

Commentary on: Shapiro S, Rotter M. Graphic depictions: portrayals of mental illness in video games. *J Forensic Sci* 2016;61(6):1592–5.

Sir,

This commentary is in response to the study of Shapiro and Rotter (2016): “Graphic Depictions: Portrayals of Mental Illness in Video Games.” (1) The article elicits a particularly painful reminder about the misrepresentation of mental illness in various sociocultural establishments, such as writings, popular media, and tools of entertainment such as video games. My group’s research is closely related to the context of the authors’ analysis of the portrayal of mental illness in the age of technology.

Recently, we conducted a study of the people who video-blogged about experiencing suicidal ideations. The goal was to understand how these individuals represent their mental illness, and how the audience responds to this imagery. Similar to methods described in the article of Shapiro and Rotter, a student of mine and I selectively searched the Web, identifying over 100 video blogs featuring suicidal struggle. All bloggers ($n = 103$) were invited to participate in the study. Of those, 24 individuals agreed to take part in semistructured interviews, conducted in English through a secure video chat.

After transcribing verbatim all interviews, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of each blog profile, noting trends of perceiving psychiatric struggle on the Internet. We made a few general observations. First, people with suicidal thoughts post online about their mental illness to attract attention and receive spiritual support. Second, over 72% of audience comments of each blog post encouraged act of suicide. Third, about 21% showed some remorse through their comments—mixed neutral and positive responses. Fourth, only 6% of comments were supportive and clearly discouraged suicide.

In the text analysis of the history of site activity, not a single person triggered an emergency note to police to alarm about events of suicidal plans occurring online. In fact, more than two-thirds of the commenters RSVP’d to watch live-streamed suicidal attempt of each of our participants. These data paint a disturbing picture of callous Internet users who follow suicidal bloggers for entertainment. These observations show disregard for mental illness in online space and that people who search for support online are more likely to be encouraged into self-destructive behaviors.

Skewed Imagery of Mental Illness

There are multiple explanations for why, despite increased exposure to the imagery of the mentally ill—either in television or video and computer games—the society continues to misunderstand psychiatric diseases. For one, normalization of mental illness has been frequent in the media (2). On the television, it is not uncommon to hear generalizing headlines; for example, “mental illness affects 15–20% of the population.” Examples of such reporting are readily identifiable through a quick Web search for sample media coverage on the prevalence of mental conditions in the United States or elsewhere. Another reason for why the society is comfortable with accepting misapprehension of psychiatric diseases is due to popularization in entertainment products (e.g., social media, games) (3).

Mocking the mental illness is prevalent on popular sharing platforms of digital content, particularly among youth. People

frequently share images (especially memes, which combine the image with catchy text line) without having forethought about the consequences of popularizing social ostracism of psychiatric conditions (4). In pop culture, we frequently say “Are you crazy” to acknowledge that someone’s idea(s) is questionable. What we do not realize is that these expressions perpetuate negative psychiatric labeling. In a computer or video games, the mentally ill are frequently cast as figures responsible for demoralizing acts, like theft or murder; thanks to a few clicks, we can eliminate them and feel better for saving the virtual world. Similar behaviors occur on the Internet—cyber bullying is an example of that (5).

Mental illness is undoubtedly an attractive platform for transforming various digital contents into entertainment blockbusters. In all Batman films, if Joker had not have twisted personality, would we still watch the movie with such high anticipation for his capture? What about Forest Gump’s challenged character? Peers certainly labeled him as a “weirdo.” In game series *Dead Rising*, the inclination of the protagonist, Frank West, toward chasing and documenting city psychopaths strangely makes us feel good about helping him with that task. All of these movies and games present misleading labeling of psychiatric conditions. These assumptions percolate through the fabric of modern societies and skew perception of psychiatric patients.

Psychiatric Struggle Online

Our analysis shows that many commenters encouraged suicidal act and advocated for live streaming of the ordeal. We have no evidence that commenters had the realization of the magnitude of negativity that their responses had on our participants—something that we determined through interviews. The tone of most messages appears to have been intentionally vicious. Future research should examine whether there is the relationship between people who frequently post negative comments on blogs of mentally struggling people, and their propensity for consuming violent content, such as videos, games, and movies. Perhaps the audience misunderstands the struggle of real people posting on the Web because they think that what they see on the Internet is a video game. Technology desensitizes modern people to the extent that we prefer to text-message about our feelings instead of talking about them. These phenomena should be explored further, for they have implication for everyone’s mental well-being.

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