

The Internet as Saviour and Destructor: Supporting Mental Health through the Lens of *My Heart and Other Black Holes*

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Abstract

In mental health advocacy, the internet plays an important and dual role because it can act both as a platform for support and potential harm. The novel *My Heart and Other Black Holes* by Jasmine Warga captures this duality of media through its story. The protagonists of the novel, Aysel and Roman, meet each other through an online suicide forum, which serves both as a source of healing and distress. This paper investigates the novel in light of how the internet helps and supports people to feel connected with others and, simultaneously, how it encourages harmful behaviours among them. By including knowledge from contemporary studies in digital and mental health, the paper highlights how digital media can increase the danger and solutions to mental health problems. Furthermore, this study contributes to the understanding of how important and responsible platform design and digital literacy should be to tackle the problems and make online environments safer.

Keywords: Suicide Forum, Digital and Mental Health, Duality of Internet, Online Communities, Digital Literacy

Introduction

In the digital era, media and the internet have become the most important mediums to share and communicate with each other. Even though it has become a crucial part of our day-to-day lives, it shows its two sides when it comes to mental health. On one side, it provides people with a sense of belonging and encourages connectivity within them. But on the other hand, they also show and provide content that can make mental health issues worse. They have negative influences on weak people who are suffering from mental health problems and make them believe in harmful beliefs like suicide and self-harm.

In today's global mental health crisis, media plays an important role in shaping mental health narratives. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), "depression is one of the leading causes of ill health and disability worldwide" ("Depression"), with "suicide being the second leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds." ("Suicide"). With this, the internet and media become both a lifeline and a possible threat. Through media and the internet, mental health information and support groups become more accessible to people. However, some unmoderated online spaces also contain the potential danger of increasing stigma and promoting harmful conduct among people.

This paper investigates the impact of the duality of media on the mental health crisis that is present in Jasmine Warga's novel *My Heart and Other Black Holes*. The whole story is about the two main characters, Aysel and Roman, who suffer from depression and suicidal thoughts. Both of them meet through an online suicide forum to end their lives together. Their

journey in the novel highlights the capability of the internet, showing how it can be able to create meaningful connections while also showcasing its dangerous tendency. This novel aligns with contemporary research done on media and mental health, making this novel an important text for examining media's potential as both a saviour and a destroyer in promoting mental health.

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to analyse and examine the portrayal of media and its dual role in *My Heart and Other Black Holes* and to understand how this affects mental health. It will investigate how the internet and media give both healing and despair and the connection between peer support and harmful digital spaces. This study hopes to contribute to the ongoing discussions on how to create safe and supportive online environments.

Literature Review

In recent years, much research has been done on media and mental health, as it is a growing area of study. Many studies demonstrate the media's complex and dual nature around mental health, agreeing on how it promotes awareness while also spreading negative habits and stigma. Research done by Menon et al. also suggests this same opinion, stating, "Youth with mental health issues spent more time on social networking websites and use it to communicate their thoughts with others and seek social support. This can become detrimental if they receive negative advice encouraging self-harm activity." (Menon et al. 384).

In *My Heart and Other Black Holes*, the Smooth Passages platforms capture this duality and reflect the complex role the internet plays in mental health. Dave Heller, in a news article, mentions Joiner's opinion on suicide and excessive screen time. Thomas Joiner, one of the leading experts on suicide, states in his research that "There is a concerning relationship between excessive screen time and risk for death by suicide, depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal attempts." (Heller). This showcases the negative influences of media on people who are suffering from mental health issues.

While the internet can amplify harmful mental health narratives, there is still growing evidence supporting the positive impact of peer support networks in online spaces. Luxton et al. state in their research that "Ultimately, proactively using social media to increase public awareness of education on mental health issues is a logical modern public health approach that can potentially save lives." (Luxton et al.).

In their research, Latha et al. show how social media platforms help spread mental health awareness easily and effectively to people. Stating, "Using social media platforms to conduct mental health campaigns is an effective initiative as one can reach out to many people over a short time frame." (Latha et al.). These studies show the positive outcomes of social media platforms if used correctly.

In this context, the ethical implications of depicting suicide in the media, especially in literature, are important. Thomas Joiner states in his book, *Why People Die by Suicide*, that "there was potential for vulnerable people who see a public suicide to become further emboldened about their own plans for suicide..... Indeed, publicizing suicide in careless ways can be a menace to public health." (Joiner). This depicts Aysel's pressure and determination to end her life after learning of a pair's successful suicide that was shared on the forum.

In literature, a lot of research has also been done to explore the relationship between media and literature. Novels like *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *All the Bright Places* and many others use digital platforms to show their impact on mental health. In *My Heart and Other Black Holes*, there were several studies done to explore depression, suicide, character analysis, and so on. This research will add and contribute a new perspective of examining the novel in the context of digital media and suicide, offering a fresh viewpoint on the mental health addresses found in the literature.

Methodology and Limitations

The primary text chosen for this research is Jasmine Warga's *My Heart and Other Black Holes* and uses qualitative descriptive methodology to analyze the text. A close reading approach was used to analyze key themes, character interactions, and the representation of media's dual impact on mental health. Existing research and literature on media, mental health, and digital spaces were examined for secondary sources. This method helps in understanding how fictional narratives reflect real-world problems.

The limitation of this paper is that it analyzes the dual nature of media and the internet only in one novel. The novel *My Heart and Other Black Holes* offers the connection between media and mental health so the paper deals only with media and ignores other factors that affect mental health, leaving room for further research studies.

Analysis of *My Heart and Other Black Holes*

Media as a platform of Connection

The main protagonists of the novel, Aysel and Roman, meet through a suicide forum named Smooth Passage. The sole reason for the existence of this online platform is to connect individuals who are looking for suicide partners to die with. The character Aysel in this novel struggles with guilt and depression in her life. She feels outcast by her community because of her father's crime and is labeled and known as a murderer's daughter. This exemplifies her feeling of isolation and a burden to the people around her.

Aysel's mother marries another man and gives birth to a son with him. Even though Aysel lives with her mother and her family, she feels like an intruder in a stranger's family. In the midst of those struggles, she turns to Smooth Passages to find a suicide companion for her to end her life with. She feels her family and the town's people would be better off without her. She uses that platform to articulate her suppressed feelings and find a partner who understands and validates her struggles.

Roman, the other character of this novel, also struggles with guilt and isolation because he thinks he is responsible for his younger sister's accidental death. Therefore, he seeks that suicide forum to find a suicide partner to die on the same day that his sister died a year ago. For both the characters, the Smooth Passages platform becomes a lifeline as it offers them a space to express their bottled-up emotions without worrying about any judgement and to gain hope and healing to live their lives again.

Aysel and Roman feel a sense of solace in the site because they know there are people out there who understand and share their pain and heaviness of life. When they finally meet, it's a turning point because they finally find someone who understands their emotional pain. This link forges a delicate yet significant connection, demonstrating how the internet can promote both deep understanding and the deadly reinforcement of despair.

The Dark Side of Media

Although the internet facilitates connections among people, the book also highlights its negative aspects by showing how uncontrolled environments can encourage harmful behaviours. Though it enables them to find comfort in one another, the forum where Aysel and Roman meet is a place that feeds hopelessness and despair. Instead of guiding its users toward recovery, the forum normalizes suicidal ideation, framing it as a shared goal rather than a problem to overcome.

"According to the boards, Suicide Partners Elmo Rains and TBaker14155 took the plunge. I don't know how SovietSummer231 obtained this information, but hopefully, Frozen Robot and I will have the same kind of success. I shiver and swallow the hard lump in my throat." (Warga 30).

These words highlight the hidden peer pressure that exists on these platforms, where vulnerability is not lessened but rather exploited. This portrayal aligns with real-world concerns about how online spaces if left unchecked, can amplify destructive behaviours rather than mitigate them.

The Role of Peer Support in Transformation

As the story continues, Aysel and Roman start to meet and engage with each other often. As a result of that, both the characters slowly come out of their despair and start to understand and support each other. Their relationship serves as a counterbalance to the negative atmosphere of the suicide forum. This highlights how relationships and community have the ability to promote healing. As Aysel begins to open up to Roman, her thought of ending her life diminishes.

She states, “He’s no longer the person I want to die with; he’s the person I want to be alive with.” (Warga 231). This is an important turning point in her journey, demonstrating how true understanding and friendship can steer people away from dangerous avenues. Roman’s evolution is similarly significant. Initially, he gives up and tries to end his life alone, as he does not want Aysel to die with him anymore and wishes her to live for him. “I want you to live, Aysel. So I did it alone because I wanted to save you.” (Warga 291). Later, when Aysel saves him, she helps him to confront his grief and guilt.

“I’m here to tell you that you deserve it....Knowing you has helped me see things differently. See myself differently. And all I want is for you to see yourself the way that I do.” (Warga 293).

Their common experience highlights the value of sympathetic listening and assistance, providing a positive outlook on how online interactions can result in life-changing relationships.

Discussion

My Heart and Other Black Holes shows the dual portrayal of the media, which highlights the need for a solution or strategy for supporting and promoting digital mental health. On one side, platforms like Smooth Passages show the Internet’s capability of creating connectivity among people who are suffering from isolation. However, on the other side, it also shows the lack of moderation and the tendency of normalizing and showcasing harmful behaviour like the go-to or the only way for the problems.

This also reflects the real-world challenges faced in improving mental health. Many studies also indicate that even though digital platforms can improve mental health accessibility, like 24/7 online helplines for suicide and mental health and decrease stigma, they also carry the inevitable danger of showcasing harmful ideas, triggering many people who are suffering from mental health crises to struggle and suffer more. These statements are supported by Warga in her novel, highlighting the thin line that separates the safe online environment from deliberately encouraging negative behaviours.

The novel raises questions and ethical concerns about the responsibility the online platform-creating individual should have. It shows how forums like Smooth Passages have high potential to do harm for many people. But the novel did not provide any conclusive solutions for that but highlights the importance of connectivity as a balancing factor. The story of Aysel and Roman shows how connecting and understanding from others will act as a lifeline for many struggling individuals.

In conclusion, the novel shows the need for a systematic change in improving digital mental advocacy. This calls for stricter rules and principles, high alertness, and moderation in digital platforms. These changes and steps can maintain the internet and media’s ability to promote connectivity and knowledge, putting an end to the normalization of harmful behaviours.

Findings

Examining *My Heart and Other Black Holes*, this study emphasizes the two sides of media that influence mental health. Online communities have the potential to help and guide people with mental disorders to connect and heal if used properly. They also have the potential to encourage a mentally vulnerable person to do negative behaviours by normalizing suicide and hopelessness. Aysel and Roman’s story in the novel underlines the capability of peer support, which leads an individual with despair to his healing, showing how connectivity has the power to overcome the negative impact of digital spaces. This study showcases the fine balance required for achieving the potential advantages of digital connectivity reducing dangers and risks.

Scope for Further Research

Further research can be done on other similar literary works like *My Heart and Other Black Holes* to analyze the dual side of media. Comparative studies can be done between works that deal with other advantages and disadvantages of digital spaces and mental health. Other factors other than media that affect mental health can be further dealt with and so on.

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