/or coping. Split by two main themes, the content reviewed is categorized as follows:

1. The Case of Affective Labeling

This category features @theartidote who curates posts that are rarely specific to his own traumas, but rather encompass the unanimous experience of coping with trauma. Most of Artidote's work is emotion-specific; he speaks about loneliness, isolation, helplessness, numbness, shutting down, depression, anxiety, dissociation etc. He then explains how such behaviors can be viewed as methods by which the body or the mind copes with suffering. His content becomes relational through the narratives that he creates to convey the most common feelings and the most common behaviors associated with pain and suffering. In essence, his large Instagram page is focused on the act of emotional labeling.

2. The Case of Trauma-Specific Disclosures

In contrast, this category features three creators who are very specific about their traumas or traumatic history in the content they share on the platform. Elyse Myers (@elysemyers), Violet Clair (@violetclair), and Dr. Nahla (@iamdoctornahla) have considerably large Instagram pages where they reveal narratives of personal, health, or culturally specific traumas. Their content directly reflects either their past or present pain, and it speaks directly to their experiences with personality disorders, chronic pain and medical gaslighting, religious and cultural trauma respectively.

The chapter includes a discussion that offers a comparative analysis between the two categories of data, and the four creators examined. A review of Instagram tools and features examined in each data set will be reviewed, audience engagement will be discussed and contrasted between creators. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by discussing the way Instagram has been employed by its users over the past few years and how this led to the rise of new genres of expression on the platform.

4.1 AFFECTIVE LABELING

The following section explores the case of @theartidote and *affective labeling* (Brackett, 2020. P.109). In the work of Marck Brackett on researching emotions, affective labeling refers to one's ability to describe feelings. He cites Matthew Lieberman, Social Cognitive Neuroscientist who conducted experiments with his colleagues on whether or not the use of words to describe feelings would moderate distressing emotional experiences (Brackett, 2020. P.109). In other words, Liberman and his colleagues studied whether or not the act of labeling emotions has any bearing on easing pain. Participants in his experiments did not believe that labeling emotions would be an effective method for emotional regulation, however, the study revealed that "participants who were asked to label emotions and facial expressions reported less distress than those subjects who weren't asked to comment" (Brackett, 2020. p.109). Liberman found that the act of affect labeling "produces a pattern of effects like those seen during explicit emotion regulation, suggesting affect labeling is a form of implicit emotion regulation" (Torre & Lieberman, 2018. P.1).

As such, this data set only includes one creator purposefully selected as a case study that reflects the way an Instagram page serves as a space for emotional regulation. By focusing on affect labeling, Artidote demonstrates the significant of emotional expression in coping with trauma. To illustrate this, I examine ten posts on Artidote's page with attention to affect, emotion, narrative, theory, and the way he uses Instagram to curate the experience of coping with pain and suffering.

A. @THEARTIDOTE

The Artidote is an art curator who duets illustrated visuals with a corresponding narrative to label the affective experiences associated with trauma. His content demonstrates elements of trauma and the way it shows up in everyday life. Many clinicians now consider the term trauma appropriate for describing "adaptive mental processes involved in the assimilation and integration of new information with intense survival emphasis" (Turnbull, 1998, p. 88). These adaptive processes only become pathological if they are inhibited in some way (Turnbull, 1998), or if they are left unaddressed and therefore unprocessed and untreated (Scott, 1990; Van der Kolk, 2015). Artidote intends to uncover these adaptive mental and emotional processes in the work he curates on Instagram. By pairing innovative visuals with the appropriate text, he often curates an intriguing message that labels the traumatic responses of the body and the mind.

Focusing on labeling negative or distressing feelings without offering any remedies probably does not sound like an effective method for reducing suffering. People probably would not believe that just labeling their feelings without trying to do anything about them could relieve any of their pain. However, an emerging body of work that focused on the act of affect labeling proved otherwise (Torre & Lieberman, 2018). There is now surprising evidence that the mere act of putting feelings into words is beneficial for reducing pain. Egnew (2009) suggests that there is healing in the process of narration, Brackett (2020) claims the terminology of emotion enhances one's perception their lives, Torre & Lieberman (2018) claim that labeling emotions can in fact be a method for implicit emotion regulation. The following frames offer a good introduction to Artidote's style in practicing affect labeling as a content creator.

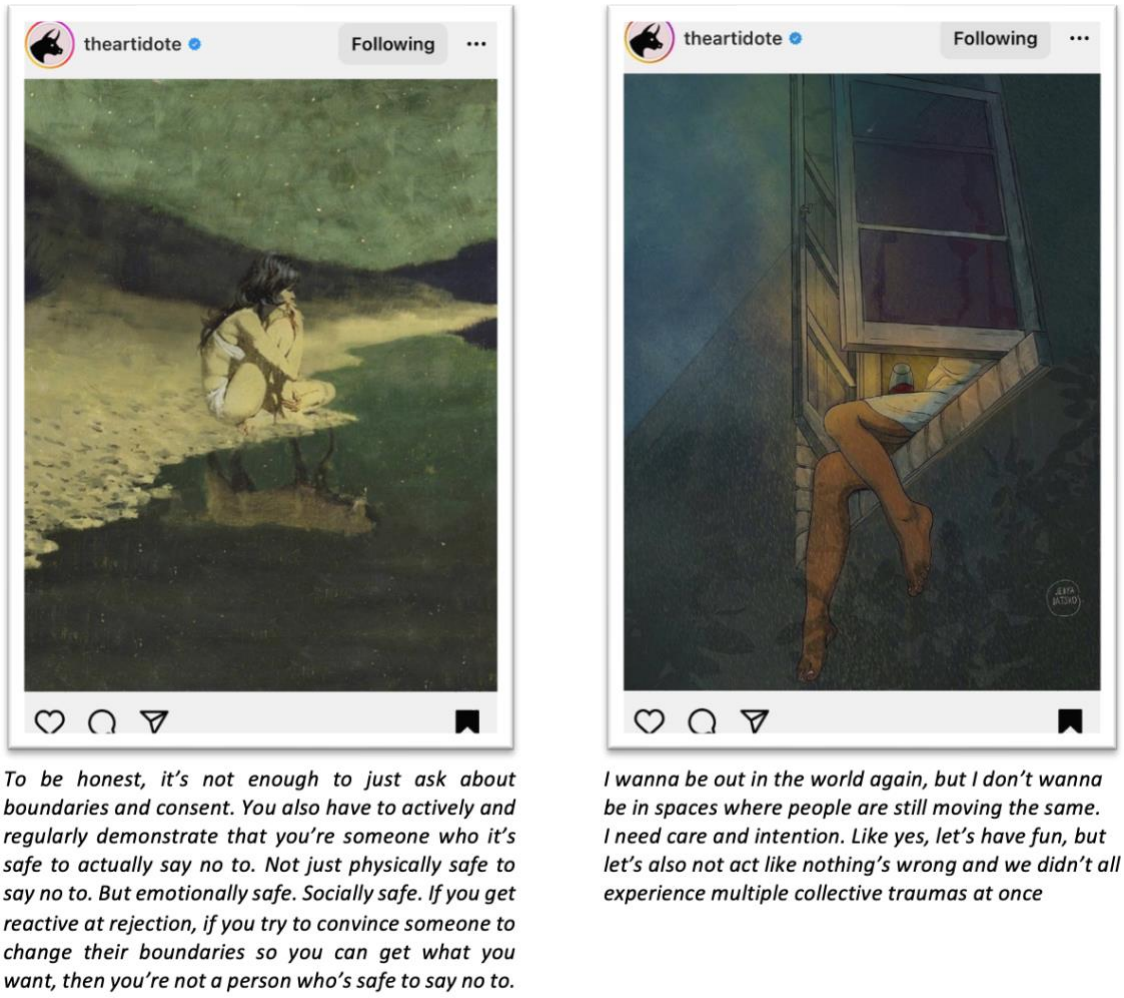


Figure 1 (Artidote, 20222; 2021)

In the above two posts (Artidote, 2022a; 2021), there are three main elements that qualify these posts to be reflective of trauma and affect. First, the visuals illuminate two necessary feelings that are often hijacked by trauma: safety and connection (Menakem, 2009; Van der Kolk, 2015). This is reflected in the isolation and loneliness of the illustrated characters which is a representation of the reality of individuals in the aftermath of a traumatic experience. Second, the visuals effectively convey fear; in the first one, we see a wolf's reflection in the water which is a metaphor for an unsafe person, and in the second one the subject's face is not drawn

in indicating a sense of withdrawal from the world. Accordingly, the illustrations alone relay the real-life experience of isolation (Kaplan, 2005), and reflect the internal experience of a traumatized individual that is marked by fear, loneliness, and lack of safety and connection.

Third, the written text is unambiguous in the way it relays trauma as it is a clear expression of *shattered assumptions* (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; 1992) or beliefs scripted in conversational tone. The first narrative reflects a loss in the assumption that one's boundaries are enough to protect them, and the second one reflects a loss in the sense of belonging to the world as a non-traumatizing place (Artidote, 2022a; 2021). Trauma theory tells us that the shattering of one's fundamental assumptions about the world is the main trigger underlying responses to all traumas (Janoff-Bulman 1992). The message attempted in these posts offers a subtle representation of the way trauma impacts people's responses to the world. Both frames are about losing trust in something or someone and feeling stuck in the aftermath of such loss. They are not densely written, and they do not use complicated language or medical diagnoses, nor do they offer any healing strategies. They are merely expressions of lost trust in previously held beliefs about the self and about the world. In other words, they are expressions of the internal sense of helplessness, numbing, or shutting down.

These are largely the recurring elements in almost all of Artidote's posts, the disclosure of trauma comes in the written text, and the depiction of coping behaviors comes in the illustrated visual. In most of his post, Artidote uses three layers of curation: 1) an image, 2) a narrative, and 3) an emotion, to curate a message that is reflective of an undeniable reality associated with trauma. In doing so, he focuses on synthesizing universal or most common responses that the body and the mind use to adapt to pain and suffering.

The main reason I was drawn to Artidote's page as a space that is reflective of trauma is his attunement to the subtle ways trauma shows up in common day-to-day manners and life choices. For example, Janoff-Bulman's concept of assumptive worlds suggests that most people usually operate on the basis of an unchallenged conceptual world view (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; 1992). That is until this world view becomes challenged by a significant life event that causes its shattering. Shattered assumptive worlds in the aftermath of trauma often create a lot of suffering (Janoff-Bulman, 1989), because it means that an individual needs to change their core beliefs about the world in order to cope. Therefore, a load of cognitive work is required to reconcile what one knows with the misfortune that happened to them. This process involves emotions like confusion, resistance, and often times a lot of internal struggles that are difficult to articulate. The internal struggle experienced during this process is illustrated in the following post: Artidote writes *not everything that makes you uncomfortable is bad*, *sometimes discomfort means your world view is being challenged […] when your ideas are tightly fused with your sense of self (identity), having them challenged can feel like a personal attack* (Artidote, *2022b).* In analyzing this post, I will show the way Artidote's curatorial approach builds posts that labels difficult internal experiences.

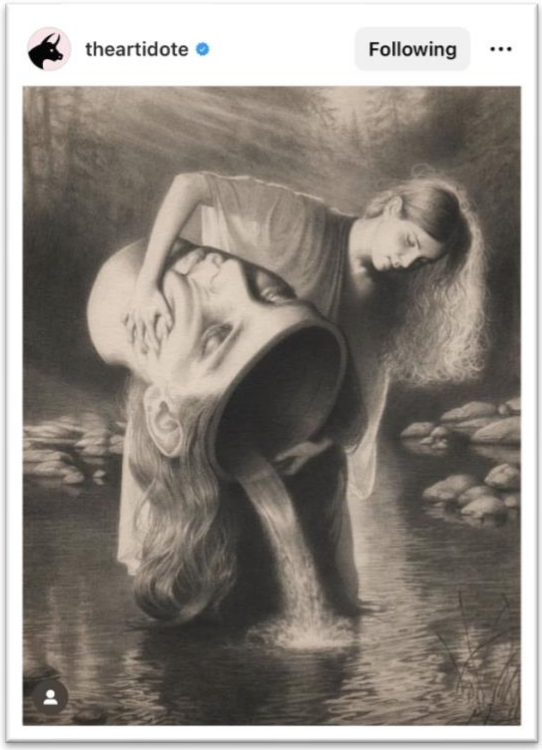


Figure 2 (Artidote, 2022b)

1. The Image.

The illustrated visual chosen for this post is powerful in the way it subtly offers the reader a sense of control; it illustrates not only the idea of one's outdated beliefs and ideologies, but also demonstrates ridding oneself from old mindsets in a way that suggests control over the process. In other words, it paints an image for intentionally releasing ideas that contribute to one's suffering. This subtle communication approach suggests to the traumatized reader, who potentially lost their sense of trust and by extension their sense of control (Van der Kolk, 2015), that they are still in charge. It proposes the idea that a person (even when traumatized) is in charge of their old assumptive world, and they can be in charge of the new one that they will now build to replace it. In that sense, this image satisfies the first layer of Artidote's approach.

2. The Narrative

The second layer in his approach is always the accompanying narrative. The captioned text emphasizes the importance of the cognitive work that one needs to do to cope with losing trust in their world. The statements he makes in the caption: *sometimes discomfort means your world view is being challenged,* or *when your ideas are tightly fused with your sense of self (identity), having them challenged can feel like a personal attack* (Artidote, *2022b)* reflect the difficulty in the process of updating one's core beliefs. Those statements mirror Janoff-Bulman's (1989) theoretical statements when she writes: "a major coping task confronting victims is a cognitive one, that of assimilating their experience and/or changing their basic schemas about themselves and their world" (p.113). Further, she notes that during this process, many "seemingly inappropriate coping strategies, including self-blame, denial, and intrusive, recurrent thoughts" (p.113) become a major part of navigating the dissonance that occurs after trauma. In this post, Artidote refers to these coping strategies as *discomfort*, and the message intended here is to make the reader feel at ease with that discomfort in order to go through the cognitive task of change.

3. The Emotion

The third layer in Artidote's approach is the emotion he believes is most common in a specific situaion. In this context, the emotion is distress and confusion. In curating this experience, he attempts to validate the discomfort of his followers going through this cognitive challenge. In doing so, he stimulates engagement through which his followers tend to expand on his message. Here, followers articulated the importance of being emotionally intelligent individuals and

discussed the value of perspective and reframing mindsets. For example, one user commented *"the discomfort makes you strong, we cannot swim without getting into water",* and another wrote *"sometimes we have to sit in the discomfort to learn what it is teaching us."* The comments often reflect that people in Artidote's community are keen on the way he explains trauma and its associated emotioal states using creative methods.

This implies that Artidote's content, even if sometimes triggering, is well received by his audience. It makes them think and engage in conversation even if just by saying they needed that particular message, or that it affected their mood, or turned their day around. In that sense, Artidote builds a digital space that people seek to feel better; to connect; and to find words for their unexpressed thoughts. When he curates posts that skillfully give difficult internal experiences shape and form, he creates a sense of safety for people to articulate their pain. For instance, expanding on the cognitive work needed in changing outdated world views, Artidote curates the concept of cognitive dissonance. He validates the impact that trauma has on one's fundamental beliefs by illustrating the action of pulling oneself out of an outdated reflection of the self. This is shown by the presence of a mirror that discloses a different reflection of reality suggesting that one's internal world is different than their external. In other words, one may seem like they are doing well on the outside, but still struggle with their outdated beliefs and identities on the inside. The discomfort of this experience is portrayed by creating a drowning reflection of the woman, and the reality of her pulling herself out of that discomfort. This echoes the theoretical claims that address one's inability to assimilate what they know with the misfortune they experienced (Alexander et.al., 2004; Menakem, 2009; Van der Kolk's 2015).

Some clinicians claim that the brain works differently after trauma that “no matter how much insight and understanding we develop, the rational brain is basically impotent to talk the emotional brain out of its own reality” (Van der Kolk’s 2015, p.47). As such the impact of trauma continues to distress one’s internal world even years after the occurrence of the negative event.

The reason a lot of people won’t become who they want is because they’re too attached to who they’ve been.

And you hear it all the time when people say, “I’ve always been that way.” Okay, well if that’s working for you, keep doing it.

But I knew it wasn’t for me any longer. I had hit my version of rock bottom… That day what shifted for me was willing to completely die to any form of me that I had been so that I can birth the person I was becoming.

I was willing to let go of everything and everybody.

Another reason people won’t get there is because the doorway is for you to fit through. And yet you’re trying to carry everybody else through cause you’re trying to save everyone, but you gotta rescue yourself first. I am much more valuable to my family and to my community because I was willing to let them go. To go through the door myself, teach myself, learn myself, condition myself, and then come back and get them. I’m much more valuable to them now, but I had to go through a window time of 10 years of judgment… I had to be willing to allow my conviction to make me an inconvenience. See, we wanna grow but we want to all stay liked by everybody. I was willing to be my own rescue at the risk of your approval. Most of us aren’t like that. Well, I woke up and liked myself today, so your like is extra. My job is to like me first. I was willing to say everyday: “Lisa, you like you?” “Lisa, are you proud of you?” “Lisa are you planned full out?”. Every day before I checked in with anybody else. @lisa2motivate.

Figure 3 (Artidote, 2022c)

In this post (Artidote, 2022c), the image (1st layer) communicates the struggle of letting go of old beliefs which impacts the quality of one’s mental well-being for a significant amount of time. However, addressing trauma and healing its long-term consequences ultimately includes

releasing old beliefs and creating new narratives about one's world (Egnew, 2009). By adding a verbal disclosure in the text (2nd layer) that reflects the hidden layer of trauma, the scene becomes filled with affective texture and emotions (3rd layer). *I had hit my version of rock bottom […] I was willing to let go of everything and everybody* (Artidote, 2022c) is a powerful statement that is descriptive of one's state of despair that instigates change. This curation reflects the artist's attempt to bring an inner world of struggle into the two-dimensional space of a digital platform. Using personal narratives, the author reveals the vulnerable layers of trauma that are difficult to articulate. In doing so, he instills markers of safety and comfort (Van der Kolk, 2015) in his art that buffer the assumed feelings of fright and abandonment after trauma, thereby creating a connected community. This is important because his page then becomes a space for co-regulation.

It has been suggested in mental health research that people impact the physiological states of one another during times of hardship and times of support (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2020). This means that people can usually regulate the state of negative emotions of either hyperarousal and/or hypo-arousal through connecting with steady and balanced individuals. This is called co-regulation where people "mobilize intra- and interpersonal regulatory resources to cope with stress and the demands of one's environment" (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2020. p.2). The practice of trauma disclosure on Instagram appears to build an interactive relationship between an author and their audience which allows for connection and coregulation to take place. This is evidenced in the way Artidote allows his audience a chance to co-regulate their discomfort via connecting with the sense of safety he instills in his narratives. Accordingly, he creates a digital space that holds potential for coping with trauma. Dwelling on this idea further,

I examine some frames that illustrate what coping with trauma looks like and analyze their structure.

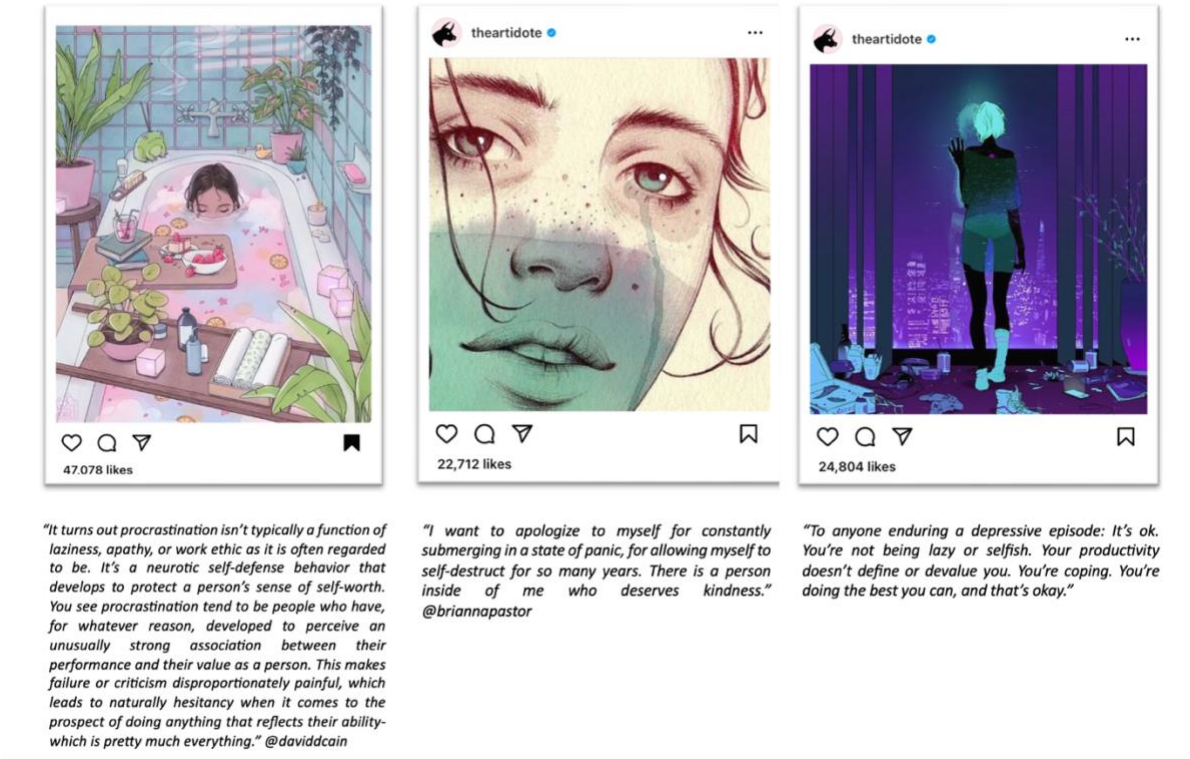


Figure 4 (Artidote, 2022d; 2022e; 2021b)

Theory tells us that nervous system dysregulation presents itself in one of four different forms: Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Fawn (Menakem, 2009). Fight is mostly active energy, while flight, freeze, and fawn are passive energy. These frames (Artidote, 2022d; 2022e; 2021b) are illustrative examples of what those physical states could possibly look like in the daily life of a suffering individual. The common thing between the three frames is their visual disclosure (1st layer) of passive coping, and the verbal disclosure (2nd layer) of the way trauma is internalized in the body (ex. procrastination, panic, depression). Numbing, freezing, and in many cases complete

dissociation are passive responses from the nervous system (LePera, 2021; Menakem, 2009) in the face of perceived or imagined threat. The text endorses those responses and addresses the reader with the reassurance (3rd layer) of an empathetic witness (Egnew, 2009).

Brackett (2020) refers to this style of emotional expression as a "natural bias in favor of displaying positive emotions" (p.124), assuming that in the United States people tend to receive positive displays of emotion better than negative or painful displays. Accordingly, this "translates into a pressure on all of us to seem happy no matter what" (Brackett, 2020. P.124). Beautifying negative emotions or displaying them in positive light is evident in the first frame (Artidote, 2022d) which displays a physical manifestation of dissociation (Caruth, 1995; Kaplan, 2005; Van der Kolk, 2015; LePera, 2021). The artist uses a medium shot in order to show the environment and the surroundings of someone experiencing procrastination, however, the environment is kept bright and colorful, and illustrated with artistic beauty. This technique attempts to beautify a negative coping mechanism in order to make it seemingly more acceptable. As Brackett (2020) noted, we live in cultures that favor displays of positive emotion and leaves very little space for the negative and the unpleasant feelings in our lives. Therefore, visuals of negative life experiences are presumed to be better received when they are portrayed in positive light. As such, the explicit image of how dissociation looks like in real life was replaced with an image that exhibits an embellished form of procrastination. Furthermore, the story captioned with the image justifies the state of procrastination as a coping strategy of the body. As though this is the only way we can accept what seems like a negative behavior. It explains that shutting down is a defense mechanism and reinforces that procrastination is not a character flaw, rather it is a coping mechanism in response to life's harsh circumstances.

The high level of engagement on this post compared to the other two somehow reinforces Brackett's theory. Visually, the first image is the most positive when analyzed for its visual aspects; it makes procrastination *look good*. The way the text speaks about this behavior as a self-defense mechanism also contributes to the positive ambiance of the post. Therefore, while followers may be cognizant of the downsides of procrastination as a behavior, they are more willing to admit it and ask how to overcome it when it's displayed so beautifully. They do not relate to the behavior from a place of guilt or shame and are able to accept the fact that they are flawed humans.

In contrast, the second image (Artidote, 2022e) is a close-up shot on a face reflecting on a different mode of coping: panic and chronic anxiety. Opposed to the medium shot, the close-up is a technique used to instill a sense of connection with the subject's inner world. Unlike the other frames, there aren't any external elements drawn in; the entire frame is comprised of the subject's face. This is because a close-up shot is not about the external experience of a subject, but rather the internal (often times) very subjective emotional experience. In this shot, we just know that the character is reflecting on a behavior that kept them stuck in an unhealthy, destructive mental state. The narrative layer relays a sense of acceptance and treating oneself with care when one comes to notice the destructive patterns in their behavior. Again, the text contributes to creating a more positive and more accepting tone to the experience; it turns struggle and trauma into triumph. Finally, the third image (Artidote, 2021b) is about depression, isolation, and the chaotic personal space that comes with the state of hopelessness and despair. The shot composition suggests a sense of loneliness that one feels during a depressive episode,

even if the reality of their life is filled with endless bursts of energy as suggested in the top view of the big city.

In summary, the three frames (Artidote, 2022d; 2022e; 2021b) are about mental health states that reflect nervous system dysregulation (Menakem, 2009; LePera, 2021). In other words, feeling constantly fatigued, flat, numb, or depressed is illustrated as the body's way of disappearing into dissociation. This is how neuroscience theories show up in this type of Instagram practice because *fight, flight, freeze, and fawn*, are functions of the vagus nerve detailed plainly via polyvagal theory (Menakem, 2009; LePera, 2021). The contrast between the three images revealing the way these functions show up in real life possibly contributed to the mainstreaming of these terms.

Furthermore, the opposite end of numbing and shutting down is sensation seeking which is the active mode of coping (Janoff-Bulman 1989). In other words, the body does not only cope through passive energy or passive traumatic responses but can cope in active modes too. In many cases, active coping behaviors can be destructive to one's health. Van der Kolk (2015) notes people cutting themselves "to make the numbing go away, while others try bungee jumping or high-risk activities like prostitution and gambling. Any of these methods can give them a false and paradoxical feeling of control" (Van der Kolk, 2015. p.268).

Hyper-sexuality as a result of trauma can happen because you start believing that you are not good for anything else but sex. Because you believe you can't expect love without it. Because you believe sex is the only way anyone could possibly connect to others. Because sex is the only kind of intimacy you're "any good at". Because you don't know how else to get attention. Because it's easier to get sex than love. Because cuddling after sex is the only way you know how to get nonsexual physical touch. Because you're high/drunk all the time. Because you have no libido/desire/attraction anymore and keep hoping that having sex and it's the only way to get recognition and respect. Because you were told that you're "bad at sex" and you feel ashamed and are trying to "get better at it". Because you have flashbacks if you abstain from sex. Because you feel so bad so much of the time that sex/orgasm is the only way to calm down or feel good anymore. Because you've been re-targeted by other abusers/perpetrators who can tell you don't know how to say no. Because you're still with your abuser/rapist/perpetrator and the only way to prevent "worse" violence is to initiate sex. Because sex is physically or emotionally painful for you and you're using sex to self-harm. Hypersexuality after trauma is way more common than anyone wants to believe, and it can happen for so, so many different reasons. These are just a few.

Figure 5 (Artidote, 2019)

For instance, this intimate scene (Artidote, 2019) presents hypersexuality as a coping behavior after trauma as clearly expressed in the written text. The narrative is an emotional dump of the many different reasons that contribute to hyper-sexuality. While the image on its own is not an expression of trauma; when it is paired with the written narrative, the context changes, and it becomes an affective expression of an active coping behavior (i.e. hyper-sexuality). The text, on the other hand, is an expression of a cognitive coping task (i.e. rumination). It ties together the mental state of suffering with physical action (Artidote, 2019). It is a good example of how the confusion, frustration, and sense of meaninglessness after trauma lead to dysregulation and potentially self-harm. This happens when the body is stuck in a vicious

cycle of trauma and coping to the point where balance and self-regulation start to feel so foreign to the nervous system.

High levels of engagement here certainly speak volumes about, not only the traumas induced by hook-up culture, but also the excessive participation in hook-up culture as a result of trauma. People have shown different reactions to this explicit image that links physical acts of intimacy to trauma. Large number of comments reveal the way people experience the harmful consequences of their scattered sexual energy. For instance, one user wrote *"I thought I was crazy for thinking like this. I guess I'm not alone… good to know it's an actual thing",* another one commented *"parts of this post just spoke to my former self, I still have flashbacks of those thoughts and feelings from time to time. My heart is with those who are still in a painful situation"*, a third one wrote *"this saddens me but lets me understand people I've known."* Many people also tag their peers which often means the message is somewhat relevant to them. This implies that these digital posts are being used as a tool to communicate with people the user knows in real life. In that way, engagement in these digital communities reveals its therapeutic potential in the way it evokes emotion, stimulates reflection, and strengthens real-life relationships.

While these expressions offer agency to the artist and allow him/her to take charge of representing their own experience and making it visible, they can still be confronting for many. Ultimately, these images (Artidote, 2022a; 2021; 2022d; 2022e; 2021b; 2019) are reflections of the ways trauma affects a person's sense of control over their mind and body (Van der Kolk, 2015). They demonstrate the problematic behaviors that people might engage in when they're overwhelmed by their suffering. Whether it's numbing or sensation-seeking, depression or

anxiety, isolation or hyper-sexuality, they offer an expression of an inner world that needs to be addressed. By enhancing people's awareness of their patterns, this type of Instagram content can help people reestablish ownership over their mind and their body (Van der Kolk, 2015). On the other hand, it can also be extremely triggering for someone who is still not ready to face their suffering. And so, encouraging people to find ways to express their pain and release their pent-up emotions has also found its way to Artidote's content. The attempt to mainstream cathartic expression is demonstrated in the following frames (Artidote, 2022f; 2022g).

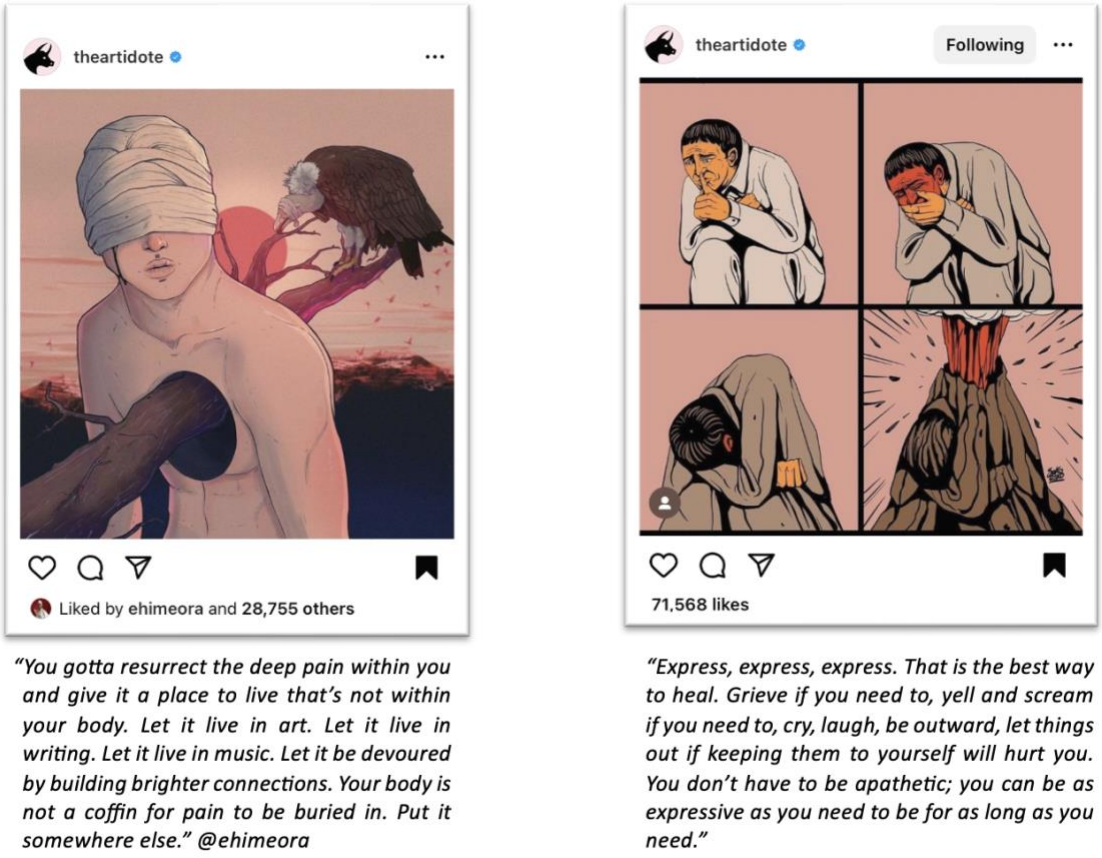


Figure 6 (Artidote, 2022g; 2022f)

The interesting thing here is the character choice; while in previous posts (Artidote, 2022a; 2021; 2022d; 2022e; 2021b) a female character was used in narratives about isolation, sadness, anxiety, and depression, a male character was chosen for narratives that encourage emotional expression. The emotion illustrated here is an outburst, as seen the images suggest the explosion of pent-up emotions in male subjects (Artidote, 2022f; 2022g). Brackett's research findings correlate certain emotions with gender to explain the types of emotional experiences most commonly accepted. He wrote "women tend to express themselves more overall, particularly positive emotions, and also internalize negative ones such as sadness and anxiety more than men do. Men, on the other hand, tend to express higher levels of aggression and anger than women. But when subjects' physiological signs of emotional excitement, such as blood pressure and cortisol release, are measured, men score higher—indicating that they likely feel as much as women do but keep more pent up inside." (Brackett, 2020. p.132). As such, these illustrations (Artidote, 2022a; 2021; 2022d; 2022e; 2021b; 2022f; 2022g) reflect the emotional norms of public culture that regards women to be more associated with sadness, anxiety, depression, isolation, etc, and men to be more associated with explosive emotions. In both cases, the layer of verbal disclosure stayed gender neutral indicating that the act of narration in and of itself is encouraged as a healthy mode of coping (Egnew, 2009).

People responded in the comments with statements like *"expression is effective only if you feel you are being heard, expressing to the wrong people makes you feel unworthy of everything"*, another user commented with a similar statement that read *"expressing does heal, but sometimes the person you are expressing it all to gets more frustrated and aren't able to handle it"*, a third one wrote *"we are made to shut up when hurt because it's uncool to express*

sadness", and a fourth user wrote *"can someone tell me where to let it all out?"*. These comments show that people tend to reveal themselves in the comments section as much as authors do in the content they create, indicating that in engaging with the content of others, people tend to discuss their own struggles. In this example, the comments reiterate that the act of emotional expression requires a safe partner, or as Egnew (2009) calls it: an *empathetic witness.*

The posts about emotional expression have almost 100,000 likes combined (Artidote, 2022f; 2022g). Engagement in the comments section was split to three categories. The first is *inquisitive comments* where people ask how to be more emotionally expressive indicating how uncommon emotional intelligence is in public culture. The second is *disclosure comments* where people reveal their own discomfort with the act of expression. For example, one member wrote that *expression is effective if only one is being seen and heard*, another one wrote *expressing does heal,* mainly to reiterate Artidote's sentiment. The third is *relational comments* where people tag others and write a message of support specifically directed to them, express their support using an emoji, or just tagged a person where the tag suggests that the post is somehow useful. This final category of comments is the most common on every post subtly indicating that this type of digital engagement strengthens emotional dialogues between people.

In summary, Artidote's page generally reveals the power of digital content in creating safety and connection in digital communities. His method of expression is curating 1- an illustrated image with 2- a written narrative and 3- a specific emotion in order to encourage people to become more emotionally intelligent individuals. The way his followers engage with his content reveals the level of comfort they feel toward the messages he shares. The comments also showed high levels of connection and support between community members who have

repeatedly shown how Artidote's page serves as a platform that offers them relational and emotional knowledge. His posts serve as digital tools that stimulate conversations on trauma, emotions, and coping. In this way, he managed to build a digital community that bonds over the unanimous experience of suffering that is induced by traumas of all kinds.

The idea of cathartic expression on social media; transforming our thoughts and feelings into emotional language has been proven in many studies to be beneficial for people dealing with trauma (Miller, 2016; Brackett, 2020). In doing this analysis, I was repeatedly amazed by the difficulty of this practice. The practice of bringing the most painful events of one's life and giving it shape and form. Or the fluency in expressing feelings associated with unspeakable trauma in an attempt to bring the essence of it to public witnesses. The following creators I review are ones who have built their communities based on their own cathartic expression. They are more specific in their content compared to Artidote in the sense that they relay the particular details and symptoms of their own traumas. However, the basic premise of their practice remains the same: emotional expression needs an empathetic safe witness that these creators seek in their digital audiences. As Brackett (2020) puts it "expression is generally a co-skill. It's kind of like tennis—you can't really do it alone" (Brackett, 2020. p.131).

4.2 TRAUMA-SPECIFIC DISCLOSURES

The following section explores three content creators who are very specific in their expression about the traumas in their own lives. The creators were purposefully selected to comprise a case that contrasts their approach with @theartidote's approach in creating content that is reflective of their own personal pain. As such, the posts analyzed here are marked by their affective nature and the raw presence of these authors who create media that is prompted by, or descriptive of, either their past or present pain. By practicing personal and self-disclosure, Myers, Clair, and Nahla demonstrate the externalization of trauma and memory (Hoskins, 2017) on the platform. They bring the concept of living in media (Deuze, 2012) to private and intimate life matters by creating an archive of media that not only reveals the way they cope (Folkman et al, 1986), but also lives on the platform as material artifacts that hold the memory of their trauma (Cvetkovich, 2019).

A. @ELYSE MYERS

Myers is a content creator who went viral in late 2021 for her short videos that she titles #coffeetalks. These videos comprise mostly of short personal stories from Myers' life told with her excellent storytelling skills and her endearing sense of humor. Given that Myers only uses original audio, and original animations that she designs to complement her storylines, her reels have become a brand of their own. One that she uses to tell stories that openly reflect her life history, specifically utilizing the *reel* feature on the platform. Using a unique production style compared to the pool of trends available on Instagram, Myers creates videos that aim to destigmatize mental health illnesses and personality disorders.

Reels are a recent feature released by Instagram in August 2020 (Instagram, 2020) where Instagram users became able to create 15-second-long vertical videos. They have since developed multiple times in length (up to 90-second) and design and have become an important tool for creators interested in dynamic visual content. Further, the reel feature has provided creators additional value as it distributes their content to an even broader audience. This is because reels operate with a unique algorithm that brings content to users' newsfeeds, regardless of whether a user is a follower.

Figure 7 Check video [here (Myers, 2021)]

Myers, being a dynamic storyteller, uses reels as her main tool for creating content that reveals her struggles with bipolar personality disorder, ADHD, and debilitating anxiety.

For instance, in this reel, Myers speaks about her long-term struggle with OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) in a light-hearted manner without making it sound like it is a mental health issue (Myers, 2021). Although people who struggle with clinical OCD are aware of how debilitating it can be to a person's life, Myers chose to present her experience in a manner that makes the disorder more digestible.

This was one of Myers' very early reels where she had just come to the internet to share her struggles publicly on the platform. Posted in November of 2021, this reel was still slightly subtle in the way it conveyed pain or suffering as Myers was still in her early days of content creation. Social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) tells us that individuals tend to exchange "impersonal, superficial, and nonintimate information at the initial stage of a relationship and forge relational intimacy by gradually revealing personal and intimate information" (Lee et al.,2018. P.382). As such, Myers' initial reels mostly show her storytelling skills, her sense of humor, and her distinctive production technique that subtly hints to her mental health struggles. Here, she speaks of her OCD and how it impacted her life; the way it affected her ability to make decisions, the way she feels overwhelmed with the presence of options, and the duration of that impact in her life, however all in an attempt to make a joke. Her expression started out subtle and then grew in its specificity over time. In this reel, she hints to her very personal struggle with being obsessive and compulsive in her thinking, and she expresses the different ways this functioning affected her life. The larger picture, however, remains subtle—how these behaviors are in fact coping behaviors in response to a larger trauma that remains unexpressed in this reel. Her initial self-disclosure led to more personal disclosures when a sense of safety was established for her on the platform.

Myers' page has grown significantly over almost two years. Today, she has close to 3 million followers and her videos hit millions of views on a regular basis. She started creating content in late 2021 to cope with severe postpartum depression as she mentions in the reel below. She used storytelling and video creation as tools to reconnect with herself when she felt lost and overcome by unpleasant obsessive thoughts. When her page grew with significant

following, she became more outspoken about mental health issues, specifically the ones she struggles with herself. As such, her community was built on the idea of mainstreaming trauma (or heavy mental health talks) and lightening its load with jokes and humor.

One e of the reels where Myers became more explicit about her traumas came in response to an attempted insult. In this reel, she explains the reason behind her decision to share her life and her traumas publicly on the platform. '*I post myself publicly on this forum though I have crippling social anxiety, and just anxiety in every form. Why? I think that my purpose is very powerful […] I have direct proof of the healing that my story brings to other peoples' lives*' she says (Myers, 2022a).

Figure 8 Check video here (Myers, 2022a)

Myers believes in the wide impact of her expression and sharing her pain and her long journey of healing became her purpose. This shows how Myers finds a sense of healing in creating on Instagram; her reels are spaces where she reflects her trauma and honors the effort she put into her healing journey. The recognition of her effort, even when disguised as an insult has given her a sense of validation for her long-term attempts to surpass pain and suffering. Her ability to

not take an insult to heart and reframe it into a validating comment was admirable and sharing it on her large platform was courageous for someone who has gone most of their life struggling with crippling social anxiety. Those actions then become meaningful to a viewer who faces the same mental health challenges. Seeing a candid creator on Instagram sharing her traumas and revealing the cognitive and emotional work she's doing to heal her suffering can become a blueprint for viewers interested in doing the same work. In that way, her page becomes a space where people feel safe in her virtual presence because of how authentic her expression is.

On the other hand, the growth of an Instagram page with dedicated followers brings a large audience to creators like Myers who sought out the digital space for comfort and support. The presence of supportive validating audience (whether large or small) fulfills the role of safe empathetic witnesses for the creator in their trauma expression. What the suffering individual needs most from people, according to Broyard, "is not love but an appreciative critical grasp of his situation, what is known now in the literature of illness as 'empathetic witnessing.' (Egnew, 2009. P.173). In the reel below, Myers expresses appreciation and gratitude for the community of followers on her page who made her feel *seen and heard* when she started speaking openly about her struggles. She appears to acknowledge how far she has come since the beginning of her journey on Instagram and reiterates her intent in creating content was to cope with her postpartum depression. *I never would have imagined my coping mechanism for my postpartum depression would have led me to you,* she writes in her caption.

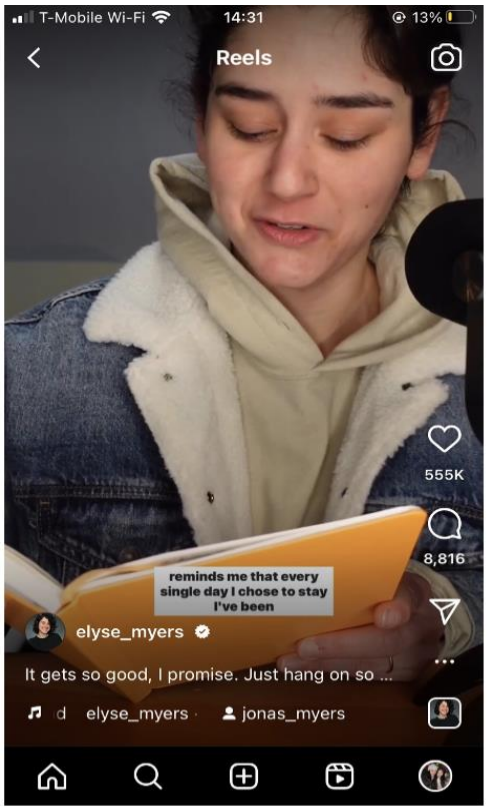
I never could have imagined my coping mechanism for my postpartum depression would have led me to you.

Figure 9 check video here Myers (2023a)

Myers' assertion of the support she has gotten from her Instagram followers reveals the value of empathetic witnessing that she experienced on Instagram and the impact it had on her pain and her suffering (Myers, 2023a). Myers took on Instagram to cope with depression and accumulated trauma. Like many others, she declares how her Instagram creations and going public with her pain have helped her cope with it. As such, Instagram as a digital space facilitated for Myers a) a space where she was able to externalize her trauma and not bear her pain in isolation (Kaplan, 2005), b) a digital community that took on the implicit responsibility of bearing

witness, and c) the act of creating media that archives her trauma, and narrating stories that document her continued attempts to cope with, and transcend her suffering (Egnew, 2009; Cvetkovich, 2019).

While much of Myers's brand is comedy, her niche became making mental health conversations light and accessible to people who perhaps lack the vocabulary to speak openly about their life challenges. This has eventually become her method in bringing restorative content to her three million followers whom Myers recently paid tribute by writing: '*I never could have imagined that my coping mechanism for my postpartum depression would have led me to you' (*Myers, 2023a).



It gets so good, I promise. Just hang on so you can get the opportunity to experience all the things your brain can't even imagine right now. #justkeepswimming

Figure 10 check video here Myers (2022b)

A major reel that Myers posted last year was her own story with overcoming her battle with attempting suicide (Myers, 2022b). It is a 90-second reel loaded with heavy emotion and a reflective voice-over on that time in her life. In this video, Myers subtly reflects back on a dark season in her past in which she considered taking her own life. The reel is an example of dynamic content that is induced by the trauma of mental illness.

Created from a place of healing and a point in Myers' life where she has done enough healing to surpass her suffering, the 90-sec reel shows three main elements of interest for analysis: 1) A verbal personal disclosure of Myers' journey with suicidal thoughts. 2) A montage of fulfilling life events visually disclosing what she has experienced as a result of her healing work and moving beyond that dark season in her life. 3) A motivational and emotional written message to her followers encouraging them to not believe their own thoughts when they are struggling. She writes: "*just hang on so you can get the opportunity to experience all the things your brain can't even imagine right now."* Those three elements used together created a 90-second piece

of content where Myers spoke about trauma in a manner that is personal, relatable, hopeful, and filled with sincere emotion. She continues to process her past struggles by using contemporary media tools and a platform with a large audience. In doing so, Myers allows her followers to witness her in her suffering by using her own pain as inspiration for the self-brand she's building to lessen the impact of mental illnesses. In doing so, she supports her followers through her act of personal disclosure to allow them the space to do the same. As Lee et al,. (2018) put it "the presumed benefits of personal disclosures mostly stem from reciprocal processes of self-disclosure" (p.382).

Self-disclosure is not an unusual practice on social media (Masur et al,. 2023), but trauma disclosure is certainly a practice that is still not entirely explored. Creators like Myers are setting new norms for the digital space by being very public about their personal lives. For instance, the montage of Myers' life here visually iterates the message she is attempting in this post which is *the choice to stay*. The captioned text emphasizes the cognitive difficulty in coping with dark thoughts. In doing so, she reassures her audience of the struggle experienced in moving beyond debilitating thoughts in order to make the choice to stay. Myers uses two things to instill hope and comfort in struggling viewers. First, she offers personal visuals from her life to instill brighter mental images that might interrupt the dark thoughts of a person in despair. Second, she uses a hyper-emotive voice over to permeate the listener with comfort and reassurance. The act of creation here can be viewed as a tool that Myers used to reframe her own thinking by juxtaposing all the happy moments she has experienced in her life, with a narration of her journey from suffering to healing. The act of sharing her creation transfers that reframed perspective to her audience. In doing so, Myers creates a story that is based on her actual trauma to gracefully

address vulnerable followers who might be drowning in that battle, reminding them that there is so much light in their *choice to stay*. Lastly, Myers made sure to utilize every feature on the platform to maximize her message including the location feature. *Location* is the small space above every post that allows the author to share where their post was created. In that space, Myers chose to write "stick around" as the location of her reel, therefore maximizing every tool available to make her followers feel seen (Myers, 2022b).

Myers' content is an example of someone working very hard to connect to those in pain because of how familiar she is with the consequences of isolation. The raw emotion that Myers brings to her community creates a sense of safety for them to share their stories. The reciprocity of self-disclosure is evidenced in the interactions of her followers which is significantly more personal than interactions with other creators I reviewed in this chapter. Many people responded to Myers' reel (Myers, 2022b) with an outpouring of their own private journeys with suicidal thoughts. In doing so, an interpersonal relationship is created between the creator and their followers through the support, validation, and the witnessing of each other's pain. On the other hand, the multitude of revelations in response to Myers' reel on suicide is also alarming; it confirms the idea that we live in a culture that lacks the emotional resources to handle the ones struggling gravely with their mental health. As such, digital spaces like Myers' page become

virtual space for people to find connection that feels friendly and intimate because of Myers' practice of personal disclosure.

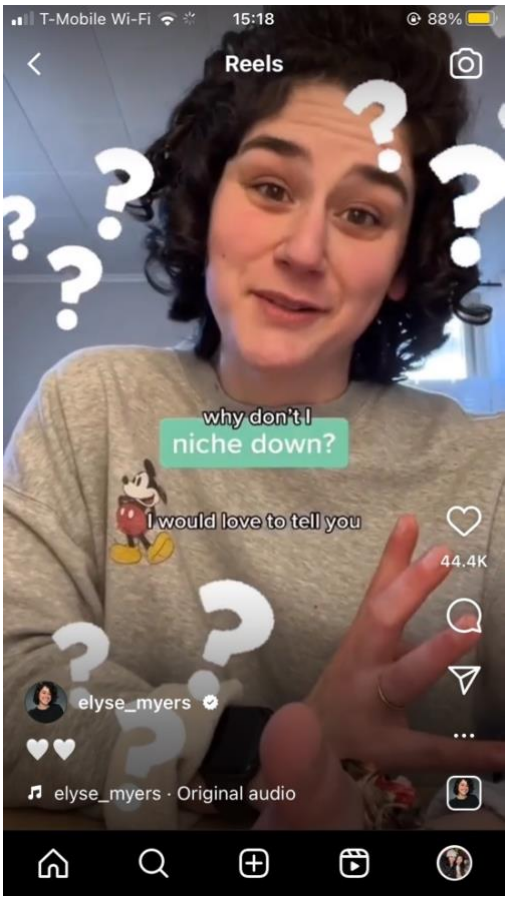


Figure 11 check video here (Myers, 2023b)

Accordingly, Myers' Instagram platform became about four things:

1- Candid expressions of her personal trauma.
2- A virtual space for seeking the value of empathetic witnessing.
3- A space for reciprocal personal and self-disclosures, therefore creating safety and connection for people struggling with their mental health.
4- A digital community that recognizes the pain of mental illness and values the support of an understanding community.

Similar to Elyse Myers, the next creator reviewed is someone who also creates content that is explicitly inspired by personal real-life trauma. Violet Clair's work reflects the struggle with chronic physical illness and the trauma of chronic pain. While Myer's brand is built on light humor and dynamic video content, Clair's content is built on dry, slightly aggressive humor and static illustrated comics.

B. @VIOLETCLAIR

Clair illustrates her own illness and speaks openly about her relational and developmental trauma, but mostly about her journey with chronic pain and medical gaslighting. Her niche is creating comic threads in the form of carousel posts. *Carousels* is another feature that Instagram released five years ago that allows users to upload more than one frame in a single post. This feature was instrumental for creators whose content rely heavily on written, or scene-by-scene, narratives. It gave them more space on the platform to tell a story in one single post, and also allowed for more diverse content to start appearing on Instagram. In the following post, Clair illustrates her journey with endometriosis (Rothenberg, 2022a) and what many people refer to as *medical gaslighting* (Caron, 2022).

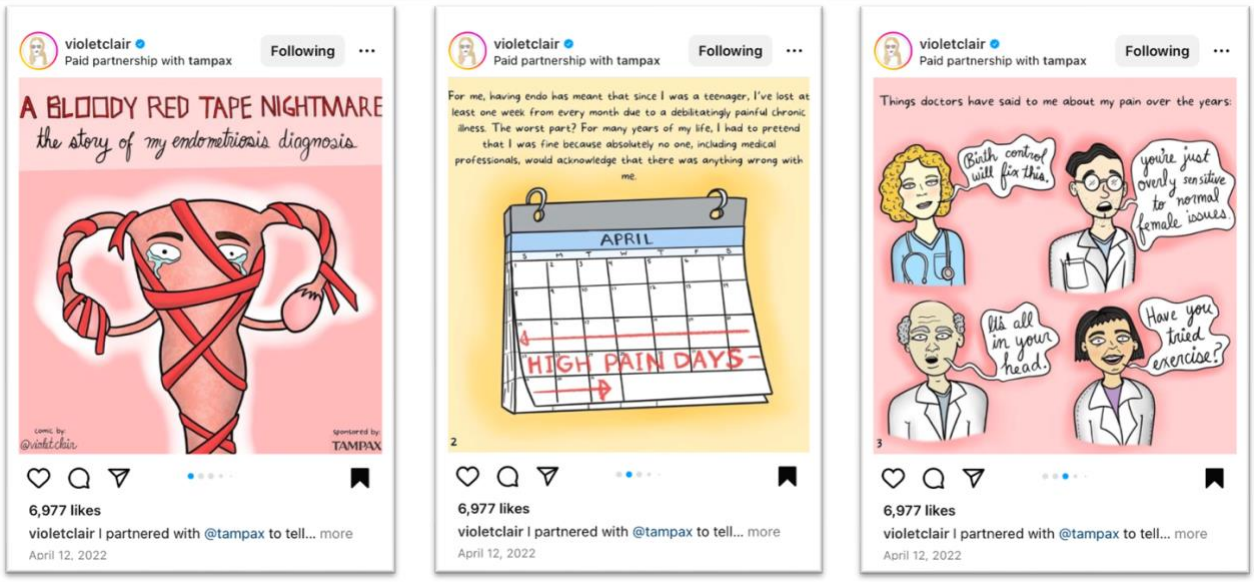


Figure 12 (Rothenberg, 2022a)

In Clair's experience, medical gaslighting happened when she struggled with prolonged physical pain that continued to go undiagnosed no matter how many doctors she visited. She illustrates this in showing multiple physicians telling her over the years that her debilitating pain was *only in her head* because they were unable to pin down the problem. For more than 17 years,

Clair struggled with unbearable physical pain accompanied with her monthly menstrual cycle. After 17 years, she met with a doctor who suspected endometriosis and referred her to an excision specialist. In those illustrated frames, Clair takes her followers on the painful journey of living with an undiagnosed chronic illness (Rothenberg, 2023a).

Figure 13 (Rothenberg, 2023a)

Her primary method of curation is utilizing the grid or Instagram feed for sharing illustrated content and utilizing the *story* feature to personalize her narratives by offering scenes from her day-to-day life. This curation between real-life experience and illustrated narratives allowed Clair to reveal the depth of her trauma in two different forms of media; one that shows the history of her illness, and the other shows her present real-life pain. In doing so, she formed a bond with her followers who seem to enjoy her raw presence and continue to support her through her suffering.

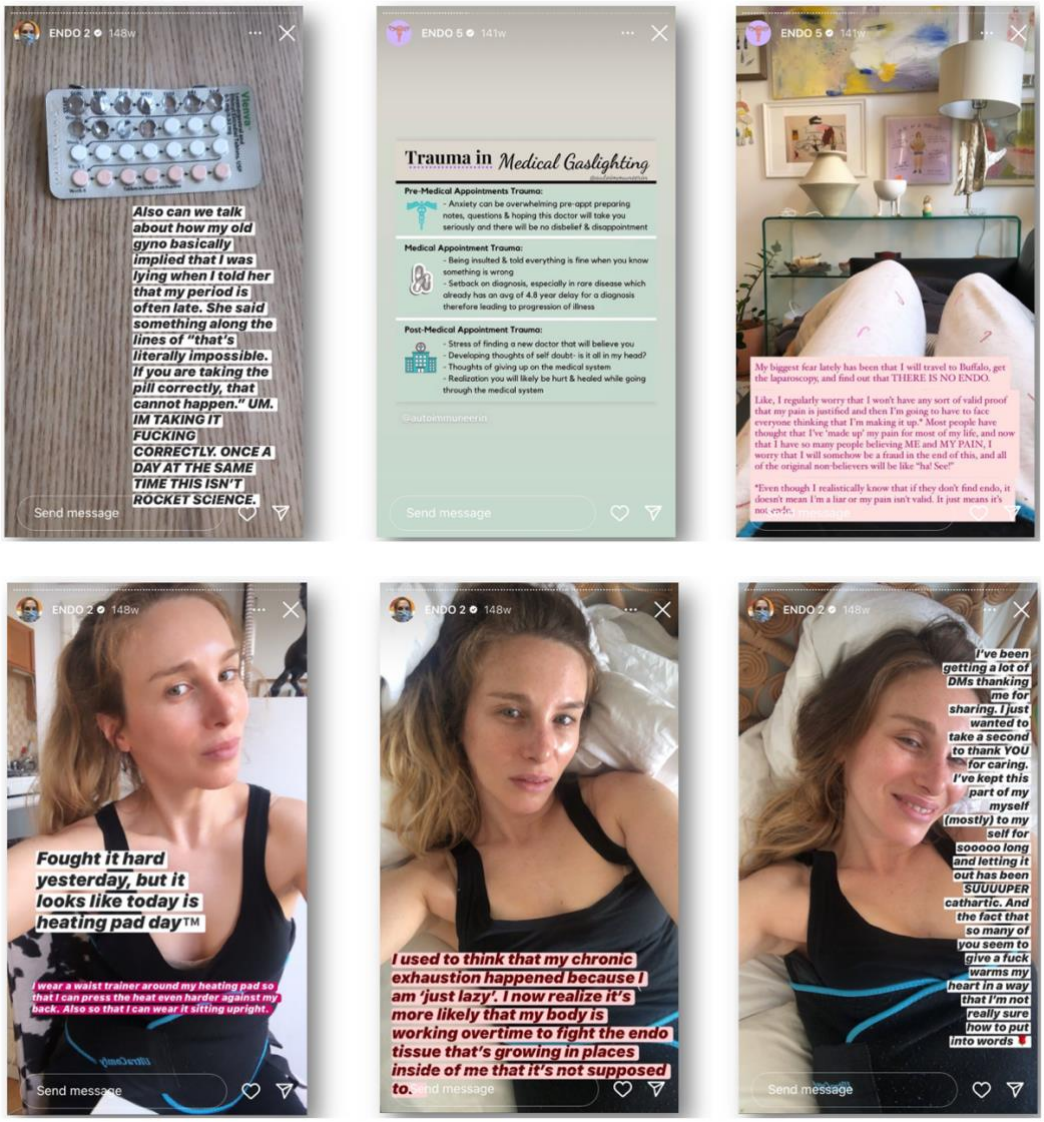


Figure 14: Sample posts from Clair's Stories

Stories is a feature that Instagram released in 2016 to allow users to post content that will automatically disappear in 24 hours. Users have since then used *stories* to participate on the platform with quick updates from their daily lives. On her *stories*, Clair would share images of her endo-flaring kit (all the tools she uses to curb her pain when she's experiencing an endo flare). She would share Q&A sessions with her physicians, and her continuing struggle with the decision

to get a hysterectomy. She lives her anxiety, her painful illness, her coping mechanisms, and her journey with making difficult life decisions all in real-time with her audience. This makes Clair's practice of trauma disclosure split in two parts:

1- Illustrated expressions that disclose her traumatic history with the healthcare system. Those disclosures live permanently on the platform holding the memory of her trauma (Cvetkovich, 2019).

2- Juxtaposed with her illustrated history are candid expressions of her real-time daily pain that she reveals on her *stories* where she appeared to manage her overwhelming pain (Madianou & Miller 2012;, Deuze, 2012).

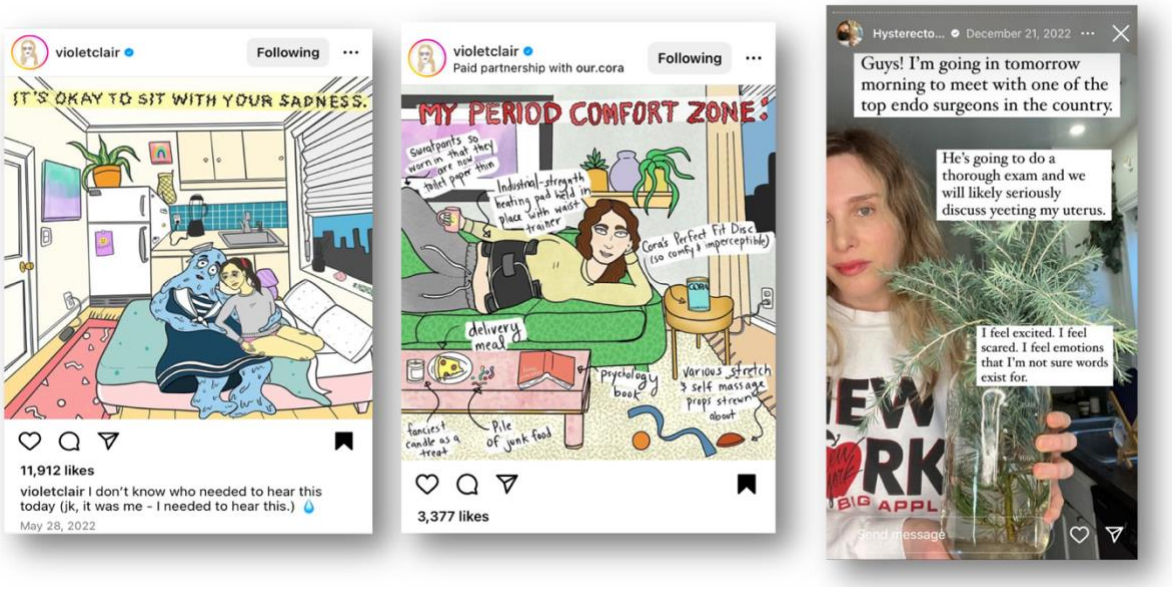


Figure 15

Grid. (Rothenberg, 2022b; 2022c) *Stories (Rothenberg, 2023b)*

It seems that what Clair really needed when she started her page was to free herself from the loneliness of her suffering. This is not unusual for trauma sufferers to feel the need to make their suffering visible (Kaplan, 2005; Chouliaraki, 2020; Rajabi,2021). Trauma scholars and clinicians argue that in making pain visible, people may become more *viscerally acquainted* with the discomfort of suffering (Kaplan, 2005; Van der Kolk, 2015. p.299; Kirmayer, 1992). For instance, Clair shared her entire journey of getting a hysterectomy at age 35, including all pre- and post-surgery updates on her stories with her followers. The interesting thing in that journey was the uncertainty of whether or not the hysterectomy would actually free her from her chronic pain.

Figure 16 (Rothenberg, 2023b)

Given the peculiarity of Clair's condition, she was told that there is a chance she might be struggling with a condition called *Adenomyosis* (Rothenberg, 2023c). One important detail she shared on her story was the limited methods by which the condition can be confirmed—this meant that the only way to know whether it was there or not was by taking out her uterus (Rothenberg, 2023c). Therefore, there was a chance for exacerbated suffering had the surgery not worked for her and she remained uncertain about the reasons for her chronic pain. Clair lived this level of uncertainty and fear in real-time with her audience, she even went as far as sharing two graphic images of her diseased uterus after the surgery. Her intense personal disclosure mirrored Chouliaraki's (2020) description of the traumatized individual being a "vulnerable figure that needs to communicate its suffering to command recognition" (p.16).

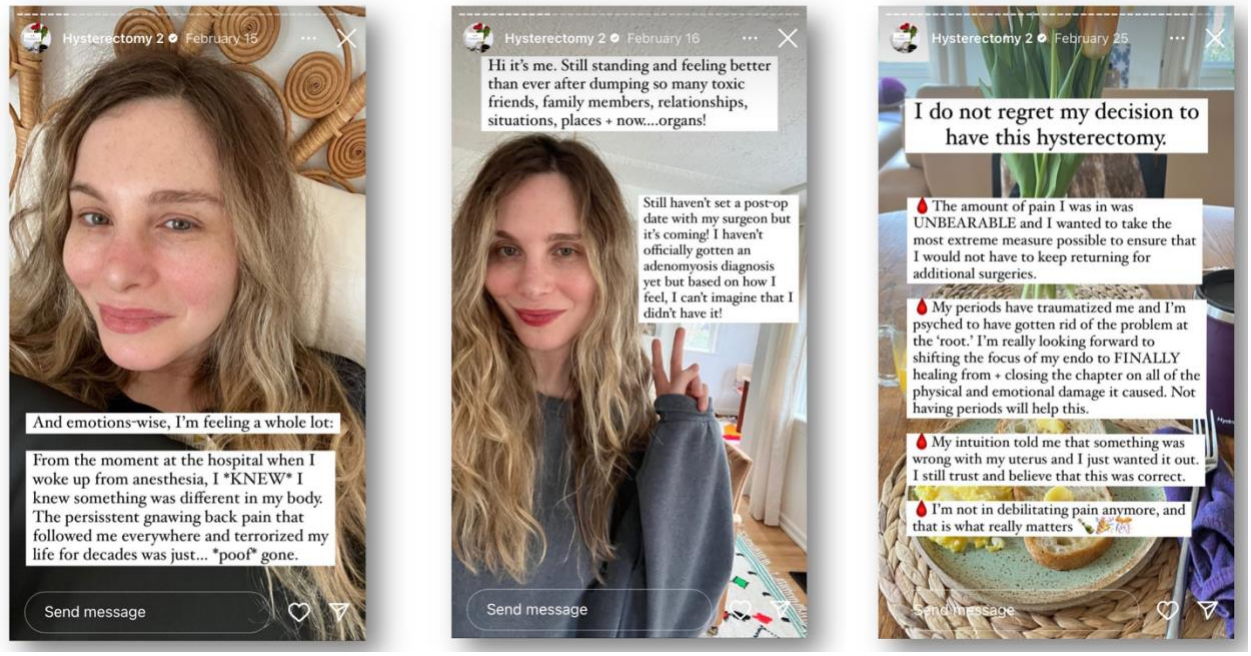


Figure 17 (Rothenberg, 2023c)

For someone like Clair, who mentioned being estranged from her immediate family members, the bond she has with her followers and the support she receives online serve as an anchor for her during hardship. It is as though resorting to the digital space for emotional support became common practice when supportive connections lack from one's physical life. Clair built a supportive community through illustrating her trauma and utilizing the digital features that worked best for her expression on the platform. The support she received on Instagram by making her pain visible offered her the validation she needed as she navigated the uncertainty of her condition.

In contrast to Mayers' expression, Clair's content is heavily induced by fresh pain, as she seems to be creating in the midst of her tussle with chronic illness. This fills her expression with present real-time suffering. In that sense, her expression can be viewed as immediately cathartic or therapeutic in its essence. Opposed to Myers who creates her reels from a place that is far removed from her deep traumatic experiences, therefore, her expression can be viewed as reflective or restorative in its essence. Both types of expression are important because of how they structure and support digital practices that enhance one's awareness of their own life. This type of Instagram practice demonstrates the way media practices allow people to have a better sense of their life experiences. As Alexander (2004) puts it "it is only through the imaginative process of representation" that trauma sufferers have a sense of the experience (p.8).

As such, I argue that this is one of the reasons why Instagram's relationship with its users started shifting from vain and superficial content creation toward a more meaningful rank. When healthcare practices and physical communities provided more pain than comfort, creators like Clair and Myers relied on the imaginative process of representation to make their pain visible.

They used Instagram as a space to share their creative expression and sought comfort, visibility, and connection in digital communities instead. By creating more features and updates that diversified the kind of media produced and shared on the platform, Instagram became a digital space that allowed users to have deeper conversations about their lives. From postpartum depression to medical gaslighting and many other daily life experiences that heavily influence the way one exists in the world. The conversation on Instagram certainly shifted from selfies and unrealistic beauty standards to what real-life pain and suffering looks like.

Some creators even took this one step further and expanded the trauma conversation to include politics, religion, gender, and refugee struggles. The following creator presents a few of these issues. Her Instagram page has a community of more that 72 thousand followers who engage with her posts on religious trauma, dispossession, relational trauma, and mental health advocacy.

C. @IMDOCTORNAHLA

Doctor Nahla is a young Syrian physician who lives and works as a psychiatry resident in Canada. Nahla writes and speaks prolifically about her experience as a young Muslim woman and physician living and working in the West. Much of her content is representative of traumatic experiences that are specific to Muslim women, and more broadly to Arab women facing religious, cultural, or dispossession challenges. Her expression is mostly through text that she sometimes pairs with professionally photographed portraits of herself. She does not rely on visual expression as much as the previous creators do; instead, her page relies mostly on well written captions and carousel text-posts. It is an example of content that succeeded on Instagram

regardless of the visual component. Nonetheless, sharing photos of herself helped personalize her page by revealing the face behind the narratives shared on the page.

I took off the hijab when I was 17. The entire time I wore it, I felt I was just a kid who happened to wear the hijab. I didn't understand it and wearing it felt like a constant battle with my identity. It was a heavy burden that felt like hypocrisy. I was in my final year of high school when I took it off. I could not have been prepared for the trauma I was about to experience. A boy at school, that I never met and never spoke to asked my friend "is that the whore that took off the hijab?" He was Muslim too. Girls I knew in the Muslim community but never spoke to me, laughed at me as I walked past them in the hall. Members of the Muslim community would approach me in public and ask, "are you happy now?!" I was ostracized from everyone. The Muslim community isolated me, but I had a hijab with me everywhere I went. I never missed a prayer and read Quran every morning at fajr. I spent my time in the library and focused on getting into university-- but the stories about me and why I took off the hijab were vile. So, when I decided to wear the hijab again, I knew it wasn't going to be for anyone else. After everything I've gone through, the hijab became a beloved part of my identity. I am so proud of where I am today. But I still haven't fully healed from that experience. I can't because the comments and criticisms never stop. The trauma does not end. I hope this post reaches the folks who say, "If you aren't going to wear it right, just take it off" and the Muslim men who go on rants about my hijab on their Instagram stories. I want them to know that on some days, I'm holding onto my hijab by a thread. And on some days, my conviction is rock solid. Their comments make every effort I put into keeping my hijab on feel worthless. They diminish all the progress I've made on my journey.

Figure 18 (Nahla, 2021)

The compelling thing about Nahal's content is the way she's able to critique her own community (the Muslim community) and identify the ways they have shaped her trauma. The way she narrates her story in many of her personal posts reflects her deep knowledge on the roots and circumstances that wounded her. What makes her content successful though, is yet again, a technique that largely contributes to the success of almost every content creator: the self-disclosure and personal narratives.

Similar to Myers and Clair, Nahla shares her personal life experiences openly on the platform using hyper-emotive storytelling that is grounded in self-reflection and self-

improvement. Her niche lies in her critical thinking, and her ability to offer solid critique on herself and her circumstances. Nahla knows she is posting to a largely Western public that places high value on logic, therefore, her content shows that she does not let her emotions cloud her judgement. She is able to distinguish clearly between the way she had been traumatized by her own culture versus the way her trauma might be wrongfully depicted in Western media. For instance, it is so much easier for Nahla to speak about the wrong depictions of her hijab in Western media and focus on that story of victimization. Some people may argue that this perspective is more appealing given that she belongs to a minority group that is undoubtedly misrepresented and marginalized. However, the stories she shares reflect her ability to notice, feel, and put into words the reality of her internal struggles. And her choice to favor that internal experience over the politics of representation certainly contributed to the growth of her community.

Furhtermore, Nahla presents as a competent mental health professional with a a sharp ability to critique both culture and religion. This puts her in the face of heavy internet bullying from others who disagree with her views; *if you aren't going to wear it right, just take it off, and the Muslim men who go on rants about my hijab on their Instagram stories. I want them to know that on some days I'm holding onto my hijab by a thread […] their comments make every effort I put into keeping my hijab on feel worthless. They diminish all the progress I've made on my journey,* she writes (Nahla, 2021). This type of bullying only adds another layer of trauma in the present for an individual whose still making the effort to heal from their past. Nahla's skill in associating intense emotions with mastery and fluency in her critique is potentially the foundation of her self-regulation (Van der Kolk, 2015). Her content is extremely balanced and

well-rounded, yet highly emotional in a way that creates deep connection. She uses her background as inspiration to create content that challenges barriers to understanding and acceptance between different communities and prides herself in battling shame, secrecy, and social taboos.

When Nahla's page started growing, she created a series of posts titled My Mental Health Journey (Nahla, 2020a). In this series, she shared nine consecutive posts that are deeply introspective. Unlike Clair, Nahla's images are not visual expressions of her trauma, they are professionally captured images of herself where she intends to perform a specific emotion (e.g., fear, anxiety) or a mental health state (e.g. agoraphobia, high functioning depression). The artistry in her visual expression doesn't matter because the captioned text is where Nahla's narratives become prolific. It is where her detailed personal disclosure takes place. To illustrate this, I examine two posts in her series.

In the first post, Nahla talks about the inspiration behind her use of critical thinking as a tool to battle her fears and emotionally taxing thoughts. The interesting thing is an exercise she describes in her story that reads*: he waited for a student to leave the class to go the bathroom to fill the rest of us in on his plan. We would all agree that in a photo of lines projected onto the board, one of them was longer than the others. They were all actually the same length. We would all watch as the student either conformed to the class or defended their reality. I was in awe of the outcome. She did not budge. She did not give in despite the - what I now know as – gaslighting* (Nahla, 2020b). Because of that exercise, Nahla was able to develop a critical mind that directs its questioning towards the self. In that way, she was able to cultivate a deep understanding of herself and her background. Why she was the way she was, what made her respond in ways that was fearful

instead of grounded, and what made her want to pursue medicine and psychiatry as a profession. She introduced fundamental parts of her story and vulnerable parts of herself through a detailed narrative in her caption.

In my Introduction to Psychology, Sociology, and Anthropology class, my teacher performed an experiment on conformity. He waited for a student to leave the class to go the bathroom to fill the rest of us in on his plan. We would all agree that in a photo of lines projected onto the board, one of them was longer than the others. They were all actually the same length. We would all watch as the student either conformed to the class or defended their reality. I was in awe of the outcome. She did not budge. She did not give in despite the - what I now know as – gaslighting. What would I have done if I happened to be the unlucky student to go to the bathroom at that moment? I thought about it during that class and accepted the fact that I would have just given in. Even if I didn't initially, I'd drop my guards and not waste my energy arguing with an entire classroom full of students and my teacher. I wondered why she and I were so different. What made her stand so firm in her truth and what made me more complaisant? I never came to a conclusion for "why," but that experiment stayed with me for the rest of my life. I was not looking to take this class to boost my average for university applications or pursue any of the professions we explored. I didn't need this course to get into the programs I was interested in either. My precious 16-year-old mind also believed that these would have nothing to do with my future career as a doctor – yes, this was set in stone that early on in my life, and I am certainly not proud to be a cliché. But I met psychological theory and the originators of CBT and psychotherapy in this class. For the first time, I was purely fascinated. This class was one of the first eye opening scholastic experiences I had because I was encouraged to think critically, not just about something or someone else, but about myself.

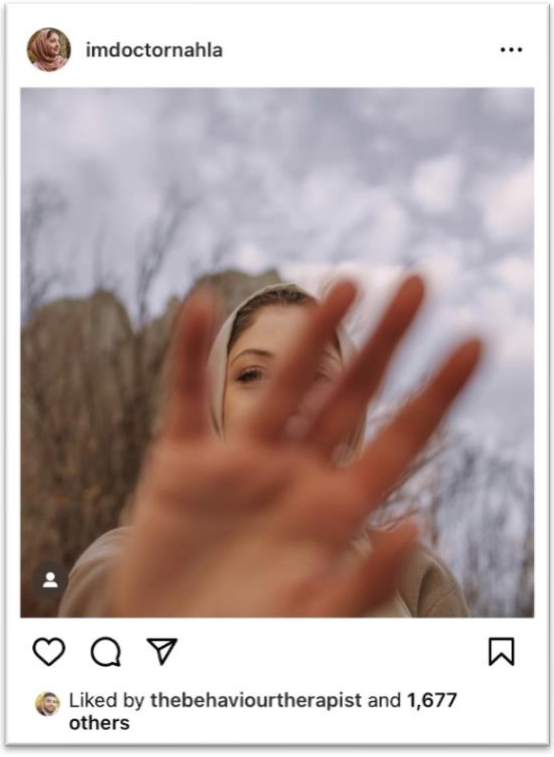
Figure 19 (Nahla, 2020b)

The second example reveals more of Nahla's vulnerability. While Nahla is proud of her achievements, she seems to be aware that her strengths lie more in her sensitivity and her emotional attunement to her internal world. In this example, Nahla renders her internal world of pain in a prolific narrative about agoraphobia and panic attacks. She describes a panic attack she experienced in very specific statements: *my heart raced, it started braking, my stomach sunk, it came closer, and the sweating began […] with tense muscles, a raging headache, and sweat stains. Nobody tells you how long and exhausting a panic attack is. It got worse* (Nahla, 2020c). This specificity paints a picture for her reader that reflects her internal struggle while attempting to complete a mundane task in her daily life. In this narrative, she is not describing a panic attack that she had while completing the bar exam to become a doctor; she is describing a panic attack that she had while trying to take the bus. The detail that Nahla offers her readers of her intense emotional responses to simple daily tasks makes her page and her stories extremely resonant. Even though Nahla's political and religious narratives might be specific to certain audiences, her granular emotional expression makes her content echoes with a broader audience, because of how it resonates with universal responses to trauma and suffering.

I dreaded this day. From the moment I booked my dentist appointment, I mentally prepared for the hour-long bus ride from Mississauga to North York. Anxiety made me a meticulous planner... in the worst way. For days and particularly for the 15 minutes I walked to and waited at the bus stop, I tried to self soothe. I purposely did not eat or drink that morning to avoid needing to use the bathroom. Ha. Like that worked before... I will try practicing mindfulness and do breathing exercises. What's the worst thing that could happen? I'll have a panic attack that's what. The bus was in my line of sight, my heart raced, it started braking, my stomach sunk, it came closer, and the sweating began. When the doors opened in front of me, I knew I couldn't do it. I placed my right foot on the first step of the bus and asked the driver where he was going (as if I didn't have his route memorized) and then politely said, "oh, sorry wrong bus, thank you!" He appeared upset and drove off. No one got off the bus at that particular stop, so I wasted his time stupidly asking where he was going. I exhaled and angrily walked back home. I was angry at myself. This invisible problem is becoming such an inconvenience. I have an appointment that I'm now going to be late for if I ever get to it in the first place. I hate what I'm becoming. What is wrong with me and who's afraid of getting onto a BUS? I got home and went to the bathroom. Of course. I ordered an Uber after spending another 10 minutes convincing myself that yes, I would panic, but I had no other choice. I sat legs firmly crossed, facing the window, leaning against the back door, panicking. I finally made it, with tense muscles, a raging headache, and sweat stains. Nobody tells you how long and exhausting a panic attack is... It got worse. The fear didn't stop at busses. The panic started coming from long lines, cars, classrooms, theatres, and enclosed spaces. I wasn't doing well mentally, but somehow, I thought I was doing just fine. The tricks we can play on our minds sometimes.

Figure 20 (Nahla, 2020c)

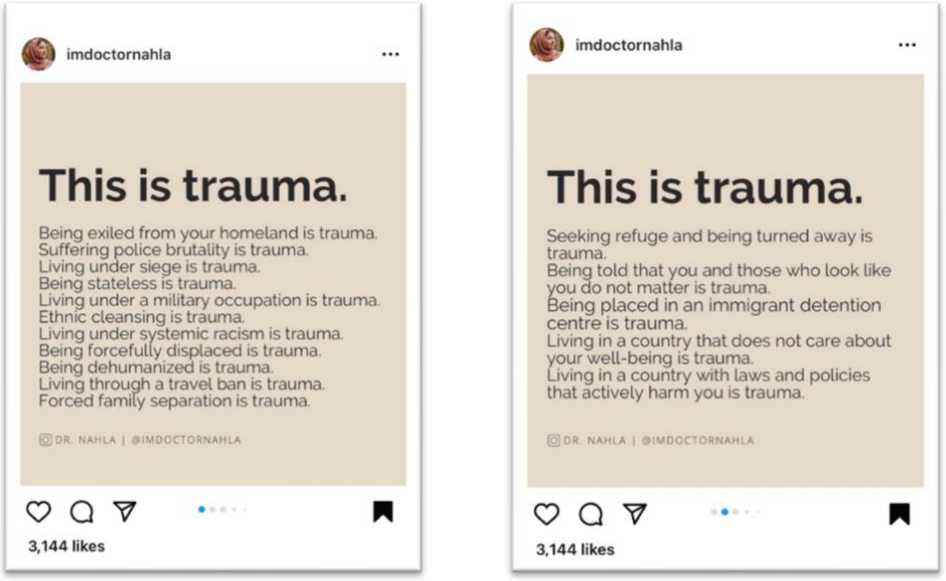
Emotional granularity means the smallest most granular details of your emotional experience brought to light using very specific words that mirror your inner life (Brackett, 2020). Nahla's emotional granularity comes through in the narratives she shares, contrasted with her critical mind, she creates narratives that are intellectual, yet emotionally intense. In that way, she shows her ability to relate to a broader audience by sharing the granular parts of her story that are more universal in their resonance. In the detailed written description of her internal struggles, Nahla is able to bring her world of traumatic responses to her Instagram page all while maintaining her poise and presenting as a competent intellectual and clinician. Body image, insecurity, and self-worth are some of the issues she touches on in the following post. She shares a story that highlights the idea of self-loathing and creates a post that tackles common issues regardless of cultural and social backgrounds (Nahla, 2022a).



When did I begin to look at photos of myself and hate how I looked? When did everything I see in myself become negative? How old was I when I saw natural body as unnatural, unbeautiful, and unworthy? When did I begin to notice that my teeth were crooked and not in a way that is trendy? When did the bad under my eyes go from being part of me to becoming so horrifying? When was the first time I ever said, "I look ugly"? When did taking a photo and looking at it became an act of self-harm? I look back on the photos I hated and grieve the moments I did not relish in a smile filled with perfectly good, crocked teeth. I wish my joy wasn't obscured by an obsession with what other people thought. I look back at photos I hated and grieve the moments I spent wishing I could get rid of my perfectly good thighs and wide hips. I was a little woman; I wish I appreciated the beauty in my blooming....

Figure 21 (Nahla, 2022a)

Psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett claims that the "greater your emotional granularity is, the more precisely you can experience yourself and your world" (Baer, 2016). Nahla's emotional granularity allowed her to create candid expressions of her wide range of personal traumas (religious, cultural, and relational). Her ability to reflect and connect with past pain in specific descriptive details became her tool for self-regulation and positioned her content under the umbrella of intense personal disclosure. As such, Nahla's Instagram page grew into being a space for three things: 1) Intense narratives of personal disclosure that are very granular in their verbal descriptive details, 2) Cathartic expression that is rooted in self-reflection and critical thinking and 3) a virtual platform for knowledge sharing.



Systemic, political, and racial trauma are (in my opinion) the most overlooked forms of trauma. It makes no sense to me because this oppression is so pervasive, so damaging, and has long term mental health impacts. Your reaction to systemic oppressions is valid. You are not deficient in some way, no matter how much you are told you are. You are reacting naturally to what is an unnatural way of living. I urge all my mental health colleagues to talk about these issues in their work. Do it as much as possible. Challenge the automatic thoughts of your colleagues who don't acknowledge these forms of trauma. Don't gaslight your patients. Validate them.

Figure 22 (Nahla, 2022b)

It is not lost on me that there is so much content to filter through online, and much of it is not based on critical thinking or a proper understanding of trauma. This ultimately created heavy critique against the uncensored use of the term. However, that doesn't mean that all content lacks substance, or all creators create just for clickbait. Every creator I have reviewed so far is an example of someone using their expression to make their trauma more visible; and in these expressions there are signs of coping, marks of meaning making, and efforts to change the narrative of their suffering. Because suffering commands visibility and recognition (Chouliaraki, 2020; Rajabi, 2021) these expressions, or stories become the creator's "antibodies against illness and pain." (Egnew, 2009. P.173). In living their trauma on Instagram, these creators succeeded in building alternative communities that resonate with their pain, and mainstreamed the idea of trauma expression in a space that was able to hold their suffering.

4.3 TRAUMA BETWEEN AFFECT LABELING AND PERSONAL DISCLOSURE ON INSTAGRAM

The digital space continues to become a significant part of social life as digital media platforms continue to grow. As such, the space between real life and digital life continues to drastically fade; a concept that interests media scholars who are keen on the way media influences public life (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Deuze, 2012). Couldry (2010) argues that what people produce in their media landscapes directly impacts our social, political, and cultural realities. Instagram content reviewed thus far demonstrates the way by which social media creations can enhance people's awareness of their own lives. Facilitated by the richness of Instagram's features, the act of capturing and curating life on Instagram has extended to private experiences like trauma, pain, and suffering. In this way, Instagram enabled users to become artistic curators of their own work and mainstreamed unembellished expression of trauma and coping.

Instagram started off as a social media app that is "conducive to posting pictures from one's mobile phone and linking them to specific (hash-)tags. This has led to various Instagram-specific practices, such as the regular posting of selfies and the designation of such via respective tags (e.g., #me, #selfie, or #selflove)" (Masur et al,. 2023. P.4). Excessive selfie-behavior contributed to the association of the platform with low psychological well-being. For example, several studies have shown that strategic representation of oneself on Instagram via the use of retouched selfies was linked to higher levels of body dissatisfaction, facial dissatisfaction, and lower self-esteem (Chang et al., 2019; Lamp et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2016; Brown & Tiggemann, 2020). However, a significant number of studies seem to not support those findings (e.g., Brailovskaia & Margraf, 2018; Vannucci et al., 2018) rendering research findings regarding

Instagram's impact on its users' to be inconclusive (Faelens et al., 2021). Therefore, more studies that offer an in-depth investigation on how Instagram use is related to well- or ill-being of its users are still needed.

Over the years, Instagram deepened the richness of its features which allowed more space for users to create different kinds of sharable content. Reels, carousels, and stories are features that Instagram has released in the past few years that have greatly diversified the platform. The diversity of voices that have risen on the platform with its new features seem to have changed the superficial relationship initially built between Instagram and its users. When users started sharing narratives about their personal traumas, the platform became a space where people attempt to seek recognition for their suffering (Chouliaraki, 2020). Practices like self-disclosure (Luo & Hancock, 2020) and personal disclosure (Lee et.al., 2018) were intensified with features like stories, reels, highlights, and carousel posts.

Many creators started using their personal life experiences as inspiration for content creation on the platform and shared posts that are reflective of the traumas they have endured. The common thing between all four creators reviewed in this chapter is that their success and popularity came from hyper-emotive personal and self-disclosure. This is because interpersonal relationships tend to form in response to these disclosures as claimed by social penetration theory (Lee, et.al., 2018). As such, the Instagram tool used might differ from one creator to the other, but the success of each page remains highly dependent on the act of visually and/or verbally disclosing aspects of their personal lives. Furthermore, this success demonstrates the capacity of Instagram in allowing space for digital communities to act as valuable empathetic witnesses (Egnew, 2009) during the act of trauma expression. In these communities, the author

becomes able to share a voice that was in some way silenced in their real lives. In that way, they no longer bear their pain in isolation (Kaplan, 2005).

Hyper-emotive storytelling was found to be the most passionately used method amongst all four pages reviewed thus far in this study. Through the use of hyper-emotive narratives, creators have practiced the disclosure of their trauma and pain either visually, verbally, or by curating both visual and verbal expression using Instagram's different features. In doing so, compelling traumatic narratives were shared that were sometimes raw and fresh, and other times reflective in tone and nature. Besides hyper-emotive narratives, every curator had their own niche. For instance, artistic creators such as Artidote built his community on cleverly curating visuals with the most fitting written narratives to discuss common emotional responses to trauma. His work reveals the different ways trauma breaks down physical synchrony (Van der Kolk, 2015). In other words, his content reveals the inner chaos of the traumatized body and mind. By carefully curating visual artworks with written personal narratives, Artidote is able to illustrate the complexity of the cognitive and emotional work needed to navigate the world after trauma (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). His ability to relate common day-to-day behaviors to the concept of coping allows his followers to infer their own conclusions about their specific situations. By bringing difficult internal struggles into two-dimensional media artifacts without claiming that struggle as his own, he offers his followers the terminology to express their own realities. This is called affective labeling (Torre & Lieberman, 2018; Brackett, 2020). His pieces about procrastination, isolation, fear, anxiety, panic, depression, and obsessive sexual activity, all relay common feelings and behaviors in people's daily lives. As such, his content focuses on the unanimous experience of suffering and offers people the language to describe it. This made his

posts more universal in their resonance and his community grew exponentially because of his skill in illustrating negative life experiences without judgement. In that way, Artidote was able to employ Instagram for curating work that is focused on affect labeling. The act of labeling emotions was shown in emotional science literature to be an effective regulation strategy (Brackett, 109). As such, Artidote's Instagram page became a refuge for people to regulate their emotions and reconnect with themselves.

Myers, Clair, and Nahla built their communities on the specificity and detail of their private worlds. Myers built her page on humor inspired by her specific struggles with mental illness. Clair built hers on illustrated comics, and Nahla built hers on the aspect of critical thinking. In so doing, they all succeeded in building digital communities that resonate with their pain, and eventually mainstreamed the idea of trauma expression in spaces that are able to hold and validate their suffering.

The act of creating and sharing media was announced and asserted by all four creators to be beneficial in their coping journey. This is certainly not surprising given the way those media creations revealed many of the maladaptive coping strategies mentioned in previous studies (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Menakem, 2009; Van der Kolk, 2015) on the way survivors cope after trauma. Those strategies include behaviors like obsessive thinking, rumination, emotional detachment, shutting down, anxiety, cognitive dissonance, numbness, and sometimes complete dissociation (LePera, 2021; Van der Kolk, 2015; Caruth, 1995). Variations of those behaviors were glaringly obvious in the pieces analyzed in this chapter as the practices of creative instagrammers were examined. In sharing their journeys, they were able to release their pain and not have to bear their traumatic memories on their own in isolation (Pinchevski, 2011). For instance, Clair

who illustrated her trauma with chronic illness and medical gaslighting exhibited the struggle of cognitive dissonance. This is when the mind is unable to reconcile or assimilate two opposing realities (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). According to Clair, her physical pain from her undiagnosed endometriosis was intense, yet she was repeatedly told for 17 years that there was nothing wrong with her, and that the pain was all in her head. These two opposing realities became traumatizing for her system and her illustrations reveal how her mind was unable to settle. Ruminating over the way her pain went misdiagnosed for almost two decades marked much of Clair's content. This created a state of almost obsessive self-disclosure as per Clair's statements on her page to reveal everything in her life the way it is because of her deep fear of being gaslit or called a fraud by her followers. The sequence of her pain, trauma, and then her digital presence on Instagram reveal the way a person can become stuck in a cycle of trauma and traumatic responses. The original trauma of medical gaslighting created an incessant fear in Clair's system of the same event being repeated, and therefore, she ruminated, obsessed, and felt debilitating anxiety around how clear she needed to be in her expression. When her expression of her original pain was disregarded, the maladaptive response of self-blame had her initially thinking that her lack of clarity was the problem. The way Clair shared the history of her illness to the point where she recovered fully was her method of reconciling her past with her present. In doing so, she managed to build a digital system of support in the form of virtual followers and create illustrated media that held the memory of her trauma (Cvetkovich, 2019). Clair's page is thus a clear example of how real-time trauma and coping became more visible experiences on Instagram.

In contrast, Nahla spoke about religious trauma and used critical thinking to reflect on a specific cultural dynamic that was the source of her pain. Nahla's expression reflected past pain,

while Clair's expression reflected ongoing real-time pain. In that sense, Nahla was able to be more objective in her disclosure. While her written narratives were filled with emotional granularity (Brackett, 2020) and conveyed deep struggle with the self; her present removal from this struggle allowed her to offer narratives that were more balanced between emotion and reason. Emotional granularity means the smallest most granular details of one's emotional experience brought to light using very specific words that mirror one's inner struggle (Brackett, 2020). Nahla's prolific ability to notice, feel, and put into words the reality of her internal experience seemed like the basis of her coping journey. Her choice to express the intricate details of her internal world over the politics of representation of religious minorities certainly contributed to the authenticity of her expression. In doing so, Nahla (a practicing Muslim woman) created a digital community that respects and admires her courageous critique of the way patriarchal institutions and discourses can be traumatizing. What I found truly compelling about Nahla's content is how competent she is in associating systems and cultures with individual trauma. Being a psychiatry resident herself, an immigrant, and a practicing Muslim Nahla creates content that is filled with narratives that sounds extremely foreign to western audience. Nonetheless, her skill in associating intense emotions with mastery and ease in her critique is potentially the reason for the significant resonance of her expression. While much of Nahla's content is cathartic, it still reflects Chouliaraki's (2020) rights-driven narrative on vulnerability because of how she connects her wounds with the cultures and structures that created them.

If I were to intuitively assign a coping strategy to Nahla's narrative, I would assign high achievement as her natural instinctive response to her traumatic history. High achievement and extreme independence seem to be appropriate responses to battling cultural and religious

mindsets that blossom on instilling emotions like shame, guilt, and fear. Letting go of foundational assumptions about the self and the world that were installed by the circumstances of one's culture and their upbringing is certainly no easy feat. Critical thinking, deep knowledge, and personal independence are qualities that can reinstate reason, safety, and self-compassion to help an individual build their new assumptive world that is more aligned with their real-life experience (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Nahla exhibits those qualities with flying colors; her content reveals her effort to change the narrative on her trauma and suffering (Egnew, 2009). Her stories exemplify the way cultures and institutions can further contribute to the traumas of individuals.

The work of narration to facilitate healing (Egnew, 2009) was also evident on Myers' page that has the largest following. Opposed to Nahla, Myers expression is centered on lighthearted comedy as a method for destigmatizing mental illness. Myers who is the most popular creator in the category of creative instagrammers relied on humor in her expression and the building of her brand. The practices of self-disclosure and personal disclosure brought Myers' mental health disorders (e.g., ADHD, OCD, and bipolar personality disorder) and coping behaviors (e.g. hyper-fixations, compulsions, etc) to public witnesses. Her presence on Instagram is endearing and her reels are popular mostly because they are comical and amusing. In terms of her trauma expression, she can be subtle about her trauma in her storytelling reels, and very explicit about it in her reflective reels. The way she scripts her comedy reels is not necessarily intended for explicit expressions of trauma, but rather the stories demonstrate the way a traumatized person navigates the world with their fragile and insecure nervous system. Van der Kolk (2015) explains that a trauma sufferer lives with a fragile nervous system because of the way their energy "becomes focused on suppressing inner chaos, at the expense of spontaneous involvement in

their life" (53). Myers' reels demonstrate her attempts to maintain control over these unbearable physiological reactions (e.g. anxiety, obsessions, compulsions, hyper fixations, etc) in a way that eliminates their stigma. In her reflective reels, she becomes more specific about the deep pain and suffering in her past and how far she has come in recovering from it. She exhibits a myriad of media skills but perhaps her light-hearted presence paired with her transparency allowed her to create media artifacts in the form of instagram reels that are restorative for her, and incredibly meaningful for others.

In summary, Myers' work conveys how the stigma of mental illness can send people down the dark road of suicide and her purpose is to actively eliminate that stigma. Clair's work reveals some weaknesses of the healthcare system and the concept of gaslighting that unsurprisingly creates so much distress and anguish. Nahla's work reveals the silent wounds that build up from trying to maintain your identity between two opposing cultures. All three creators have skillfully utilized Instagram to bring serious life issues to the platform and used its popularity to convey to a large audience the realities behind their suffering. In doing so, Instagram became a space that brought different kinds of trauma to public witnessing. It became a channel that gave suffering voices the tools to express and share their pain.

CHAPTER 5

INSTAGRAM THERAPY

On the flipside of artistic and creative expressions of trauma is the trauma-informed content created by clinicians and trauma practitioners on Instagram. The popularity of explainer and psycho-educational content on the platform contributed to the evolution of a new genre of content popularly known as *Instagram therapy* (Waldman, 2021). I argue that in the last few years, Instagram has become a social media platform utilized by its users to access mental health support (Ryan & Linehan, 2022; Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, & Bartels, 2016), social support (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2012), and knowledge sharing (Ahmed, Ahmad, Ahmad, & Zakaria, 2019). Given the popularity of Instagram as a platform hosting more than one billion active users monthly (Ryan & Linehan, 2022; Johnson et al., 2021; Statista, 2023), health and wellness professionals have utilized it as a medium for sharing their knowledge. In doing so, they added a layer of therapeutic content to Instagram which led to an upsurge in self-help content created and consumed on the platform.

The data set in this chapter reveals the way therapists and trauma professionals use Instagram for knowledge sharing that is interlaced with personal and self-disclosure. Some of them choose to break down the medical lexicon of trauma and create content that is mostly educational. Others center the somatic aspect of trauma and create content that is primarily focused on the body. As such, this chapter examines a set of Instagram practices that have largely shaped the genre of Instagram therapy. The creators analyzed are ones who have employed the popularity of Instagram to mainstream the theories that inform the concept of trauma using different content capacities. Even though their content is mostly informational, they still include

their back stories and weave in the personal element the same way creative instagrammers do. The key difference is that the focus here is not just on the personal narrative, but also on the knowledge that is simplified and shared in a manner that fits the parameters of the platform. Therefore, the communities following trauma-informed creators are ones that show great interest in understanding the roots of trauma and suffering.

The chapter features two creators whose content corelates with Menakem's (2009) concept of traumatic retention that outlines how trauma can be routinely passed "from person to person and from generation to generation" (p.20). This will be further detailed in the analysis where it is applicable. First, a page titled @awakenwithally will be reviewed, one that focuses mainly on the characteristics of a traumatized nervous system and offers in-depth knowledge on the somatic consequences of trauma. Ally's page is entirely text-based, yet she still managed to create a significant following of more than one hundred thousand followers while rarely sharing any visuals. The methods by which she managed to do so will be reviewed in detail. Second, Ally's account is contrasted with arguably the most popular Instagram page in this genre titled @theholisticpsychologist (Wiest, 2022). LePera, the licensed therapist behind this large platform of nearly seven million followers was named by The Wall Street Journal as *Instagram's favorite therapist* (Collins, 2023). She is largely against the western mental health system and has become an advocate for alternative ways to heal trauma that are mostly based in the concept of self-regulation. As such, the content that she puts out on her platform is conducive to the idea of self-healing. Using different tools on Instagram, LePera mainstreams clinical language, specifically language that is particular to the underlying responses to all traumas. Today, her page has nearly

seven million followers where she publishes concepts and ideas that are helpful for understanding one's trauma history.

The chapter concludes with a discussion section that offers a comparative analysis between the two sets of data, and the practices of the two creators examined. A review of Instagram tools and features examined in each data set will be discussed, and audience engagement will be considered. In doing so, this chapter aims to demonstrate the way the genre of Instagram therapy has garnered its controversial success on the platform. It also aims to demonstrate the way new social and cultural norms can be created in digital spaces where personal and self-disclosure is corelated with scientific reasoning.

5.1 @AWAKENWITHALLY

Ally's Instagram page primarily offers text-based content that focuses on the characteristics of a traumatized nervous system. In 2015, Ally was involved in a car crash that left her nervous system in a state of complete shutdown. For the following three months, she struggled with severe insomnia, anxiety, startle, and severe PTSD. On Ally's journey of recovery, she was advised to shift her focus from the external experience to the internal experience. In other words, shifting her attention from what happened outside to what is happening inside. In doing so, Ally was able to embrace that the internal is the source of her dysregulation and she was then able to allow her body to guide her healing and her life forward. Today, Ally describes herself as a *Life Transformation Mentor* and titles her work: *Trauma Resolution and Nervous System Empowerment*. Her content can be described as energetically clean; she is balanced and writes in a way that is not filled with emotional exaggerations frequently induced by trauma as demonstrated in the previous chapter.

Ally started garnering Instagram followers possibly in 2020 which is when her page started growing with visual coherence. This means that all of her posts were created with the same visual aesthetics that gave her content a homogenous composition. She speaks about trauma in a way that is highly accessible to her lay audience because of how she simplifies medical concepts and neuroscientific theories. By the end of 2020, Ally shared a post that got the highest engagement (996 likes and 56 comments) compared to her earlier posts indicating that she started garnering wider interest and her page started growing further from there.

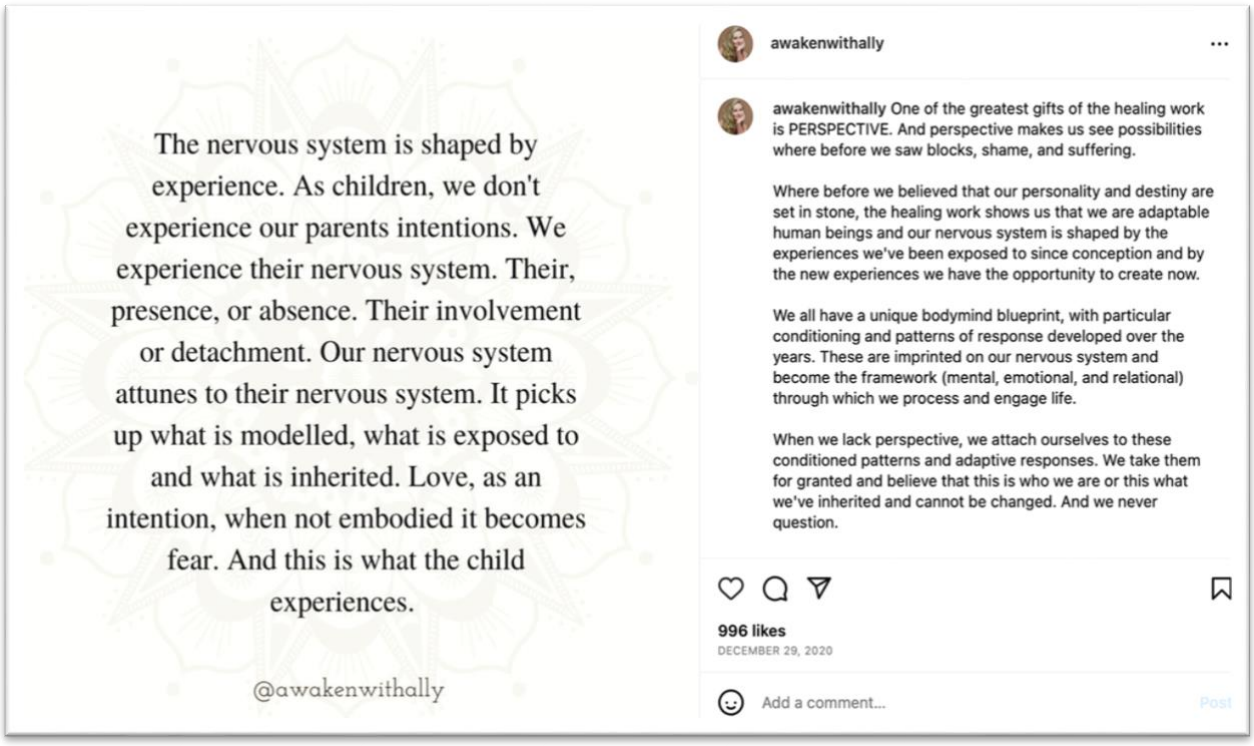


Figure 23 (Wise, 2023a)

In this post, Ally talked about the way childhood homes are the foundation of either secure or fragile nervous systems. In her caption, she talked about the importance of perspective in recovery. Lacking perspective keeps an individual stuck in the fearful responses of the nervous system that is intended as protection (Wise, 2023a). By developing the ability to change perspective and reframe an experience, one is able to reshape their nervous system toward balance and calm. In her caption, Ally continues to write:

> *we are designed to heal […], with healing comes perspective and choice. It comes to the realization that in the same way a pattern was shaped, in the same way, it can be reshaped or brought into its natural expression: Through experience, through mirroring, […], through*

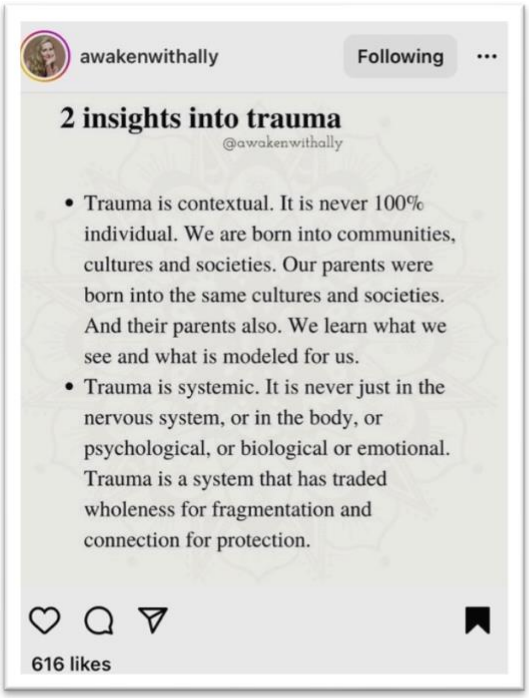
safe relation. When we expose the nervous system to insecurity, anxiety, emotional suppression, neglect, or conflict it will wire itself to cope with this inner environment. When we expose the nervous system to the natural elements, to safety, connection, presence, kindness, or love, it will wire itself to this environment. It takes patience, it takes skill, and it takes love, over and over and over and over again." (Wise, 2023a)

Creators who detail the responses the nervous system in that way are obtaining their reasonings from neuroscientific perspectives on trauma. Polyvagal theory is their scientific reference as it explains the way adverse experiences (*insecurity, anxiety, emotional suppression, neglect, or conflict, Ally mentions)* leave behind an implicit trace in the nervous system. This implicit trace is claimed to manifest as bodily sensations (or nervous system responses) like a knotted gut, racing heart, or a gripping in the chest, etc that are stored in the body as interoceptive memories (Menakem, 2009; LePera, 2021). Those memories become the reference point for how the body perceives new experiences, and therefore, profoundly impact one's physiology, thoughts, and actions by distorting its perception of events. In other words, a person starts perceiving the world with the reference of an unbalanced and reactive nervous system that fails to distinguish safety from danger. In essence, interoceptive memories are the foundation of either a regulated or dysregulated nervous system (Menakem, 2009; LePera, 2021; Van der Kolk, 2015).

In contrasting the theory with Ally's words, I noticed two things in analyzing her work: 1. The way she roots much of her content in polyvagal theory and the science of the nervous system is contrasted with some spiritual references such as Taoism in the post below, and eastern philosophies such as Tibetan Buddhism. Therefore, the way Ally curates her content (which is

entirely text-based) is by making connections between neuroscience and spirituality. In that way, she connects the science of the nervous system with the teachings of spiritual thinkers to address trauma using body-focused and soul-focused techniques. 2. She writes with a trauma-informed perspective by focusing on the phenomenon of dissociation, a concept that has been named by trauma scholars and clinicians to be the essence of trauma as referenced in Chapter 2. However, Ally also maintains elements of personal disclosure where she writes about her own trauma and experiences with nervous system collapse.

In other words, even though all of Ally's posts are written for the purpose of knowledge sharing, she still incorporates her own experience with nervous system collapse/dysregulation to form connections with her audience. While her posts are loaded with scientific knowledge they do not come off as dry or stale. They are not motivational posts and do not carry emotional exaggerations, rather, they are balanced, informative, and simple in their tone and language. In the posts below I break down Ally's technique to demonstrate the way she combines knowledge sharing with affective expression.



In the Taoist tradition it is said that there are four paths towards ultimate liberation: mediation, sex, death, and trauma. Mine so far has a lot to do with trauma. Throughout my adult life, I began to notice the repetition of certain limiting and painful patterns. Without tools and perspective, I used to shame myself, to blame my "unlucky" destiny, and believe that something is deeply wrong with me. A series of acute traumas in my late 20s dysregulated my nervous system so severely that I went into collapse, experiencing chronic insomnia for months, chronic startle, a fear that I could almost cut it with a knife, suicidal thoughts and ideation, panic attacks that the emergency room became so familiar. From all of the symptoms, the most debilitating was chronic insomnia. I was exhausted, not functioning, experiencing a deep sense of collapse and helplessness not knowing why this was happening to me.

Through a series of synchronistic events I came across yoga and meditation as alternatives to help myself. Because my body was so contracted and tense both of them seemed too much for what my nervous system could handle. And so, I adapted them to fit my somatic capacity. I didn't force myself to be still, to breathe deeply or to be in the flow. I listened. I would create a few moments of gentle stretches, eyes open mindful orienting, gentle dancing or spontaneous movement and 2-3 minutes of eyes closing mediation scanning my body. This didn't solve my sleep issues, but it was one way that helped my gradually reconnect to my body and my instincts. A foundational aspect of this process of healing is to listen rather than impose.

Figure 23 (Wise, 2022a)

In this post, she balances scientific content with personal narratives; the different writing techniques that Ally uses between the square image and the caption allows her to combine knowledge sharing with personal disclosure. As such, her posts frequently offer story, connection, and affective texture combined with theoretical content. There are three main layers in this post that highlights her technique:

1. Personal Disclosure is the layer that offers Ally's affective expression of her own trauma. *A series of acute traumas in my late 20s dysregulated my system so severely that I went into collapse experiencing chronic insomnia for months, chronic startle, a fear that I could almost*

cut it with a knife, suicidal thoughts and ideation, panic attacks that the emergency room became so familiar (Wise, 2022a), she writes about her experience with nervous system dysregulation.

2. Cognitive Disclosure the layer where Ally offers narratives from her past that reveal her cognitive challenge with self-blame where she unfailingly blamed and shamed herself for her struggles. *I used to shame myself, to blame my unlucky destiny, and believe that something was deeply wrong with me (*Wise, 2022a). This layer complements the personal disclosure by allowing her audience to be part of her debilitating thoughts and the emotions she associated with the way her body responded to trauma.

3. Scientific or Intellectual Content is the layer of in-depth content usually displayed in the square image to contrast the layers of personal and cognitive disclosure. Ally utilizes the regular space for visuals to share definitions, insights, theories, or short descriptions of specific responses of the body.

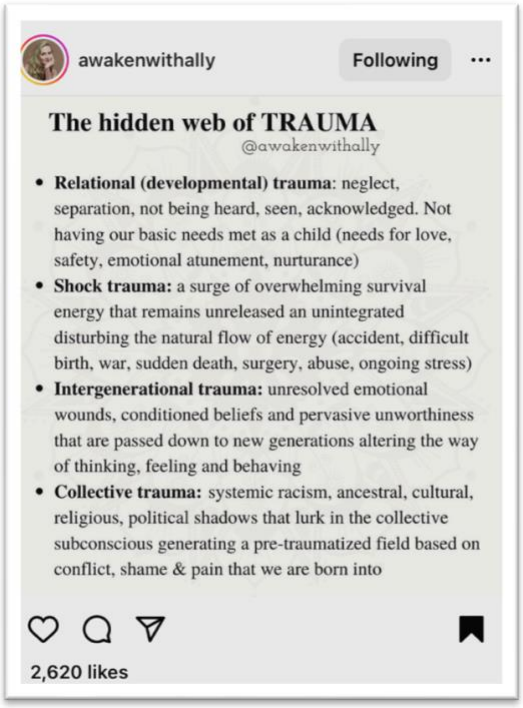
This is how those layers come together in the above post: In the square image, Ally offers a broader view on what trauma is and how it develops individually and collectively from communities and societies, and systemically from institutional systems and cultural systems that are imposed on people in their most formative years. Contrasted with the captioned text where she offers a short story (personal disclosure) about the way trauma impacted her body. Ally then ties her symptoms with the cognitive challenge of self-blame. By juxtaposing her own emotional

challenges with the information on trauma being contextual and systemic as she explains in the square image, Ally tackles the scientific, the emotional, and the cognitive aspects of a traumatic experience and creates an inclusive post.

Further, by describing how her trauma manifested in physical symptoms and the somatic work she had to do to regain balance, her well-composed post becomes relational. Story versus science, and logic versus pain is a technique maintained in most of Ally's posts. At the end of her caption, Ally addresses her audience by extending an invitation to her community to go at the body's pace and not impose any work on their system. While this might sound simple, it is actually extremely powerful because of the subtle permission coming from a mentor that advises one to go against the practicality of public culture. *A foundational aspect of this process of healing is to listen rather than impose (*Wise, 2022a)*,* she writes to invite her pained followers to listen to their bodies and give themselves the time they need to regain balance.

In that way, Ally managed to employ Instagram as a platform to not only spread her knowledge, but also share her own traumatic history through written narratives. Creators like Ally found a way to work around Instagram's superficial algorithm that favors retouched visuals and videos to popularize health and wellness content. By creating emotionally and cognitively textured posts, creators like Ally trick the algorithm and employ a popular platform to mainstream their entirely text-based content. The medium, in a way, became their message; they popularized their teachings by tailoring them to the popularity of the medium. In creating content that fits the parameters of the platform without sacrificing its scientific integrity, they succeeded in bringing trauma theories to mainstream conversation. To illustrate this further, the post below

demonstrates the way text-book terms have made it to the digital space because of this genre of content.



It takes courage, vulnerability, and ongoing commitment to our truth to do this work and claim our life in this way, through healing opening, and reconnecting with what has been lost, not nurtured, disowned and suppressed for so long […] I've always felt that this work of trauma resolution is so complex and subtle that to come on the other side where we are not at the mercy of our troubling reactions and limiting expression, we need an upgrade the way we relate to the various aspects of ourselves, our challenges, wounds, our body, nature and the world. Trauma needs to be met with what was absent at the time of the wound, of the disconnect, disruption, and the fear. With presence, attunement, connection, agency and new levels of embodiment. We need challenge, I would say to the core, what we thought is true about us, about the world and the ways we have learned to be in the world which is largely the way we have learned to survive. But survival is not our original blueprint. Survival is an emergency mode, just like the airbags of a car. We need to open up so radically and claim our life in such a way that no need is left unmet, no limit is being dismissed, and no territory of our body is being untouched by our kindness. We need to be so honest with who we are, where we are, so vulnerable to ask for help and seek perspective. […] To work through trauma is to work with the most subtle and complex of our life's human expression and this is why it holds so much potential. You're so brave!

Figure 24 (Wise, 2022b)

Here, Ally is able to demonstrate that she knows what she teaches inside and out; she is able to converse about, and explain, the concept of trauma outside medical terms and DSM5 diagnoses and breaks it down to her lay readers. While lacking the entertaining element that Instagram demands for a post to get attention, there is still significant engagement with Ally's content. She has close to 3000 likes on two of the examples I used so far. That's over 3% engagement from her total number of followers. According to the digital marketing industry standards, engagement between 3-5% is considered a very good metric for engagement (Bora, 2018). Further much of the content produced in the genre of Instagram therapy becomes

adapted by artistic creators to communicate that knowledge through art (e.g. Artidote) or memes as will be shown in a later part of this chapter. Accordingly, recent claims that suggest the relationship between Instagram and its users to be changing (Staniewski & Awruk, 2022) deserve more attention as the platform contributes to advancing self-help and mental health movements.

The improved or altered relationship between Instagram and its users is also reflected in the way an author becomes more attentive to the *look and feel* of their page. For instance, the image below displays some of Ally's most recent posts where she applied slight design changes that make her posts easier on the eye, and therefore, more compelling to read (Wise, 2023b; 2023c; 2023d, 2023e; 2023f; 2023g). She shortened her wordcount in the image, yet she still manages to keep her message intact: trauma is a concept that does not begin and end in the medical field. Trauma is personal, systemic, and cultural and she continues to demonstrate and explain that fluently.

Figure 25 (Wise, 2023b; 2023c; 2023d)

Figure 26 (Wise, 2023e; 2023f; 2023g)

In terms of content, Ally continues to focus on the characteristics of a traumatized or dysregulated nervous system. She emphasizes the importance of being connected to the body in order for it to develop the capacity to repair and regulate. This becomes possible when one has the awareness to allow grief to be experienced and not blocked, rushed, or denied. In denying or rushing the grieving process after loss or trauma, the body naturally becomes tense because of the suppressed grief. *When grief is not allowed, trauma perpetuates—our body and nervous system brace, disconnect, and tense in response to the suppressed grief. Our minds find strategies to protect, avoid, and deny the pain* (Wise, 2023f*)* she writes. In correlating the importance of releasing those emotions with the concept of repair and regulation, Ally reinforces the significance of refracting trauma outside of the body. Moreover, she speaks about familiarity as the primary filter for the nervous system—meaning the traumatized nervous system is probably more familiar with a sense of intensity rather than a sense of calm. In other words, it might be difficult for the body to release intense emotions after trauma because they feel familiar,

therefore, making it difficult for trauma to be healed. *How can we heal when we are not in touch, in an embodied way, with what needs healing?* she asks (Wise, 2023e*)*. By offering small pieces of information that are easy to read and digest, Ally's posts become thought-provoking; she encourages her readers to reflect on their experiences yet supports them to not impose any work on their body when it feels unprepared. In that way, her platform becomes a space for people to learn the science behind their behavioral patterns and receive comfort and reassurance in the process.

In terms of visual elements, since Ally rarely uses photos, she utilizes an artistic/geometric design behind her text that resembles mandala designs that are, oftentimes, associated with spiritual communities. This subtle visual element situates Ally as someone who is holistic in her approach to trauma; her square images are scientific, her captions are personal, and her visual elements are spiritual. In that way, Ally, very elegantly and delicately, forms a special relationship with her audience that both, directly and indirectly, allows them to feel safe and calm in her content. Given how her work is centered on the nervous system, she knows how to write and communicate in a way that is relaxing to the nervous system of her readers. I don't think I ever came across anything that was triggering on her page. This is what makes her content so unique.

In closing, Ally's account is an example of Instagram being efficiently utilized in creating digital content that strongly emphasizes one's relationship to their body. In doing so, she creates very specific posts that focus on the somatic effects of trauma that centers the body, its responses, and its wisdom. This is important because "our sense of agency, how much we feel in control, is defined by our relationship with our bodies and its rhythms: Our waking and sleeping

and how we eat, sit, and walk define the contours of our days. In order to find our voice, we have to be in our bodies—able to breathe fully and able to access our inner sensations. This is the opposite of dissociation" (Van der Kolk, 2015. p.333). Ally's Instagram practice then becomes an example of pop-psychology that is rooted in scientific knowledge, mixed with personal and spiritual narratives. One post at a time, Ally explains in simple steps the way to connect with the body and achieve a steady and connected nervous system. She teaches people one post at a time how to come out of freeze or dissociation.

Ally's followers often express gratitude for her sharing her knowledge and many ask for clarification on a definition or a suggested strategy. I didn't expect to find much interaction with her posts given how dense they are. However, it seems that people do invest time in reading, thinking, and commenting on her posts. The engagement on her posts is lower than engagement on the artistic or personal content given the difference in tone and depth, however audience behavior is very similar. People still tag one another, interact in comments using the *mention* function, and many times just communicate through the use of emojis. These interactions, while simple, are still important because they are indicators of the changed and improved relationship that users have with the platform. While Instagram was once a platform where users were mainly concerned with collecting likes and followers (Verrastro et al., 2020), this study demonstrates that now there is a different culture; one that promotes emotional awareness, discusses trauma and trauma responses, and circulates neuroscientific knowledge about the human mind and body.

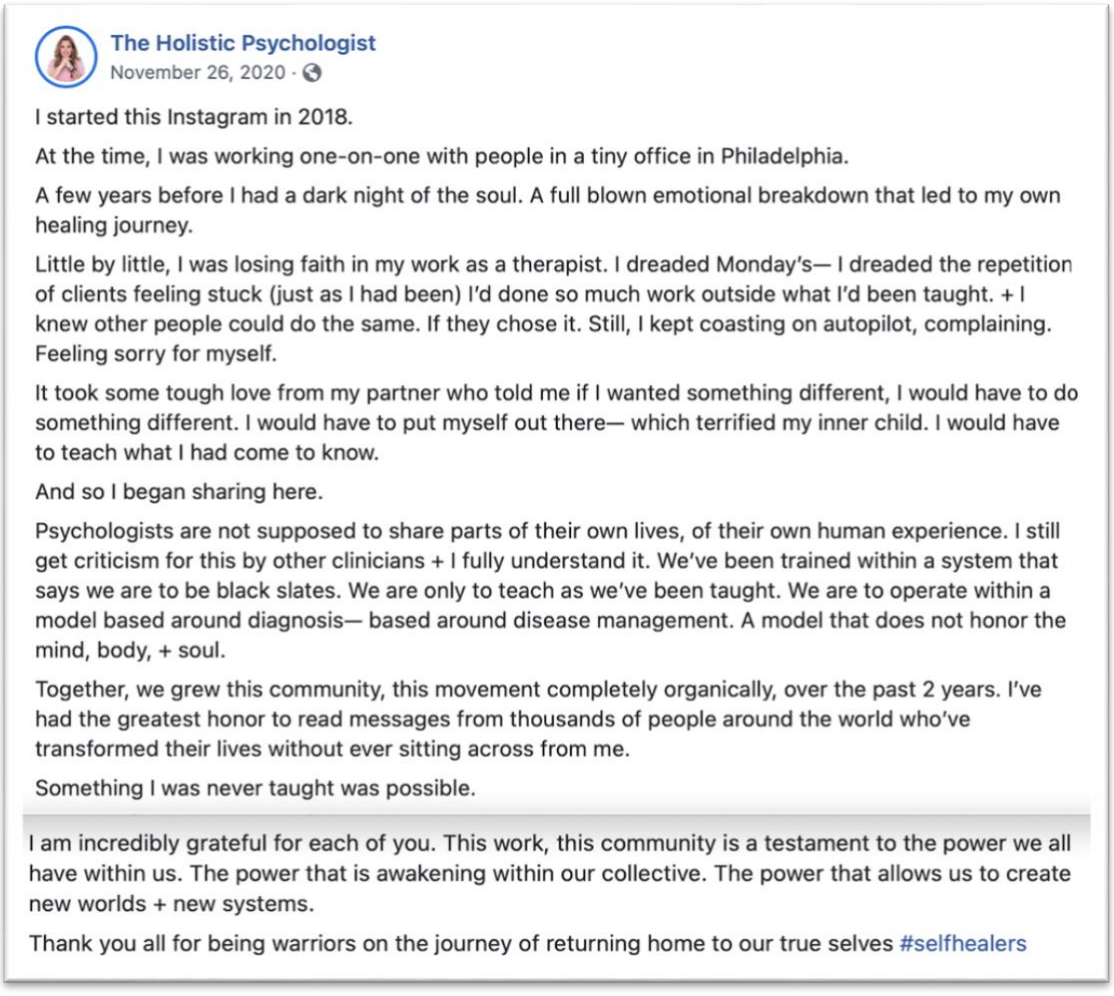
To illustrate this further, the following creator I examine in this chapter is arguably the most popular mental health creator on the platform: the holistic psychologist. In 2020 the holistic psychologist was named by Forbes to be *radically changing the business of mental health* (Wiest, 2020) because of her Instagram account. At the time the Forbes article was written, the page had slightly over one million followers. Today, @theholisticpsychologist has nearly seven million followers and was recently named by The Wall Street Journal to be *Instagram's favorite therapist* (Collins, 2023).

5.2 @THEHOLISTICPSYCHOLOGIST

Nicole LePera founded and built her renowned Instagram page *@theholisticpsychologist* that has seven million followers, and her often wait-listed virtual healing platform Self Healers Circle. LePera received traditional training in clinical psychology at Cornell University and The New School for Social Research. She is a New York Times best-selling author, clinician, and now a social media influencer. When speaking about her journey with healing trauma, and also her journey with the American mental health system, she speaks a lot about her passion for self-healing, hence her virtual healing platform titled Self Healers. Her most unpopular opinion is her belief that every individual has the capacity to heal their traumas and transcend their suffering without the need for an official diagnosis or a medication plan. She receives a lot of criticism by other clinicians in the industry (Coyne, 2021) for her approach because of how she regards mental health disorders to be trauma responses instead. Her critical stance of traditional mental health treatments stem from her frustration with the way it is "focused on a diagnostic model, which means labeling symptoms as disorders, she explains. *I was*

trained that all people can do is basically manage symptoms. I wish I had been taught more about trauma, epigenetics, and the importance of conscious awareness. These are things I teach every day now because they lead to immense healing" (LePera quoted in Wiest, 2020).

In this post LePera reiterates this sentiment as she reflects on the growth of her Instagram that started in 2018 motivated by the goal of creating knowledge that she felt was needed in her own healing.



The Holistic Psychologist
November 26, 2020 ·

I started this Instagram in 2018.

At the time, I was working one-on-one with people in a tiny office in Philadelphia.

A few years before I had a dark night of the soul. A full blown emotional breakdown that led to my own healing journey.

Little by little, I was losing faith in my work as a therapist. I dreaded Monday's— I dreaded the repetition of clients feeling stuck (just as I had been) I'd done so much work outside what I'd been taught. + I knew other people could do the same. If they chose it. Still, I kept coasting on autopilot, complaining. Feeling sorry for myself.

It took some tough love from my partner who told me if I wanted something different, I would have to do something different. I would have to put myself out there— which terrified my inner child. I would have to teach what I had come to know.

And so I began sharing here.

Psychologists are not supposed to share parts of their own lives, of their own human experience. I still get criticism for this by other clinicians + I fully understand it. We've been trained within a system that says we are to be black slates. We are only to teach as we've been taught. We are to operate within a model based around diagnosis— based around disease management. A model that does not honor the mind, body, + soul.

Together, we grew this community, this movement completely organically, over the past 2 years. I've had the greatest honor to read messages from thousands of people around the world who've transformed their lives without ever sitting across from me.

Something I was never taught was possible.

I am incredibly grateful for each of you. This work, this community is a testament to the power we all have within us. The power that is awakening within our collective. The power that allows us to create new worlds + new systems.

Thank you all for being warriors on the journey of returning home to our true selves #selfhealers

Figure 27 (Lepera, 2020)

Like previous creators, LePera uses layers of visual and verbal disclosure in her Instagram practice; she writes prolifically about trauma and trauma history in the square images like Ally, as well as in her extensive captions. And she reveals her own personal traumas in the narratives she shares about her past. In doing so, she weaves in the layer of affective expression with knowledge creation. The reels she creates are reenactments of scenes often from her own childhood where she performs specific dynamics from her past that startled her emotional growth and caused her developmental trauma. In that way, her content becomes partially informed by her childhood trauma, and largely by her extensive academic and clinical knowledge.

In my analysis of LePera's page, I focus mostly on her reel creations to show how her dynamic video content enables viewers to observe a physical representation of trauma as it shows up in their everyday lives. For example, the following reel demonstrates what dissociation, or the freeze response (Menakem, 2009) looks like in real life. It reveals LePera's method where she replaces clinical language (depression) with the common traumatic responses of the body (shutdown/freeze). She employs a production technique that maximizes the potential of Instagram in delivering her message. In the reel below, she utilizes the following functions and theories:

1. *90-second Reel* in which she performs the phenomenon of dissociation that is thoroughly discussed in trauma literature (Caruth, 1995; Kaplan, 2005; Van der Kolk, 2015) where the body becomes disconnected due to its limited capacity to assimilate a traumatic experience.
2. *Overlaid Text* in which she highlights the symptoms of the body in *shutdown* (Menakem, 2009) in short, clear, and concise sentences that complement the footage.

3. *Captioned Text in which* she expands on the message in the caption and uses hashtags to increase its visibility and circulation.

Shutdown is a nervous system state.
In this state a person is detached or shut down to survive a threat/stressor.
A person can get stuck within a freeze or shutdown state which is usually diagnosed as depression

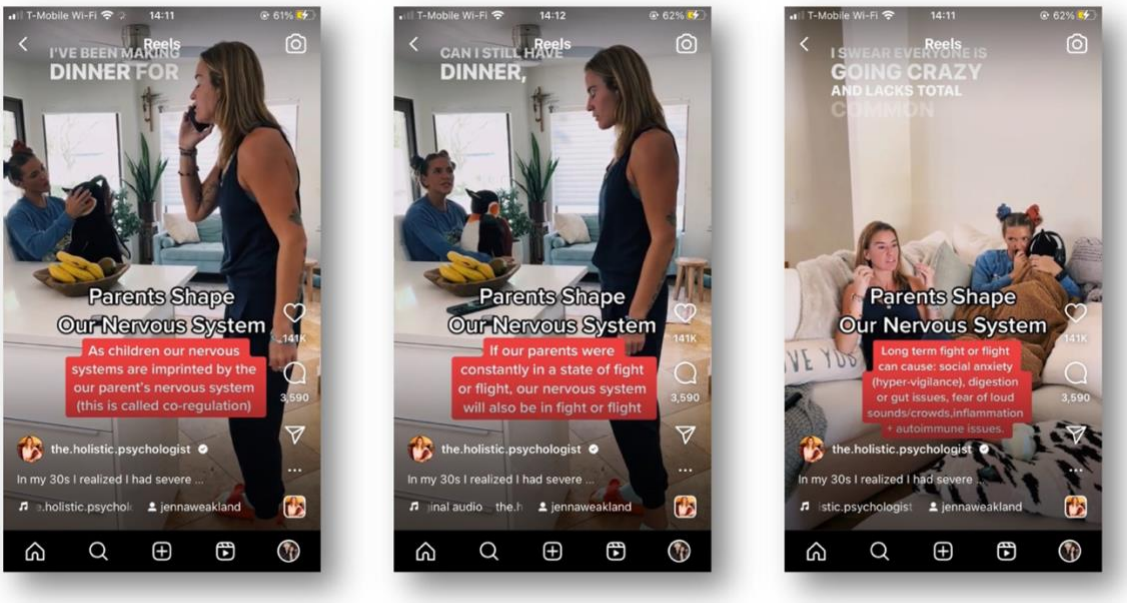
In shutdown:
- *The body is immobilized (very low motivation, no energy to move)*
- *Blank stares or monotonous voice*
- *Desire to hide away from the world*
- *Feels detached from reality, left body, dissociation*
- *Tight muscles, stiff body (from freeze state)*
- *Withdrawn*
- *Can't fully engage in conversation (spaced out)*
- *Body in survival mode*

#selfhealers

Figure 28 check video here (LePera, 2022a)

The unique thing about LePera's writing is her ability to pack a lot of information in short, simple, and succinctly written sentences. In this caption, LePera makes a clear distinction between a clinical diagnosis (depression) and a nervous system trauma response (shutdown/freeze) and how they can be mistaken for one another (LePera, 2022a). She acts out what shutdown looks like in the daily life of a dissociated individual to demonstrate why this nervous system state is often mistaken for depression. Her belief in self-healing over traditional treatments put her in the face of extensive criticism. "*I still get criticism from other clinicians, and*

I understand it. We are only to teach as we've been taught, *we are to operate in a model based around diagnosis – based around disease management, a model that does not honor the mind, body, and soul"* (LePera, 2020) she writes. Nevertheless, LePera remains unfazed by critics and continues to create content that encourages self-soothing and nervous system repair through understanding trauma and one's traumatic history.



In my 30s I realized I had severe dissociation. No childhood memories. I struggled to be present—mostly existed with a numb spaced out feeling. To be honest, I had thoughts that something "really bad" has happened to me + maybe I repressed the memory. What I came to realize was that my home was full of adults who were in a constant, chronic state of fight or flight. Their inability to regulate their emotions, to communicate, or to self soothe left me in the same state as a child. Up at night. Fearing someone would break in. Fearing my parents would die. Thoughts reflect nervous system states. I believe one of the most important things for people to understand is that our nervous systems are shaped by our homes. We need to support parents. Teach them how to regulate their emotions. How to express themselves in healthy ways. How to get their bodies to return to homeostasis (a parasympathetic state). How to breathe. How to step the cycles of addiction to crisis+ chaos that allow us to feel "alive". Resilient nervous systems can change an entire outcome of a generation. #selfhealers

Figure 29 check video here LePera (2022b)

Her inspiration for her reels seems to come from her own history with childhood and developmental trauma. *In my 30s I realized I had severe dissociation. No childhood memories. I*

struggled to be present—mostly existed with a numb spaced-out feeling, she writes here (LePera, 2022b). In this reel, she attempts to reenact a scene potentially from her own memory of a home where she consistently witnessed the problematic dynamics of her parents. In the captioned text, she does three things to provide context:

1. *Personal Disclosure* where she speaks about her prolonged state of dissociation to the extent that she could not retain or remember any memories from her childhood. She attributes this state of dissociation to her tumultuous home in which she developed it as a strategy to cope with the sense of unsafety she felt as a child. In this way, she weaves in her own traumatic history with the information she writes about resilient nervous systems.

2. *Cognitive Disclosure* where she mentions her struggle with the thought that something really bad must have happened to her that caused her to lose all memories of her childhood. In those disclosures, she is revealing to her audience the environment of her childhood home and the way it impacted her emotionally and mentally as an adult.

3. *Scientific Content* where she writes about resilient nervous systems and uses the term homeostasis or parasympathetic state which she contrasts with the sympathetic state (fight or flight) in the overlaid text on the footage. Ultimately, she's saying that parents need support to snap out of fight or flight (sympathetic state) and cultivate balance and calm (parasympathetic state) in order to breed resilient nervous systems in their children.

In this way, LePera's content becomes infused with trauma theories, and reflects her clinical training, academic knowledge, and her personal traumatic history.

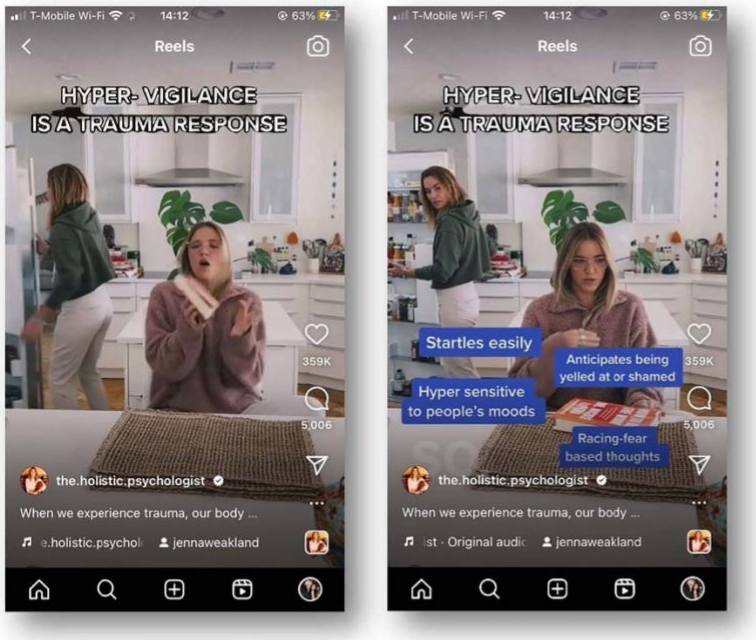
According to LePera's reels, one can understand that safe secure homes breed children with regulated and resilient nervous systems, while chaotic and stressful homes breed insecure and traumatized nervous systems. This is ultimately what she is trying to demonstrate in her skits; the way the body internalizes the dynamics of its childhood home and continues to live with those internalized patterns in adulthood. Menakem (2009) refers to this idea in his work as *traumatic retention* (p.3). He writes "as years and decades pass, reflexive traumatic responses can lose context. A person may forget that something happened to him or her—and then internalize the trauma responses. These responses are typically viewed by others, and often by the person, as a personality defect. When this same strategy gets internalized and passed down over generations within a particular group, it can start to look like culture. Therapists call this a traumatic retention" (p.3)

To illustrate this further, I will discuss three examples most popular on LePera's page that exhibit the way a traumatic response can become collective responses in families, communities, and culture. I will discuss the way she uses variations of the above curatorial technique to maximize her message.

1. <u>Hypervigilance in Families</u>

The first example is the state of hypervigilance (LePera, 2022c). LePera claims that hypervigilance is an unconscious reaction of the body to what could have potentially been an unpredictable home. This means that the unpredictable dynamics the body witnessed in

childhood were stored as implicit memory that shaped the reactions or strategies of the nervous system moving forward. In other words, the body starts to communicate through the unconscious memories it held in unsafety which shows up as sensory information (e.g., strong gut sensations, racing heart, etc). The reel below is a short skit of what that might look like in the daily life of an individual with hypervigilance; the captioned text connects the behavior to the potential dynamics of one's family.



when we experience trauma, our body copes by becoming hyper-vigilant. The easiest way to describe this is that the body turns on its alarm 24/7 or at least a majority of the time in an attempt to protect us. Hypervigilance is the most common symptom of C-PTSD.

Here's an example: Let's say that you had an unpredictable parent. Sometimes they were in a great upbeat mood. They were loving. Other times, out of nowhere, they yelled at you when you didn't do anything (seemingly wrong). Or punished you harshly/shamed you. Or "lost it" when they were in a situation that was stressful. When this happened, they didn't explain or apologize. They would actually speak to you like nothing happened leaving you more confused + slowly teaching you that people cannot be trusted. Because their behavior was unpredictable, you felt unsafe regularly + could not make sense of how the most important person in your world was so scary. Your nervous system learned to watch every change in mood, every facial expression. This hyper-vigilance was the only way your body knew to keep you safe. Because you weren't developmentally capable of understanding: "Dad has his own emotional issues. He has insecurities + is stressed from his job. He was parented this exact same way..." you thought this meant something about you were: "I'm bad", "I'm unlovable", "I'm not worthy". I believe that most cases of what is labeled as social anxiety disorder actually stems from long term hypervigilance. The brain + body still on alert, especially in crowds or social situations where there's a feeling of not being safe (strangers) or in control (unfamiliar place). Signs of Hyper-vigilance:

-Cyclical thoughts or worst-case scenarios (thoughts mirror nervous system states)
-Social anxiety
-Fear of crowds
-Jumpy or nervousness for "no reason"
-Fear of loud noises
-Heart racing when someone comes into the room (common for adults of childhood abuse)
-Nightmares
-Insomnia
-Over-reacting (ex: the situation does not match the reaction)

Figure 30 check video here (LePera, 2022c)

This juxtaposition of simplicity with an in-depth explanation of background and symptoms is the trademark of LePera's production and curation techniques. It is quite possibly

the reason why her content is so popular because of the way it allows the average follower to easily relate to the reenacted scene. The in-depth text then offers a gradual sense of awareness of problematic patterns in families and invites the viewer to practice self-reflection. In doing so, LePera builds a digital brand that is centered on showing people how to actively change their problematic patterns and move towards creating more safety and security in their bodies. This reel has 7.9 million views, 359 thousand likes, and more than 5000 comments.

2. C-PTSD in Families and Communities

The second example is a more severe adaptation of hypervigilance clinically known as C-PTSD (complex post-traumatic stress disorder) which LePera describes as a protective mechanism of mind + body (LePera, 2023a). In this state, a person becomes unable to understand and regulate their emotions because of their hyperactive nervous system. The following reel shows a casual conversation between two people where LePera explains what C-PTSD is and how it develops in the body, she highlights some signs of it and how it manifests in a person's life. The first statement she makes is *C-PTSD comes from a series of trauma that happened from a prolonged event* (LePera, 2023a). For example, "through families in which one family member abuses or mistreats another. Through unsafe or abusive systems, structures, institutions, and/or cultural norms (Menakem, 2009. P.20). In this reel, LePera references the dynamics of her own family that contributed to her C-PTSD. *I had an emotionally unavailable mom, and my dad struggled to deal with his anger. There was always a ton of yelling and chaos in my home* (LePera, 2023a) is how she opens in this skit. She continues to say *when you are little, and your brain and nervous system are still developing, and there are constant threats in your environment, you can*

develop complex post-traumatic stress disorder. People with C-PTSD can often cope by dissociating or just sort of blacking out and leaving their bodies for extended periods of time […] to stay safe and protected (LePera, 2023a). In this way, her script reflects Menakem's (2009) concept of traumatic retention.

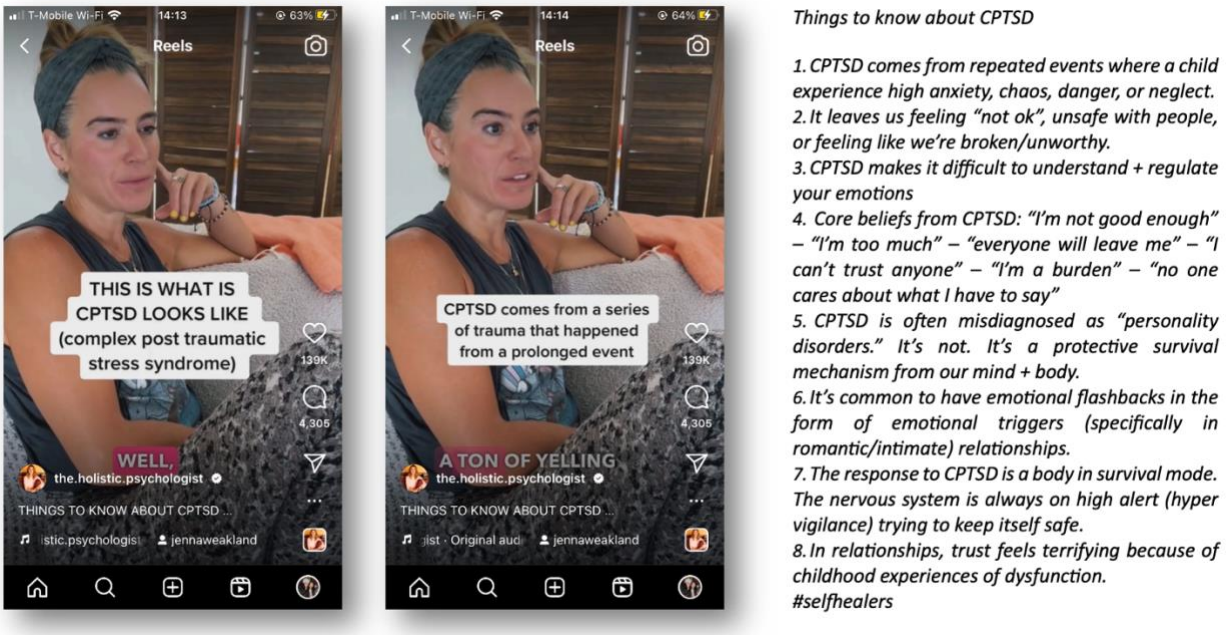


Figure 31 check video here (LePera, 2023a).

LePera's curation style remains consistent: Skit + Descriptive text + Informational captions: The first layer is the simplicity of the skit; the second layer is the descriptive text overlaid on each frame to give the viewer a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon she is reenacting—in this case: C-PTSD. The third layer is her extensive captions where she offers the maximum amount of information on the topic. While the videos can be deterring because of the

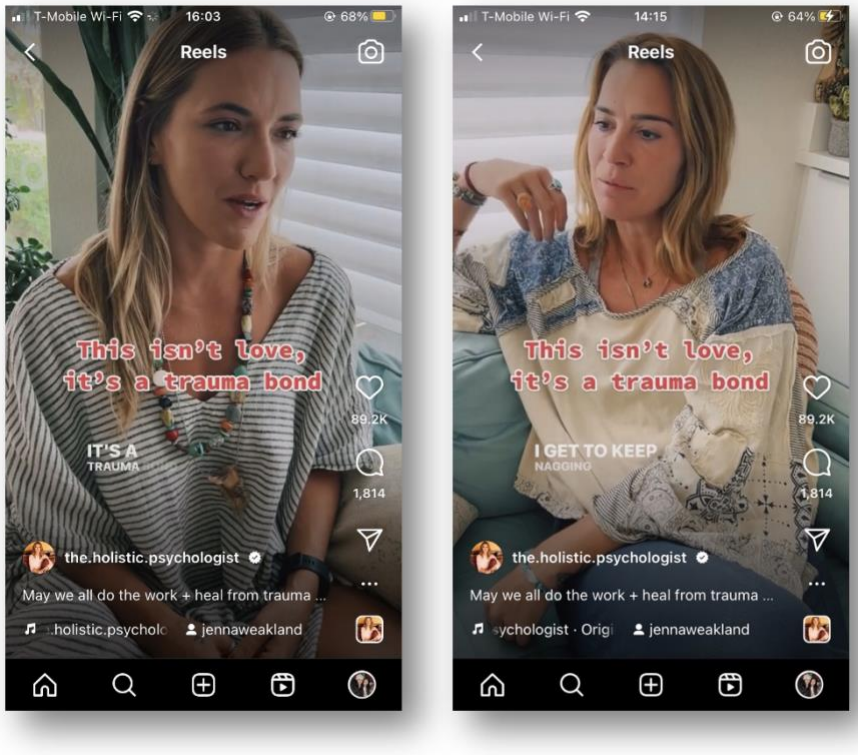
bad acting, the consistency in curation style puts the focus on the quality of her message. This reel has 3.1 million views, 139 thousand likes, and more that 4000 comments (LePera, 2023a).

Interaction with LePera's content certainly reveals that she gets the most in-depth engagement from her audience compared to Ally and many other similar creators. Almost 4000 comments on her C-PTSD reel of people saying they relate and share stories of their childhood and/or their developmental trauma. This reflects the way traumatic responses can become prominent enough and ultimately be considered as part of culture. LePera's reels are viewed in millions of replays indicating how powerful her content is despite her lack of acting and filming skills. She managed to maximize the potential of all functions on Instagram in sharing the depth of her knowledge and making connections between a person's past and their present.

3. The Culture of Romantic Relationships

The third and last example demonstrates the way traumatic responses show up with great intensity in romantic relationships (LePera, 2023b). LePera claims that one's first relationship with parent figures sets the foundation for all other relationships—including the one a person has with themself. If the first relationship with a person's caregivers was unsafe and emotionally disconnected, they will repeatedly seek out that same dynamic in their romantic relationships courtesy of repetition compulsion. This means that people tend to be attracted to similar dynamics that they have lived in childhood in an attempt to resolve the original wound when they first felt rejected or abandoned as children. In other words, people tend to choose romantic relationships where they unconsciously reenact their familiar past. LePera explains that

those relationships are often called trauma bonds where people attach to the same experience that created their pain in order to resolve it. She captions the reel: “may we all do the work and heal from trauma bonds that society calls love” (LePera, 2023b).



May we all do the work + heal from trauma bonds that society calls love #selfhealers

Figure 32 check video here (LePera, 2023b)

The term *trauma bond* replaces terms like love, passion, soulmate, and other popular romantic terms in much of LePera’s content on relationships. She cites popular culture including TV shows, Hollywood films, Disney films, and popular music hits for the way our culture defines and understands love. This skit is a conversation between two partners revealing the reasons why they chose one another and continue to do so regardless of the dysfunction in their relationship. Those reasons are mostly rooted in the traumatic responses of each partner. *There*

is something called a compulsion to repeat […], both of us grew up feeling helpless, *unseen, and not good enough. This relationship allows us to feel that way pretty much all the time. We're repeating this as an attempt to correct or heal this pattern. That is what our brain does"* (LePera, 2023b). These are statements she uses in this skit to explain how traumatic responses dictate the way people choose romantic partners. She then proceeds to explain in other reels that when people heal, they become attracted to safety, security, and availability. This reflects their healthy nervous system, their secure attachment style, and their awareness of what long-lasting relationships require to stand the test of time.

Significant engagement from LePera's followers here range from people asking what to do, or how to heal from a *trauma bond* indicating how many people mistake these chaotic dynamics for love. Triggered followers, however, come with anger and frustration in the comments trolling and telling her that her claims are not entirely accurate because of how a specific message didn't apply to their situation. At one point, LePera posted a reel following a popular Instagram trend responding to these types of comments with grace and humor.

This kind of interaction where she participates in a trend, not only escalates engagement and visibility of her page, but also shows that the author behind the page is human. Despite their knowledge, they can still become unsurprisingly affected by the negative comments or repetitive criticism one can face on social media.

Figure 33: It's been real #selfhealers

People are impacted by LePera's content because it serves as a mirror that reveals some hard truths about families, communities, and ultimately public culture. I admire the way she has utilized her minimal media skills to curate content that carries so many insights, however, many people are offended by her conviction in self-healing. I understand why her page is controversial and why many professionals are offended by her approach (Coyne, 2021; Way, 2020). She is very blunt about being heavily against the traditional structure of therapy in Western culture. She believes that trauma responses are misdiagnosed as personality disorders which prompts the patient on a journey with medication that is oftentimes unnecessary. For example, she does not believe in ADHD being a mental health disorder which can feel dismissive for people struggling with the condition.

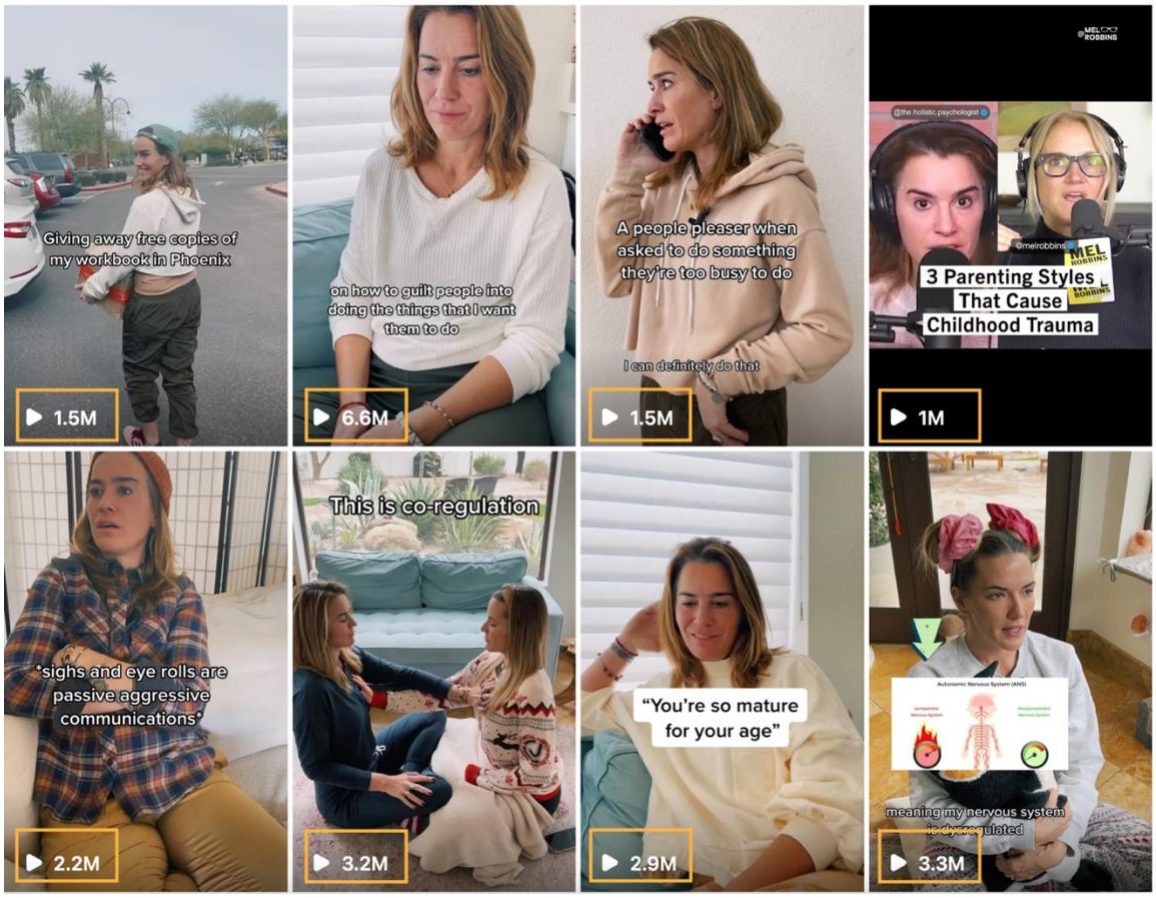


Figure 34

Despite the backlash, LePera remains very successful as a content creator and generous in the content she puts out on Instagram without any concern for credit. As shown above in figure 35, almost all her reels hit millions of views and replays which contributes to the significant growth of her page. Her content is arguably the most popular on the platform in the genre of Instagram therapy where she advocates for a more holistic approach to mental health that honors the mind, body, and soul. In that way, one regains balance that is sustainable and self-achieved. Her success on Instagram reveals the power of the platform in mainstreaming an idea and influencing public culture to a point that offends industry professionals. It proves that pop-psychology, while highly critiqued, can still have its merits. One of which is making a layer of

therapy available for a much larger audience and mainstreaming its vocabulary in the digital space. As such, LePera's page becomes a space where people can learn about trauma through simple, well-written, and well-curated content that offers intellectual, emotional, and somatic knowledge.

5.3 DISUCSSION

Instagram has been largely utilized by health and wellness professionals in creating content that is informed and motivated by trauma. Using the different features on the platform, wellness creators found a way to use Instagram as a publishing platform for their knowledge. In doing so, they built digital communities interested in trauma by sharing scientific information in simple accessible language. The large following of those creators indicate that Instagram users show significant interest in the way the platform is being used for knowledge sharing. As such, pop-psychology became an Instagram genre that is largely uncensored due to the lack of control over the knowledge created and the speed by which it circulates. Nonetheless, the platform continues to grow and advance its features which gives way for content creators to produce different types of media to live on their pages.

Due to the controversy of some contemporary healing modalities popular on Instagram such as the #selfhealers movement that was founded and launched by @theholisticpsychologist, the Instagram therapeutic genre became highly critiqued for lack of scientific accuracy. This means that *Instagram therapy* (Walden, 2021) became a genre in itself facing so much backlash because of the uncensored and therefore the anticipated error in using psychoanalytic concepts. The mass adoption of psychological language is claimed by critics to be draining the terms of their value (Burton, 2022). When people start tossing around terms like trauma, depression, PTSD, and so forth on their Instagram pages, these conditions will likely be taken less seriously in popular culture. However, there is a good stream of psychologists and academics who seem to be not entirely bothered by the genre of Instagram therapy. As per a recent New Yorker piece that termed the genre *Instagram therapy,* the author was surprised by the responses she got from

the psychologists she interviewed on the topic. She writes: "steeped in a counter-history of silence about and vilification of mental illness, they could not bring themselves, it seemed, to worry about this particular aspect of therapy-speak's rise. Gottlieb[2] […] noted that most of us are still more likely to minimize mental-health challenges (including addiction) than to exaggerate them. And although Saxbe[3] acknowledged that "there's a danger of pathologizing and over-treating," she found both modes preferable to fear and shame" (Waldman, 2021). And so, the concern over the popularity of psychology or trauma specific content being a disservice to people with real or serious conditions might not be that daring.

If anything, this study reveals that the genre of Instagram therapy has been more helpful than dangerous. The popularity of LePera's content with her reels getting millions of views indicates that there is at least a wide interest in understanding one's trauma history. Engagement on her posts shows that most people genuinely lack support when they struggle, and therefore resort to social media platforms for their varied potential to provide emotional support (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Clark et al., 2004; Roberts, 2004, 2006). Some of the most noteworthy comments are statements like:

- "my family was huge on maintaining image. We couldn't talk about anything unless it was positive and maintained that image. And we never were able to discuss issues with each other. It was always as if it never happened." @naturallyashly
- "52 years of being in survival mode and being dissociated and functionality frozen for that long… retrospectively, I see it as a gift I gave myself to stay alive" @toddsinstalife

[2] Lori Gottlieb is an American writer and psychotherapist. She is the author of the New York Times bestseller, Maybe You Should Talk to Someone.

[3] Darby Saxbe, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Southern California

- “manipulation is used as a common strategy in our brown culture” @mindfulcomebacktherapy
- “Getting through the day when you’re struggling with long-term illness can be a huge accomplishment. And it’s almost completely invisible culturally.” @the.embodied.mystic
- “Disassociation was how I was able to get through my childhood. And it destroyed every single one of my relationships. It contributed to my failed first marriage” @indraniphillips
- “I was in survival mode for over 70 years before it ended 8 weeks ago. It is like I am in a different body with a new mind. Exhausting and sometimes scary, but I trust being calm and open” @irewiredmybrain

These comments are examples of how people reveal themselves in their interaction with an author who is practicing personal self-disclosure. They suggest that “social media users adjust their self-disclosure behaviors based on what they perceive other users are doing” (Masur et al,. 2023. p.10). This means that Instagram users become highly impacted by the personal disclosure of other instagrammers in a way that motivates them to do the same. They follow social cues from creators who are comfortable sharing their own traumas on the platform “as reference points for their own self-disclosure” (Masur et al,. 2023. p.10). In doing so, a conversation starts taking place between the author and their followers, as well as between followers in the comments section. New social and cultural norms are thus created in those digital interactions.

Further, the backlash and critique against Lepera’s work and the genre all together in itself deserves some dwelling. It is as though critics are not fully aware of the nature of Instagram being a social media platform. The expectation that social media users should treat Instagram

the same way they treat a research study is fairly unreasonable. Social media is not a safe space at large, nor is it a research platform, or a space where a creator is required by any means to cite their claims. Social media is a space where each platform dictates the way content is created and shared. Being able to navigate the platform and tailor it to a specific message is a media skill, not a mental health credential. That said, there will be qualified mental health professionals like LePera who will succeed in popularizing their uncited, yet scientifically valid content. And there will be unqualified mental health creators who might succeed equally in popularizing their inaccurate content. This means that the digital space will be filled with streams of information, and it becomes the responsibility of the consumer to pick and choose who they follow. No one is required to cite their content or edit themselves on Instagram for their message to be approved by their large audience. This is simply the nature of the platform and users are generally aware of this, therefore, every person is expected to exercise their agency in what they consume on a regular basis.

On the other hand, Ally, who creates equally compelling content on the somatic effects of trauma, receives much less attention and much less criticism than LePera. Granted, Ally has a much smaller platform, and she also seems to be more cautious in her writings. She speaks fluently about the nervous system and encourages her followers to integrate somatic practices in their daily routines without much critique over the traditional route of treatments. Further, her entire platform is based on static text posts. She rarely creates reels and rarely any visuals which could potentially be the reason for her low popularity. Given the way Instagram's algorithm distributes reels to a broader audience on the platform, creators who rely mostly on static images can have a ceiling for their content's reach. Nevertheless, the lexicon of trauma and the nervous

system continues to garner wide interest on the platform that digital artists started adapting content from the genre of Instagram therapy into memes and digital art.

For instance, James McCrae (@wordsarevibrations) displays this adaptation in some of his meme art. The nervous system, how it functions, how it responds, and how it heals became content for memes that place the focus on self-soothing, co-regulation, and healing. There aren't any extensive captions or text attached to these posts, no explanation, no theory, and no scientific content. The post is meant to utilize a few words with the goal of spreading new concepts that define the way people evaluate their success and live their lives.

Figure 35 (McCrae, 2023a; 2023b)

The Artidote (@theartidote), the artist discussed in the previous chapter does the same thing in some of his posts. He uses the language of Instagram therapy to promote new sets of ideals for healthy living. The health of the nervous system started being portrayed as an expression of love,

a measure for success, a marker for emotional maturity, an indication of one's ability to live and connect with their feelings.

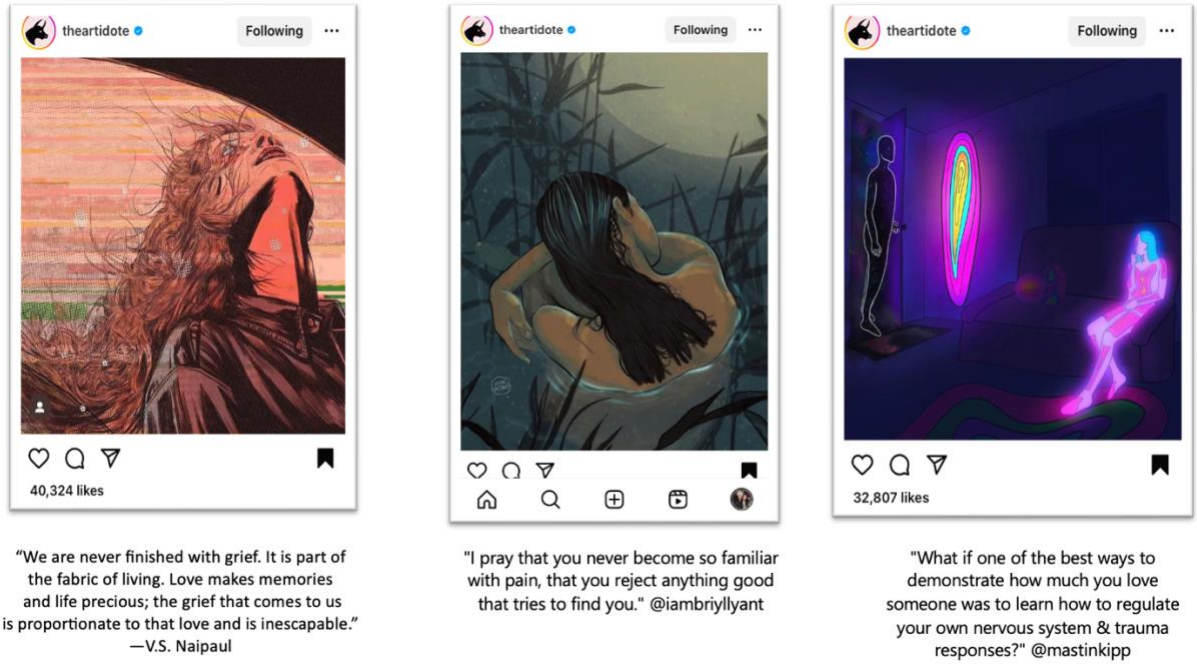


Figure 36 (Artidote, 2020; 2022h; 2022i)

Alessandra Olanow @aolanow illustrates concepts of the body and its wisdom. The importance of understanding the body and its stored memories also made it to the world of digital art and popular Instagram posts.

Figure 37 (Olanow, 2022a; 2022b; 2022c; 2021)

Furthermore, the concept of generational trauma, the choice to end it, and breaking the generational cycle of pain was not lost in artistic adaptations. Ultimately, being in tune with family history, childhood wounds, shadow work, etc. all became popularized on Instagram because of the success of Instagram therapy as a genre of content on the platform. Essentially looking deeper into one's history, their own patterns, and doing the work to act or respond in healthier, more emotionally attuned ways eventually made it to memes, artistic, and mainstream content.

Figure 38 (; Hanson, 2023; FeathWellness, 2023; Mcrae, 2022)

As such, it is safe to argue that the genre of Instagram therapy has certainly become prominent enough to build a digital culture that inspires reflective thinking and encourages new standards for living. Trauma expression and affective living on the platform have also revealed the way users favor content that is an authentic extension of one's real life. The carefully curated image of only happiness and success is slowly starting to fade and is being replaced or interspersed by the realness of pain, grief, and suffering. This contributed to the changed relationship between the platform and its users and changed not only the reputation of Instagram, but also the desire of its users to not hide from their pain or be ashamed of their suffering. The degree of personal and self-disclosure practiced by creative and professional instagrammers is setting up new social norms for what is deemed acceptable. By believing in the purpose of their expression, feeling their pain, and sharing it with large digital communities, they create more space in digital and public culture for the experience and the language of trauma.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study has been to investigate the way media technologies have afforded people spaces to process and cope with trauma and traumatic life events. This objective was met through examining the different ways content producers utilize Instagram, a popular social media platform, in expressing and coping with pain. In doing so, different types of expression circulated on the platform was analyzed to demonstrate the way digital media artifacts became containers that hold the memory of trauma. This process was guided by two main research questions: 1. what is the relationship between the behavior of a trauma-sufferer in the digital media space and meaning-making? 2. What is the relationship between affective expressions in digital media spaces and coping with trauma? What do these expressions reveal about the reality of coping? How do they relay suffering, and how do they make sense of it?

The analytic framework of the study uncovers and emphasizes not only the complexity of psychological trauma, but also the way societies, cultures, and institutions can further contribute to the suffering of an individual in their process of recovering. Trauma scholars have previously undertaken thorough studies on survivors of overwhelming life events to understand the psychology of trauma and victimization. Social psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman (1992) drew on her fifteen years of research to develop a framework that explains the common psychological processes underlying responses to all traumas. She argues that the psychological disequilibrium that follows trauma, results from the shattering of our basic conceptual systems also known as our assumptive worlds (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). These are the fundamental assumptions we hold about the world— with the most common assumptions being

that “the world is benevolent, the world is meaningful, and the self is worthy” (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p.6). After trauma, clinicians have noticed that victims tend to develop some seemingly paradoxical and maladaptive responses like self-blame, to restore the illusions of their fundamental assumptive worlds. In that way, they maintain the sense of safety that those assumptions held, and therefore regain psychological balance and equilibrium. Psych literature that integrates neuroscience theories (Menakem, 2009; LePera, 2021) argues that such maladaptive responses are in fact coping strategies or traumatic responses of the body. This dissertation examined the way trauma and traumatic responses of the body have become less discrete because of the affordances of media technologies. The analysis reveals the ways people have used the digital space to co-regulate their overwhelming emotions and re-establish the capacity to cope. It uncovers the way digital media platforms offer trauma sufferers tools to create meaning and re-establish safety and connection.

Using Instagram as the main platform of study, I ask in what ways do Instagram users utilize Instagram for managing their intense pain? How do they use the platform to produce media that is motivated by their trauma? How does the act of creating and sharing on the platform contribute to the emotional wellness of those users? What do these media artifacts reveal about trauma and the cultures that produced it? As such, this study explored the nuances and limitations that Instagram offers as a space for coping with the intensity of trauma and traumatic memories.

6.1 CONCEPTS, THEORIES, AND INSTAGRAM PRACTICES

Six Instagram pages have been thoroughly analyzed in this study to contrast the ways six different content creators have employed the platform for trauma expression. Every page presented a significant style of expression, mode of creation, and a substantial audience. The smallest page of the six garnered seventy-two thousand followers, while the largest one garnered seven million followers. Stills, captions, reels, carousels, stories, along with some other minor features on the platform were evaluated to examine the tools used by each author in externalizing their trauma. The impact or significance of the traumatic narratives expressed was analyzed via assessing the creator's personal and self-disclosure practices and the way their audience interacted with such disclosure. Audience interaction was analyzed via their affective engagement, personal disclosure in the comments, verbal or symbolic signs of support, and engagement with the narrative shared by using it as a tool to communicate or connect with others. Impression was determined using the number of *likes*, number of *views*, and where those numbers stand within the standard digital metrics of success. However, intuitive interpretation was also considered in analyzing impact especially when looking at audience engagement in the comments section on each post. In other words, metrics were quantitatively used to determine the popularity of each post, and my intuitive interpretation was used as the qualitative method determining the depth of engagement between the creator and their audience. The impact of this type of Instagram practice on each creator was determined via their own self declarations in their expression and in their interaction with the community.

Accordingly, this dissertation extends the concept of living in media proposed by Deuze (2012) specifically to social behaviors that were once known to be strictly private experiences

such as the trauma, illness, grief, and suffering. It looks at the way digital media spaces have become crucial aspects of coping with trauma, and digital media artifacts have become containers for the voice, memory, and history of trauma (Cvetkovich, 2019). In illuminating the distinct overlap between trauma and digital media, this work seeks to contribute to the empirical literature by bringing a trauma-informed approach to the media studies scholarship.

By thoroughly examining the behaviors of six Instagram users and the interactions taking place in their large communities, I argue that the externalization of trauma and/or traumatic memory on the platform can be considered aspects of coping (Folkman et al, 1986). Coping is conceptualized as the "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding one's resources" (Folkman et al, 1986. P.993). In the act of media creation, the internal struggle is given an external container to exist instead of being stuck in one's body. This effort to separate the internal struggle from the body that holds it is an effort that allows an individual to regain some sense of objectivity (Hoskins, 2017). This is evidenced in many of the reflective posts created after the author was physically removed from the site of their trauma. Myers, Nahla, LePera, and Ally created posts that mirrored a sense of balance and coherence when compared to Clair's who created her content in the midst of suffering. Nonetheless, digital media artifacts (or Instagram posts) that are produced in the practice of externalizing trauma act as material evidence of the internal struggle experienced during and after trauma (Cvetkovich, 2019). They are statements that represent a reality that went unrecognized and unvalidated for a period of time. In watching or observing one's traumas, the mind becomes able to separate the facts or truths of a situation from the "unconscious distortions of memory" (Alexander et al., 2004. p.8). In doing so, it seems

to regain some of its capacity to think independently without being heavily impacted by the traumatic responses of the body. Hoskins (2017) refers to these artifacts as *memory in the wild* (p.18) and claims that in externalizing traumatic memories, the mind tends to function significantly better in the way it handles memory. Unbeknownst to the creators, the bigger more holistic goal of those media artifacts, then, becomes about the act of restoring physical and psychological well-being.

The framework of this study reveals that Instagram plays a significant role in restoring psychological health by allowing space for releasing repressed pain and reinstating a sense of safety and connection in the traumatized self (Menakem, 2009; Van der Kolk, 2015; Kaplan 2005; Egnew 2009). Further, the dynamics of some posts uncover the realities and cultures that have contributed to the shaping of people's pain. Having truthful conversations about those realities allows for another layer of validation for the people pained by them. And therefore, creates potential chances for change in individuals' and public views on trauma and suffering (Couldry, 2010).

As my data demonstrates, important concepts and theories are at play on Instagram. A network of diverse theories, trauma scholars, and clinicians propose the distinct ways trauma impacts the mind and the body for many consecutive years after the occurrence of the traumatic experience. Lay theory considers trauma to be an event that shatters an individual's sense of well-being, and psychoanalytic theory outlines the way this shattering impacts the mind and the body (Alexander et al., 2004). In this model, scholars dive into the neuroscience of the brain and the nervous system and offer an in-depth academic thinking model that explains how the body behaves when trauma remains unresolved. For instance, Van der Kolk (2015) stresses the

phenomenon of dissociation in his work, which is the way trauma essentially produces dissociated or disconnected selves. Alexander et al. (2004) explains this by saying that the traumatized individual becomes so terrified by the trauma that their natural instinctive response becomes repression rather than a rational understanding of what happened. This leads to distortions of the traumatizing event in the individual's "imagination and memory" (p.5). The creators reviewed in this study reveal distinct digital practices that demonstrate the way Instagram is used as an external storage system for their memories. In doing so, the content they produce not only aids their coping, but also enriches their awareness of their life experience and pulls them out of dissociation.

Neuroscientific theory offers a deep dive into the concept of dissociated selves by outlining the way the nervous system works (Menakem, 2009; Van der Kolk; 2015). Safe and steady nervous systems are claimed by attachment theorists to develop in early childhood through responsible and reliable caregiving (Bowlby, 1969; Erikson, 1950, 1968). When trauma occurs, the shattering of one's fundamental beliefs causes psychological disequilibrium (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Accordingly, a person starts experiencing the world with an imbalanced or a traumatized nervous system. Clinicians such as Van der Kolk (2015), Menakem (2009), LePera (2021), consider this psychological disequilibrium, or insecure and unbalanced nervous systems, to be the result of unresolved trauma. In other words, when trauma remains unaddressed, it inevitably becomes a reason for a person's prolonged suffering. Characteristics of the traumatized nervous system are drawn from polyvagal theory, a neuroscientific model that explains the functions of the vagus nerve or the soul nerve (Menakem, 2009). The vagus nerve is the nerve that links the brain to every major organ of the body, and therefore illuminates the

way the body becomes deeply affected by a traumatic experience (Menakem, 2009; LePera, 2021). Both Menakem (2009) and LePera (2021) are clinical psychologists who dove into the neuroscience of the brain in their work. They use polyvagal theory to explain the way the body responds to real or imagined danger after trauma. Van der Kolk (2015) explained the way polyvagal theory contributed to his work by saying it provided them with an understanding of why co-regulation or *focused attunement* with another person is vital for healing trauma. He writes:

> Polyvagal theory provided us with a more sophisticated understanding of the biology of safety and danger, one based on the subtle interplay between the visceral experiences of our own bodies and the voices and faces of the people around us. It explained why a kind face, or a soothing tone of voice can dramatically alter the way we feel. It clarified why knowing what we are seen and heard by the important people in our lives can make us feel calm and safe, and why being ignored or dismissed can precipitate rage reactions or mental collapse. It helped us understand why focused attunement with another person can shift us out of disorganized and fearful states (p.80).

As such, by emphasizing the unconscious emotional fears that send the body into its psychological defense mode after trauma, the concept of dissociation becomes clarified and endorsed (Caruth, 1995; Kaplan, 2005). While the terms used are different, there is clearly congruence in these theories regarding the way trauma continues to show up in one's life through the defensive responses of the mind and body.

Some scholars outside the medical field and clinical work who have taken an interest in trauma developed a trauma-informed approach in their academic disciplines. Cathy Caruth, the leading figure in psychoanalytically informed literary theory and humanistic approaches to trauma (Alexander et al., 2004) was heavily influenced by Freud and other French psychoanalysts. She rooted her definition of trauma in their work, and therefore endorsed the theory of dissociation (Kaplan, 2005). Her popular definition of trauma is "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or set of events, which takes the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors from the event" (Caruth, 1995. p4). She explains that Freud associated this delayed response to "the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (Caruth 1995, p2). The inability to leave the event behind is due to a disruption in the brain's ability to grasp the suddenness of the event. According to Caruth, this suddenness precludes the mind from fully assimilating the event, and thus it continues to return in the form of belated "repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (Caruth, 1995. p4). As such, psychoanalytic thinking became an enormous influence in both lay thinking and academic thinking.

Media and Communication scholars who have considered a trauma-informed approach in their work claim that the traumatized self is a "vulnerable figure that needs to communicate its suffering to command recognition" (Chouliaraki, 2020, p.16). Rajabi (2021) similarly claimed that "suffering is a human condition that demands to be seen" (p.6). Kaplan (2005) notes that when victims of traumatic experiences put their experiences out into the world, they do so for two reasons: "to organize pain into a narrative that gives it shape for the purpose of self-understanding (working their trauma through), or with the purpose of being heard, that is,

constructing a witness where there was none before" (p.20). Additionally, trauma scholars and clinicians argue that in making pain visible, people may become more *viscerally acquainted* with the discomfort of suffering (Kaplan, 2005; Van der Kolk, 2015. p.299; Kirmayer, 1992). Chouliariki (2020) who argues that the platformization of pain promotes victimhood culture still recognized the therapeutic value in making pain visible. She writes "the more vulnerable people become online, simply put, the more these languages are reinvented and repackaged as a resource for them to make sense of their suffering" (p.22). Similarly, Kirmayer (1992) recognized the value of empathetic witnessing in supporting an individual transcend their suffering. Although the terms used are different, there is, again, a clear congruence on the physiological need behind choosing to make trauma visible.

Digital connectivity has afforded trauma sufferers spaces to share their traumatic memories and speak openly about their trauma, therefore, no longer carrying their pain solely in isolation. Madianou and Miller (2012) argue that media users are taking advantage of new technologies and media platforms to "manage their emotions and their relationships" (p.172). In other words, managing difficult feelings is being proposed as an implicit function of new media spaces. Some scholars even proposed the idea of *'living in media'* (Deuze et al, 2012). Central to this argument is "the ways in which social life is lived in different forms of media practices and mediated interactions" (Madianou & Miller, 2012. P.174).

The data in this study reveals the different ways media technologies are being utilized as an external resource to navigate the heavy tasks of cognitive and emotional coping after trauma. As such, I argue that the concept of *living in media* now extends to the most strictly private experiences of trauma and suffering. More specifically, people resort to Instagram as a

popular digital media platform to bring their traumas to public witnesses and command recognition for their pain. In so doing, they bring their innermost struggles to the platform and build digital communities that are able to hold and validate their prolonged suffering.

6.2 PRIVACY VERSUS SELF-DISCLOSURE: WHERE WE ARE NOW

Studies that have previously looked at self-disclosure across communication channels noted that behaviors differed from one platform to the other. For example, one study, based on 1201 Dutch adolescents, concluded that Instagram was the least social media platform associated with expression of negative emotions. In contrast, it was the 2nd most associated with expression of positive emotions (Masur et al,. 2023). Further, a qualitative study that reviewed the practices of 33 German internet users revealed that both Facebook and Instagram were considered platforms not suitable for personal or self-disclosure (Teutsch et al., 2018). In other words, people used to have a less authentic presence on both Facebook and Instagram when they first came out—meaning, personal lives were still kept relatively private on social media and the practice of personal disclosure was not yet deemed appropriate. Instagram practices were mostly consumed with selfie behavior and displaying a positive image of one's life.

More recent studies on social network sites have specifically looked at the way Facebook was changing private experiences like bereavement, death, and illness, and the way people responded to these experiences (Miller, 2016). For instance, Miller's study found that Facebook was making it easier for people to communicate with the ones they know are experiencing the hardship of chronic or terminal illness. The reason for this is that communicating through Facebook made people feel like they were able to maintain contact with the suffering

person by being “inquisitive without being intrusive” (p.145). Miller noted that there were cases in his study “where it seems that Facebook has enabled people to retain communication that otherwise would have ended when he or she retreated to the home” (Miller, 2016, p.145). He concluded that social communication maintained through Facebook networks was instrumental for “people suffering from loneliness and isolation […], he encountered cases where patients are using Facebook cathartically to discuss openly both the experience of having cancer and the situation of knowing that they are going to die” (p. 145-146). He argued that this cathartic expression on social network sites can help people “overcome the reluctance […] to engage with the topics of death and dying” (Miller, 2016. P.146).

Instagram behaviors noted in Chapters 4 and 5 here reveal that Instagram is no longer perceived as a platform inappropriate for expression of negative emotions. The relationship between Instagram and its users is shifting toward a practice that regards the platform as a real extension of social life (Deuze, 2012). In fact, Instagram as a platform seems to have become an important aspect of social support and the process of re-establishing safety and connection after trauma. Instagram users have outgrown the platform’s original concept of retouched and beautified content and have created a new culture that encourages people to be more attuned to their pain. By utilizing the many features that Instagram released over the past few years, creative instagrammers, clinicians, and trauma practitioners, mainstreamed the conversation on trauma, the nervous system, trauma theories, and trauma recovery treatments. This is evidenced in the way the lexicon of trauma has been adapted in memes and digital art. In that sense, this has created some new norms around the way people behave in the digital space.

Research studies have previously and continuously shown that perceptions of "what others commonly do" and perceptions of "what others commonly approve of" tend to be two distinct sources of human motivation (Cialdini et al., 1990; Masur et al,. 2023). When expressions of trauma, pain, and suffering on Instagram started being viewed as things that people commonly do, the discomfort and the reluctance to discuss these topics openly gradually faded at least in the digital space. As such, digital communities showing support and approval of such expressions created an environment where people can learn how to handle their overwhelming emotions. The new norms that these digital communities are creating can easily translate to public culture, therefore greatly impacting the way people perceive and hold experiences of trauma in public capitalistic cultures. This means that what becomes normal in the digital space can translate to public culture as a new norm. In that sense, having these conversations on trauma and suffering on Instagram can potentially build more tolerant, self-aware, emotionally intelligent publics. People will become more acquainted with the discomfort of a person in pain, and in doing so, we create cultures that are largely psychologically healthy. To accomplish this, "social scientists stress the importance of finding—through public acts of commemoration […] some collective means for undoing repression and allowing the pent-up emotions of loss and mourning to be expressed" (Alexander et al., 2004. p.7). This study reveals that the practice of undoing repressed pain and externalizing trauma on a public forum is now being heavily practiced on Instagram. In doing so, the emotions of loss, grief, and mourning are being publicly held, validated, and supported by the digital communities formed around these expressions.

6.3 CONTRIBUTIONS OF STUDY

This study aims to make two main contributions: (1) A contribution to the empirical literature; and (2) a contribution to the media studies scholarship. While some media scholars have written about the use of media technologies for processing emotions (Madianou and Miller, 2012), and others have written about the concept of living in media (Deuze, 2021)- research specifically exploring the overlap between trauma, media, and personal well-being is still somewhat inconclusive. This was highlighted in Chapter 2 where connections between trauma theories, neuroscientific concepts, and contemporary media theories have been explored. This study seeks to offer a modest contribution to the empirical literature by demonstrating the way multiple interdisciplinary theories come together in the media practices of modern-day living. While Facebook has been explored in previous research in correlation to illness, and death – this study offers insights in the way Instagram has evolved as a platform and became a significant space for vulnerable personal disclosures.

Following that, the study contributes to the media studies scholarship by emphasizing the pedagogy of feelings and introspection. By utilizing people's stories and the narratives they share about their lives as the main data for analysis, the framework of this study stresses the value of emotionally attuned scholarship. A model that allows for intuitive and critical modes of thinking to exist side by side in the process of knowledge creation.

6.5 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

This study is qualitative and exploratory in nature, however conducted over a short period of time to fulfill the requirements of a PhD program. As such, the first limitation faced in this study is time. The process of coping with trauma, meaning making, and processing a significant life event are experiences that require time to emerge, and therefore are best studied over an extended period of time. Though the study examined Instagram creators who have been creating content for at least a year, the content examined is therefore argued to reflect their coping with trauma in their specific circumstances. However, more time would have allowed space for bringing in more examples and direct responses from the creators on how their Instagram presence impacts their mental and emotional well-being. For instance, Alessandra Olanow (@aolanow) is an illustrator who creates content that would have contrasted well with Artidote's (@theartidote) work. Rising woman (@risingwoman) and Vienna Pharaon (@minfulmft) would contrast well with LePera's work (@theholisticpsychologist). Jessica Maguire (@repairing_the_nervous_system) would have provided more explicit content on polyvagal theory, therefore, would contrast well with Ally's work (@awakenwithally). Mastin Kipp (@mastinkipp) and Connor Beaton (@mantalks) would bring in the male layer of trauma content to this study, which would reveal the difference between male and female generated content on the platform in terms of the way they approach trauma. Further, next to endometriosis, Violet Clair (@violetclair) creates a whole genre of illustrations that explicitly critique the chaos of hook-up culture and the traumas induced by the ambiguities of modern-day dating. This would have contrasted well with Ginger Dean (@lovingmeafterwe) who brings psychoanalytic thinking to dating culture and explains the way trauma can drive problematic

dating patterns. In doing so, an extensive comparative analysis would have added another layer of depth to this study.

The other limitation is methodological. The original scope of this study was intended to employ traditional research methodology together with practice-based methodology. In doing so, this dissertation intended to demonstrate the value of a practice-based method (filmmaking) as a creative practice employed to build connections between theories, methods, and lived experience. This provides potential areas for future research on trauma and media. Hearing (2015) argues that creative scholarship allows for emotional and cognitive connections to be made 'without excessive researcher influence' (p.79). In employing creative or practice-based methodology, a researcher is able to reflect on their own lived experience which arguably allows for "a more complex, nuanced and thoughtful conclusion than might otherwise be the case" (Rapport & Harthill 2012, p.20) as cited in (Hearing, 2015, p.79). This is because a practice-based research process is centered on intuitiveness (Sinner et al, 2006, p.1229); it is a process that allows the researcher to create enhanced meanings through their own lived experience which is missing in this study. Gergen and Gergen (2011) note "while traditional writing seeks to bring the full content into a logically coherent whole, a performative orientation invites explorations into ambiguity, subtle nuance, and contradiction" (p.9). As such, by incorporating a practice-based approach to this study, I would have been able to draw from creative arts and push the boundaries of the traditional text-based research by creating space for a layer of research that is specific to my own journey.

Some might think that this would create another limitation which is personal bias. However, the nature of this study is extremely personal being that it examines the private experiences of trauma and suffering. Moreover, the traditional qualitative layer of this study was conducted by only me; one researcher, therefore, personal bias is unavoidable in studies that are part of PhD projects because of the limited human resources and time constraints. Third, the scholarship approach that is used in this study is centered on emotional attunement, therefore allowing space for intuitive reflections on the researcher's personal journey will bring more value to studies of this nature. In that way, this study can further benefit from a dynamic process of inquiry that "utilizes the elements, processes, and strategies of artistic and creative practices in scholarly investigation" (Sinner et al, 2006, p. 1234).

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