

The Spectacle of Sadness: Romanticisation of Suffering on Instagram Among Teens
and Young Adults

Project Report

Submitted by

Jitha

(SB22CE013)

Under the guidance of

Ms. Neena George

In partial fulfilment of requirements for award of the degree

Of Bachelor of Arts

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam



College With Potential for

Excellence Accredited by NAAC with 'A++'

Grade

Affiliated to

Mahatma Gandhi University

Kottayam-686560

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Declaration

I do affirm that the project “The Spectacle of Sadness: Romanticisation of Suffering on Instagram Among Teens and Young Adults” submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature and Communication Studies has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.

Ernakulam

Jitha

20th March, 2025

Reg No: SB22CE013

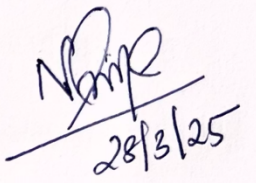
B.A. English Literature and Communication Studies

St. Teresa’s College (Autonomous)

Certificate

I hereby certify that this project entitled “The Spectacle of Sadness: Romanticisation of Suffering on Instagram Among Teens and Young Adults” by Jitha is a record of bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

Ernakulam


28/3/25
Ms. Neena George

20th March, 2025

Department of Communicative English

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous)



Acknowledgement

I take this opportunity to offer my humble prayers and thanks to God Almighty for His mercy and blessings for the completion of this project.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“In a culture where everything is performance, even pain becomes a spectacle.”

-Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

Sadness has been a core universal human emotion recurrent in every art form for centuries. From literature to film, suffering in all its dimensions have been explored and reimagined to the point that art devoid of pain lacks depth and meaning. Michelangelo once remarked, “The most beautiful works of art are those that express the deepest sorrow.” Even today the same sorrow lingers behind narratives, but it has evolved from a private experience to a public performance. The Spectacle of Sadness refers to the phenomenon where suffering is transformed into an aesthetic on social media, particularly Instagram.

The portrayal of sorrow has its deep roots in literature, where it is used to evoke sentiments like empathy, admiration and even transcendence. Great writers that are still celebrated, for instance Dostoevsky is someone who rigorously wrote about man’s pains. It is evident in these lines from *Crime and Punishment*- “Pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence and a deep heart. The really great man must, I think, have great sadness on Earth.” In the case of English writers Lord Byron and John Keats were two canons who immortalised suffering. Byron proclaimed that sorrow is knowledge and those that know the most must mourn deepest. Indian writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, and O.V. Vijayan are among those who have transformed tragedy into a literary experience. Their themes encompassed partition trauma, marginalised suffering, and feminine oppression.

Existentialist and Confessional literature further deepened the romanticisation of suffering, shifting from external tragedy to internal anguish. Writers like Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Sylvia Plath, Kamala Das, Anne Sexton are some who are well known to portray

suffering as an inherent part of existence. Their unfiltered depictions of mental illnesses made it deeply personal and even poetic. This tendency to view pain as beautiful would later seep into other art forms, including cinema and, eventually, digital media.

Interestingly enough, with the advent of digital age, suffering developed a new sphere of existence. Unlike traditional media, where suffering was often an implicit narrative device, digital platforms demand explicit, visually appealing and consumable displays of emotion. Movies gave the consumers just that, before its aestheticization in Instagram. From silent movies like Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid*, to *Casablanca*, and even today's movies like *Joker* or *La la land*, to name a few, are all fixated on glorifying pain and trauma. These films set a standard on how people see sadness. Not as something to be healed from but as something poetic, deep and aesthetic. Something people crave for rather than avoid.

Even in regional cinema, suffering was often glorified through grand, tragic romances and family dramas. *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, *Devdas*, *Rockstar*, *Kireedam*, *Chithram* are movies where pain is a symbol of love, art and loyalty. Sad endings give a lingering feeling of sadness that the audience takes home with them. They mistake it for something selfless, true and noble.

This idea of a visual melancholy is carried on in social media platforms, especially on Instagram. Instagram with its priority set in its visual nature has made itself a fertile ground for aestheticized suffering. From depressing quotes to documenting mental health struggles, suffering is packaged in ways that are visually striking and emotionally evocative.

As Neil Postman argues in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, media plays a critical role in shaping how society processes human emotion. This sets the foundation for understanding how suffering is presented not only as a personal story but as a consumable and shareable

narrative. The validation that Instagram provides the users through likes and comments further encourages the displays of sadness. This sort of shift raises questions about whether the expression of pain on social media is genuine or if it has turned into a distinct kind of self-branding.

This study attempts to:

- Examine the intersection between mental health awareness and the commodification of suffering which is very important in today's digital era.
- It analyses the issue of repeated exposure and its implications for users who are engaging with content that romanticizes suffering.
- Through the theoretical evaluation of social media, it seeks to enrich the media studies field.

The following are some potential limitations of the study:

- Platform-Specific Focus: Although Instagram is the main focus, the romanticization of pain is also heavily influenced by other platforms like TikTok and Tumblr. They will not be investigated.
- Time Restrictions: A full analysis could not be done well because of the short research time period.
- Psychological Complexity: While this research explores emotional impact, it does not provide clinical psychological analysis or diagnosis.

Research Statement: This study aims to analyse the romanticisation of suffering on Instagram, by exploring how glorified portrayals of sadness influence young users' perceptions of mental health and self-identity.

The scope of the study is to determine how user engagement trends, captions, and hashtags contribute to the development of a digital culture that normalizes melancholy. Young adults and teenagers (ages 18 to 25) make up the majority of the target group demographic because they utilize social media and are highly susceptible to the influence of digital trends.

This project will be analysed through the lens of two media theories:

1. Uses and Gratification Theory: This theory, which was developed by Blumler and Katz in 1974, contends that viewers actively look for media material that satisfies their social and psychological requirements. Instagram users may utilize the romanticization of suffering as a means of self-expression, approval, or a sense of community.
2. Spectacle Theory: Guy Debord, in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) says everything in contemporary society is transformed into a spectacle, a performance for an audience, including identity, grief, and emotions. Instagram encourages users to aestheticize suffering by turning it from a personal experience into something that is curated and consumed. This is because Instagram is a highly visual and performing platform.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

- Examine how suffering has been depicted in literature, film, and social media over time.
- Analyse the role of Instagram in shaping perceptions of pain and emotional distress.
- Investigate whether the romanticisation of suffering influences real-life behaviours and attitudes toward mental health.
- Understand the psychological motivations behind engaging with aestheticized depictions of sadness.

Review of Literature

The article *Pain as Performance: How the Romanticization of Sadness on Social Media is Damaging Our Mental Health*, which was posted on Medium.com by Chris Blogs, examines the increasing trend of aestheticizing mental illness and sadness on social media. The author explores how users frequently turn their struggles into visually appealing and stylized content, effectively turning personal suffering into performative content. Social media creates an idealized image of suffering by presenting mental health struggles in an artistic and occasionally poetic light, which can unintentionally trivialize the severity of these conditions.

While existing studies have explored the romanticization of mental illness and sadness on platforms like TikTok and Twitter, there is a noticeable gap in understanding how these phenomena manifest specifically on Instagram.

The following chapter will explore how Instagram, in particular, has contributed to the romanticisation of suffering and its psychological effects on teens and young adults.

CHAPTER 2: THE ROMANTICISATION OF SUFFERING ON INSTAGRAM

With the rise of social media, suffering has been rebranded, not as something to be endured privately but as an aesthetic to be performed and consumed. Unlike literature and cinema, where suffering was a narrative device used to evoke empathy, Instagram turns it into a visual trend, complete with filters, captions, and engagement metrics. In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch argues that modern society is obsessed with curating and displaying the self. This is particularly evident on Instagram, where users carefully craft their identities through posts that often blend real emotions with aesthetic considerations. Suffering, in this context, is no longer just an experience but a brandable emotion.

The Monetisation of Trauma and Algorithms

Many influencers have capitalised on the appeal of vulnerability, crafting social media personas around their struggles. While some genuinely use their platforms to destigmatize mental health discussions, others engage in what can be termed “trauma marketing,” where their pain becomes a central part of their online brand.

Users interacting with melancholic posts are more likely to receive similar content on their feeds, reinforcing the idea that sadness is not just an emotion but a consumable aesthetic. As scholar Zeynep Tufekci points out in *Twitter and Tear Gas*, social media platforms do not simply reflect human behaviour, they shape it by privileging certain types of content over others. On Instagram, this means that posts about suffering often receives more likes and comments, subtly encouraging users to share more of their pain.

Another consequence of social media’s engagement-driven design is the rise of trauma dumping, where users share deeply personal experiences with large audiences, often without context or boundaries. The risk here is that complex emotions are reduced to

digestible, shareable moments. As Byung-Chul Han warns in *The Burnout Society*, the digital age has turned emotions into capital, where even suffering must be optimised for visibility. Young users may begin to see suffering as a necessary part of self-expression, leading to a culture where sadness is not only accepted but idealised. Psychologists warn that this can contribute to increased rates of depression and anxiety. A study by the Royal Society for Public Health found that Instagram was ranked as the most detrimental social media platform for mental well-being, particularly due to its impact on self-esteem and body image.

Self-Diagnosis and the Rise of Pathological Identity

Another concerning trend is the rise of self-diagnosis culture, where young users label themselves with mental health disorders based on Instagram content. Posts romanticising depression, anxiety, or dissociation often circulate without medical context, leading some users to adopt these labels without professional evaluation. The danger here is that rather than seeking proper help, users may begin to embody the very suffering they consume. On Instagram, suffering becomes an identity rather than an experience.

The Not So Hidden Sadness in Hashtags, Filters and Captions

Instagram with its visual culture never fails to give the underlying message behind every picture. The employing of specific colour palettes and filters to evoke emotions. Muted colour tones, images of people crying, use of movie scenes or dialogues, captions that glorify the concept of “It is okay not to be okay”, these are all aestheticized to the point that it aligns with the themes of suffering and make content more relatable while planting the idea that being sad is not something to be recovered from. Hashtags and captions help to increase the visibility of such posts. Some of the most common hashtags that are frequently used to categorise these posts are- #lonely, #sadness, #heartbreak, #sadgirl, #sadhour, #depression,

#cry, #brokenheart, #sadquotespage etc. Poetic captions leave a lasting imprint in the minds of the audience which alongside pictures makes it even more impactful. . As Plath famously wrote in *The Unabridged Journals*, “I desire the things that will destroy me in the end.” Such quotes are frequently repurposed in Instagram captions, often removed from their original contexts to serve as aesthetic markers of despair.

The Fine Line Between Awareness and Glorification

While trying to raise awareness about mental health issues is crucial, one must know the limit, where to draw the line. It must be distinguished as awareness will involve providing accurate information, promoting understanding, and encouraging supportive actions. Glorification on the other hand occurs when suffering is depicted as glamorous, desirable or a defining characteristic of depth and creativity. Neurologist Suzanne O’Sullivan explores the pressing need to strike a balance between these two contrasting yet similar concepts to ensure that content serves to inform and support rather than to mislead or harm.

CHAPTER 3: DATA ANALYSIS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter presents an analysis of the survey conducted on the romanticization of suffering on Instagram among teenagers and young adults. The study used Google Forms to collect responses from 101 participants, offering insights into how aestheticized suffering affects mental health perceptions and online behaviour. The findings are analysed using Uses and Gratifications Theory and Spectacle Theory to understand why people engage with this type of content and how it influences their self-identity.

Demographics of Respondents

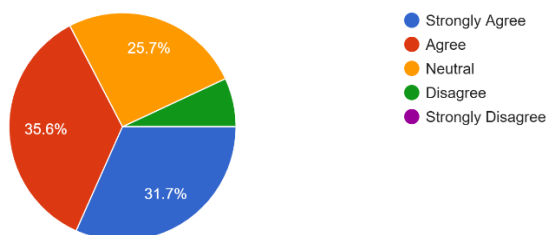
The majority of participants were between 18-21 years old (42.57%), followed by 13-17 years (28.71%), 22-25 years (20.79%), and 26+ years (7.92%).

Perceptions of Romanticized Suffering

When asked whether Instagram romanticizes suffering, the majority agreed:

Do you think social media romanticises suffering (e.g., makes sadness, loneliness, or mental illness look aesthetic or appealing)?

101 responses

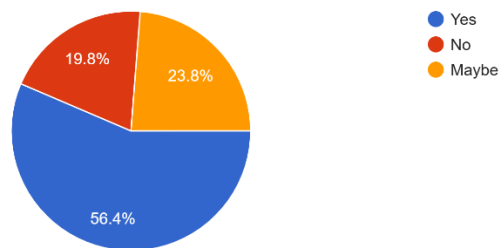


These findings align with Spectacle Theory, which suggests that suffering has become a public performance rather than a personal experience.

Self-Diagnosis and Mental Health Content

Have you ever related to mental health related content on Instagram and wondered if you might have that condition (e.g., depression, anxiety, ADHD)?

101 responses



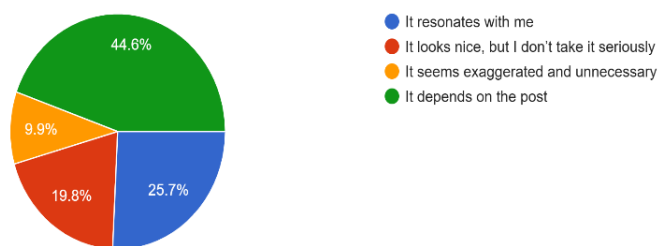
Over 56.43% of participants admitted that Instagram posts made them question whether they had a mental health disorder. Another 23.76% said "Maybe", indicating that social media influences how young people perceive mental illness.

Emotional Response to Sad Content

Participants reacted differently to posts about aestheticized suffering:

How do you feel when you see posts that celebrates suffering (e.g., depressing quotes, sad movie scenes) ?

101 responses



These mixed responses highlight that while some users find comfort in this content, others see it as performative or unnecessary.

Reasons for Engaging with Sad Content

The primary reasons users interact with melancholic content include:

Why do you think people engage with sad content on Instagram?

101 responses



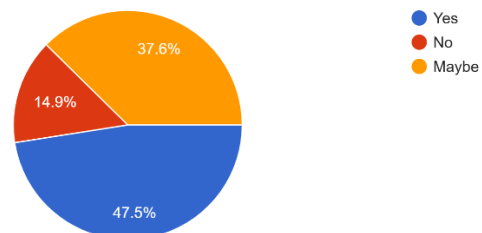
A small portion noted that sadness is now perceived as “cool,” suggesting that suffering has become a social trend.

Impact on Mental Health

When asked if engaging with aestheticized suffering worsens mental health:

Do you think engaging with sad or aestheticised suffering content can worsen a person's mental health?

101 responses

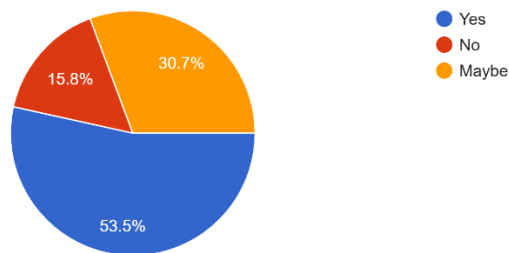


This shows that aestheticized sadness can reinforce negative emotions, validating distress instead of encouraging healing.

Suffering as a Personality Trait

Do you think social media can make people feel like suffering is a personality trait rather than a temporary experience?

101 responses

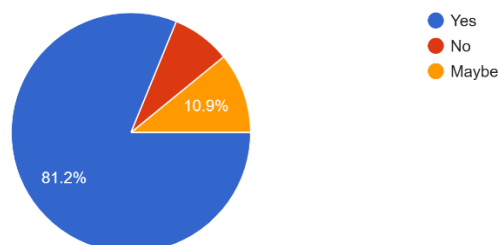


Over 53.46% of respondents believed Instagram promotes suffering as part of self-identity, rather than a temporary emotion. This reflects how users may internalize sadness due to constant exposure.

Awareness vs. Aestheticization

Do you believe there's a difference between raising awareness about mental health and aestheticising it?

101 responses



A significant 81.18% agreed that there is a difference between raising mental health awareness and making suffering look aesthetic. However, blurred boundaries between the two remain an issue.

Theoretical Analysis

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

This theory explains why people actively seek out content that reflects their emotions or provides validation. The survey results show that users engage with sad content because they relate to it (28.71%), express emotions (27.72%), or feel understood (23.76%). However, 47.52% acknowledged that prolonged engagement with such content could negatively affect mental health.

Spectacle Theory

Debord's Spectacle Theory suggests that modern media turns suffering into a visual performance. The survey supports this idea, as 67.32% of respondents believed Instagram romanticizes sadness. Also, 53.46% said that social media makes suffering seem like a personality trait. This reflects how online culture glorifies sadness rather than encouraging recovery.

Conclusion

The data shows that Instagram plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of sadness and mental health. While some users find comfort in aestheticized suffering, many recognize its negative impact. The findings suggest that social media has blurred the lines between authentic emotional expression and the performance of pain for validation. Addressing this issue requires better media literacy, responsible content creation, and critical engagement with social media narratives.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study explored how Instagram contributes to the romanticization of suffering, shaping young users' perceptions of mental health. Using Uses and Gratifications Theory, the research found that many users engage with aestheticized sadness for emotional validation and self-expression. However, Spectacle Theory highlights how social media turns suffering into a performance, often detaching it from real mental health struggles.

While some respondents find comfort in engaging with such content, others recognize its harmful effects, including self-diagnosis and the normalization of sadness. The blurred line between raising awareness and aestheticizing distress makes it crucial to promote healthier online discussions about mental health.

Implications for Individuals, Society, and Social Media

- For Individuals: Young users may begin to internalize sadness as part of their identity, making it harder to seek help or recover.
- For Society: The glorification of suffering can reduce urgency for real mental health interventions, as distress is often portrayed as poetic rather than a condition needing support.
- For Social Media Platforms: Instagram's algorithms may prioritize engaging but harmful content, reinforcing cycles of distress rather than encouraging solutions.

Suggested Solutions

To address these concerns, several steps can be taken:

- Media Literacy: Users must learn to differentiate between authentic mental health advocacy and performative suffering.
- Balanced Narratives: Influencers should emphasize both struggles and recovery, promoting healthier perspectives on mental health.

- Reducing Negative Reinforcement: Platforms must limit the visibility of self-destructive content to prevent users from being trapped in an echo chamber of sadness.

Further Areas of Research

Future studies could explore:

- The long-term effects of exposure to aestheticized suffering on mental health.
- A comparative analysis of romanticized suffering across different social media platforms like Twitter, Tumblr, TikTok, etc.
- Neuroscientific studies on how digital aesthetics influence emotional processing.

Final Thoughts

The romanticization of suffering on Instagram is a growing concern, as it blurs the line between self-expression and unhealthy glorification of sadness. While social media creates a space for people to connect, it can also commodify pain in ways that may be harmful. This study highlights the need for responsible content creation, ethical platform regulation, and improved digital literacy to ensure that mental health struggles are addressed with empathy and awareness rather than spectacle.

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Charlie Chaplin's The Kid (1921) – Directed by Charlie Chaplin. First National Pictures.

Joker (2019) – Directed by Todd Phillips. Warner Bros.

La La Land (2016) – Directed by Damien Chazelle. Lionsgate.

Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham (2001) – Directed by Karan Johar. Dharma Productions.

Devdas (2002) – Directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. Eros International.

Rockstar (2011) – Directed by Imtiaz Ali. Eros International.

Kireedam (1989) – Directed by Sibi Malayil. Ashirvad Cinemas.

Chithram (1988) – Directed by Priyadarshan. P. V. Gangadharan.

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Instagram Hashtag Trends: #sadgirl, #lonely, #sadness, #brokenheart etc(collected via Instagram trends analysis).

Survey Data: Conducted via Google Forms, with 101 participants aged 13–26+

APPENDIX

Survey Questionnaire

Below is the list of questions used in the survey to analyse the romanticization of suffering on Instagram among teenagers and young adults:

1. What is your age?
 - 13-17 years
 - 18-21 years
 - 22-25 years
 - 26+ years
2. How often do you use Instagram?
 - Constantly
 - Every few hours
 - Once or twice a day
 - Rarely or never
3. Do you think social media romanticizes suffering (e.g., makes sadness, loneliness, or mental illness look aesthetic or appealing)?
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree

- Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
4. Have you ever related to mental health-related content on Instagram and wondered if you might have that condition (e.g., depression, anxiety, ADHD)?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
5. How do you feel when you see posts that celebrate suffering (e.g., depressing quotes, sad movie scenes)?
- It resonates with me
 - It depends on the post
 - It looks nice, but I don't take it seriously
 - It seems exaggerated and unnecessary
6. Why do you think people engage with sad content on Instagram?
- They want to express their feelings indirectly
 - They relate to it personally
 - It helps them feel understood
 - They want to gain attention or validation
 - Other (please specify)

7. Do you think engaging with sad or aestheticized suffering content can worsen a person's mental health?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Maybe
8. Have you ever felt comforted or validated by seeing posts about sadness or suffering?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Maybe
9. Do you think social media can make people feel like suffering is a personality trait rather than a temporary experience?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Maybe
10. Do you believe there's a difference between raising awareness about mental health and aestheticizing it?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Maybe
11. How do you think mental health struggles should be represented on social media?
- (Optional open-ended response)

