

Mental Health on YouTube: How do female influencers on YouTube portray and discuss mental health issues?

A case study of Anna Akana's YouTube videos

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the portrayal and discussion of mental health issues by female influencers on YouTube, focusing on the case study of Anna Akana. The research highlights the importance of effective mental health communication in the digital age, especially given the increased mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main research question examines how Anna Akana, a well-known YouTube influencer, addresses mental health topics in her video content. The study does a qualitative thematic analysis of 30 videos between 2018 and 2024. The analysis identifies four main themes: daily self-care and inner growth; mental health strategies and interventions; mental health misconceptions and social stigma; and personal journeys to healing and empowerment. These themes show how Anna Akana educates her audience about practical self-care methods, challenges common misconceptions about mental health, and shares her own experiences to promote emotional resilience and self-acceptance. Although her content does not specifically focus on gender-related mental health issues, her identity as a female influencer naturally supports a gender-sensitive approach to mental health communication. The study concludes that female influencers like Anna Akana play a significant role in shaping public discourse on mental health. By combining educational content with personal storytelling, they make mental health information more accessible and relatable. This research highlights the potential of social media as a powerful tool for public health communication and calls for further studies on the impact of digital influencers on mental health advocacy.

KEYWORDS: *Mental Health, YouTube, Female Influencers, Anna Akana, Digital Mental Health Communication*

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1. Introduction

In his TED talk titled “Why we all need to practice emotional first aid,” psychologist Guy Winch said, “We all know how to maintain our physical health and practice dental hygiene since we were five years old. But what do we know about maintaining our psychological health? Nothing.” This video on YouTube, which has gained 4.9 million views, not only highlights the lack of awareness surrounding mental health among individuals but also serves as an excellent example of how social media has become a crucial platform for disseminating mental health knowledge.

And we cannot overlook the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic, as a major virus outbreak in the 21st century, has led to unparalleled risks to global mental health, thereby requiring considerable attention to the mental well-being of the general public (Xiong et al., 2020, p. 61). In contrast to the prevalence of mental health issues among individuals, there is a lack of awareness and understanding of mental health (Kelly et al., 2007, p. 26), along with limited access to seek help from professionals (Henderson et al., 2013, p. 777).

Mental health, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.” It is emphasized that mental health is more than the absence of mental illness and serves as a foundation for well-being and effective functioning for both individuals and communities (World Health Organization, 2004, p. 13). Galderisi et al. (2015, pp. 231-232) expand on this definition by stating that positive emotions and functioning should not be identified as key factors for mental health, as people in good mental health can experience negative emotions like sadness, anger, or being unhappy. They propose a more inclusive and comprehensive definition of mental health as a dynamic state of internal balance that allows individuals to use their abilities in accordance with societal norms and values, including “basic cognitive and social skills; ability to recognize, express and modulate one’s own emotions, as well as empathize with others; flexibility and ability to cope with adverse life events and function in social roles; and harmonious relationship between body and mind” (Galderisi et al., 2015, p. 232).

The importance of mental health cannot be overemphasized enough. Both the World Health Organization (2004, p. 12) and Prince et al. (2007, pp. 859-862) highlight that there can be no health without mental health, and mental health plays a crucial role in overall

public health and well-being. Prince et al. (2007, p. 862) argue that the connection between mental illness and other physical health has been underestimated, and mental disorders can increase the risk of physical diseases and affect the outcomes of various diseases. The study conducted by Ferguson et al. (2015, p. 2434) proved that there is a strong association between mental health problems and life satisfaction, highlighting the significance of addressing mental health issues to enhance individuals' overall life satisfaction. Herrman (2001, p. 710) also discusses the wide range of negative outcomes in the family, social, and vocational realms associated with severe mental illnesses, including family disruption, substance abuse, unemployment, poverty, social isolation, and homelessness, among others. These outcomes not only have a huge impact on individuals and families but also create significant economic costs for communities and countries.

With the rise of social media, particularly YouTube, mental health information can be obtained in a free and accessible way by the general public. This traditionally taboo topic, usually confined to therapy sessions, now has the opportunity to be discussed in a more informal and open manner on social media platforms. An increasing number of people are turning to YouTube videos and influencers talking about mental health for support and advice. Considering the critical role YouTube influencers can play in mental health information sharing, it is vital to study the representation of mental health in influencers' video content. With the acknowledgement of the potential gender differences in how individuals perceive, experience, and express mental health concerns and the unique challenges and stigmas related to mental health that women may face, this study focuses specifically on female influencers and explores the role of gender in mental health representation on YouTube.

1.1 Research Problem

Hence, this leads to the following main research question:

RQ: How do female influencers on YouTube portray and discuss mental health issues in their videos?

This study uses Anna Akana as a case study to explore her content and narrative strategies and its potential to improve mental health communication and education. Anna Akana is a popular female influencer on YouTube in the field of mental health communication, who is known for her candid discussions on mental health in an engaging

and humorous way. By integrating the theories of self-presentation, mental health advocacy, and digital mental health interventions into the study, this research is trying to explore in what ways YouTube female influencers can foster a more informed and empathetic public conversation on mental health, as well as how her identity as a female shapes the approach to discussing mental health.

Five sub-questions are raised to further examine in what ways Anna's content can not only challenge mental health stigma and gender norms but also how personal experiences and influence can be leveraged to enhance mental health awareness and education, thus bridging the gap in mental health communication and improving mental health literacy and awareness:

Sub-RQ 1: In what ways does Anna Akana contribute to improving mental health literacy and awareness through her YouTube videos?

Sub-RQ 2: To what extent does Anna Akana tackle the stigma associated with mental health in her videos, and what strategies does she use to encourage viewers to seek help and support for mental health issues?

Sub-RQ 3: What role does gender play in the way Anna Akana discusses mental health, and how does she address gender-specific issues related to mental health in her content?

Sub-RQ 4: How does Anna Akana portray mental health issues in her videos, and what themes emerge from her discussions on mental health?

Sub-RQ 5: How does Anna Akana balance authenticity and self-presentation in her discussions about mental health?

1.2 Academic and Social Relevance

Previous research has placed significant emphasis on how the media represents mental illness. The media can create mental health stigma and discrimination through the repeated use of negative and inaccurate images of the mentally ill and mental health treatments (Stuart, 2006, p. 102). Wahl (1995, p. 139) further explores how the media shapes and presents public images and stereotypes of mental illness. With the general public's limited knowledge about mental disorders and the pressing need to enhance health literacy (Jorm, 2000, p. 396), researchers have delved into exploring the uses, benefits, and limitations of social media in health communication. Key overarching benefits were identified by Moorhead et al. (2013, p. 8), such as widening access to health

information and the potential to influence health policy. And with the emergence of mental health influencers on social media who focus on offering mental health advice, the potential and risks of online peer-to-peer support among people with serious mental illness have been explored by Naslund et al. (2016, p. 115).

Besides, Afifi (2007, p. 385) and Rosenfield & Mouzon (2013, p. 284) look at mental health from a gender perspective. They argue that the mental disorder risk factors themselves are gender-specific (Afifi, 2007, p. 385), including the stressors men and women are exposed to, the coping strategies they use, the social relationships they engage in, and the personal resources and vulnerabilities they develop (Rosenfield & Mouzon, 2013, p. 284). However, with the existing studies on gender differences in mental health, there is still a knowledge gap on how influencers on YouTube communicate mental health issues in their channels under female subjectivity, focusing on the unique experiences and perspectives of women as individuals (Roberti, 2022, p. 5).

1.3 Thesis Outline

The second chapter, Theoretical Framework, discusses key concepts and previous research findings related to mental health to build the foundation for the study. It explores the dynamic definition of mental health, the importance of improving mental health awareness and literacy, stigma reduction, and YouTube's role in mental health communication and influencer impact

The third chapter, Method, explains the research design used in this study and the rationale behind it. It outlines the chosen qualitative thematic analysis, supported by visual analysis, to examine the content of Anna Akana's YouTube videos. This chapter also describes the sampling strategy, the data collection procedure, the operationalization of key concepts, and the data analysis process, ensuring the validity and reliability of the study.

The fourth chapter, Results, presents the findings from the thematic analysis of Anna Akana's sample videos. It identifies and discusses four main themes: daily self-care and inner growth; mental health strategies and interventions; mental health misconceptions and social stigma; and Anna's personal journeys to healing and empowerment.

The fifth chapter, Conclusion, addresses the research questions based on the research findings and discusses the implications of the study. It highlights how Anna Akana's portrayal and discussion of mental health contribute to improving mental health literacy,

reducing stigma, and empowering her audience. This chapter also discusses the limitations of the study and provides recommendations for future research.

By following this structured outline, the thesis aims to provide a thorough analysis of female influencer Anna Akana's mental health communication on YouTube, contributing to both academic research and practical applications in the field of mental health awareness and education.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework starts with the introduction and previous academic findings regarding a few important concepts related to mental health, including the current state of mental health awareness, the stigma around mental health and illness and gender differences, which offer a solid foundation to understand mental health issues. With the encoding and decoding model and representation theory, the role of YouTube as a mental health communication platform and content created by influencers as digital mental health interventions have been discussed. This chapter aims to explore the theoretical concepts of how female influencers can contribute to mental health communication and challenge societal norms.

2.1 Understanding Mental Health Issues

2.1.1 Mental Health Awareness and Literacy

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of mental health, a significant gap still exists between the attention given to physical health and that given to mental well-being. Psychologist Guy Winch, in his TED talk titled “Why we all need to practice emotional first aid,” highlighted the big contrast in how much more we value the body compared to the mind. Winch (2014, p. 9) further emphasizes in his book that, just as physical wounds require care, emotional wounds also require attention for overall well-being. The question he raised about the knowledge of maintaining psychological health serves as a reminder of the limited awareness regarding mental health.

Jorm (2000, p. 396) emphasizes the importance of mental health literacy, which refers to the general population’s knowledge and beliefs of mental disorders that aid their recognition, management, or prevention. It has been revealed that the public’s knowledge and recognition of mental disorders are generally low, and mental health literacy needs to be improved, including their ability to recognize specific disorders, understand causes and risk factors, know how to seek mental health information, and possess attitudes that facilitate appropriate help-seeking (Jorm 2000, p. 396). In a study by Kelly et al. (2007, p. 26), participants had difficulties recognizing mental disorders in others, and a lack of awareness and understanding of mental health issues often leads to delays in seeking help.

The inequitable provision of health services, as emphasized by Prince et al. (2007, p. 859), worsens the situation, highlighting the urgent need to improve the quality of care for

both mental and physical health conditions. According to Henderson et al. (2013, p. 777), more than 70% of people with mental illness globally do not receive treatment from healthcare staff due to a lack of knowledge for identifying features of mental illnesses, ignorance about how to access treatment, and prejudice against people with mental illness, among other reasons. However, Jorm (2012, p. 238) also points out that evidence suggests a variety of interventions, such as community campaigns, educational initiatives, mental health first aid training, and informational websites, can significantly improve mental health literacy.

The study aims to explore how Anna's discussion of mental health issues in her YouTube videos can potentially educate the public, promote early help-seeking, and challenge existing stigmas surrounding mental health. Thus, this leads to the first sub-question of the study:

Sub-RQ 1: In what ways does Anna Akana contribute to improving mental health literacy and awareness through her YouTube videos?

2.1.2 Overcoming Stigma in Mental Health

Stigma is another important concept that cannot be ignored when talking about mental health. Byrne (2000, p. 65) defines stigma as a sign of disgrace or discredit that sets a person apart from others, including shame, secrecy, social exclusion, stereotypes, discrimination, etc. Corrigan et al. (2014, pp. 42-45) discuss the complex construct of stigma to understand its impact on care seeking and identify three types of stigma: public stigma, when the general public chooses to discriminate against those who have been diagnosed as mentally ill and supports stereotypes; self-stigma, where a person with mental illness internalizes negative perceptions; and structural stigma, which is embodied in institutional and societal practices and policies that limit the opportunities available to individuals with mental illness. All of these have an immediate impact on those who suffer from mental illness, as well as their network of providers, support system, and local resources (Corrigan et al., 2014, p. 42). Clement et al. (2015, p. 11) support this view and identify stigma as a key factor in avoiding or delaying seeking professional help for mental health problems. Corrigan (2004, p. 614) further emphasizes how stigma can damage self-esteem and limit social opportunities, directly impacting care-seeking behaviors.

Fortunately, interventions aimed at reducing stigma through education, social contact,

and advocacy have been proven effective. Byrne (2000, pp. 66-69) specifically highlights that the media, while often offering the public narrowly focused stories based around stereotypes, can also serve as a platform to challenge and change these stereotypes. Byrne (2000, p. 68) also emphasizes the need for educational intervention at all levels to make efforts to close the knowledge gap in mental health. Corrigan et al. (2014, p. 37) support the view that the impact of stigma can be moderated by knowledge of mental illness and cultural relevance. The authors further explain that understanding stigma is key to reducing its negative impact on care seeking and treatment with the help of mental health literacy, cultural competence, and family engagement. Thornicroft et al. (2016, p. 1125) also state that both education and social contact are effective in reducing stigmatizing attitudes and intended behavior, and social contact has been shown to be the most effective form of intervention for improving knowledge and attitudes related to stigma in the short term.

This study aims to explore how the ways in which female influencers on YouTube discuss mental health can act as interventions to reduce stigma, create a more supportive and empathetic dialogue on mental health with the audiences, and encourage individuals to seek help without fear of stigma. Thus, this leads to the second sub-question:

Sub-RQ 2: To what extent does Anna Akana tackle the stigma associated with mental health in her videos, and what strategies does she use to encourage viewers to seek help and support for mental health issues?

2.1.3 Gender Differences in Mental Health

According to Afifi (2007, pp. 385-386), effective strategies for mental disorder prevention must consider gender differences due to gender-specific risks and health-seeking behaviors. It is noteworthy to mention that women's status and life opportunities remain low worldwide, which is a huge mental health risk (Afifi, 2007, p. 389). Thus, the importance of media and education and training of media personnel to increase community awareness and promote women's mental health and autonomy is emphasized (Afifi, 2007, p. 389). Mackenzie et al. (2006, p. 575) find that women are more likely to seek help from mental health professionals due to their more positive attitudes towards psychological openness. Rosenfield & Mouzon (2013, p. 284) further explore gender differences in coping mechanisms and help-seeking behaviors and find that women use particular coping strategies, like seeking emotional support, rumination, and positive self-

talk, to handle a variety of stressors.

Wendt & Shafer (2016, p. 21) shift their focus to men's attitudes toward seeking mental health help, highlighting that men are generally less likely than women to seek professional help for mental health issues, which is common across age, race, ethnicity, and nationality. Gender stereotypes, like independence, emotional silence, self-reliance, and the rejection of personal weakness associated with men and perceived stigma, also significantly discourage men from seeking help for mental health issues (Wendt & Shafer, 2016, p. 21). Liddon et al. (2018, p. 56) identify personal and systematic barriers to seeking help among men, including societal expectations, preferences for therapy types, and a lack of male-friendly mental health services. Tailoring mental health advocacy, interventions, and service delivery to consider gender-specific attitudes and preferences could enhance the effectiveness of mental health services and encourage more men to seek the help they need (Liddon et al., 2018, p. 56).

With the awareness of gender differences in attitudes towards mental health, help-seeking behaviors, and the representation of mental health issues, it will be helpful to understand how Anna might address or challenge gender norms in their content, for example, by highlighting the barriers women face in accessing mental health care, advocating for gender-sensitive mental health practices, or expressing a more proactive attitude towards seeking mental health care as female. And here is the third sub-question:

Sub-RQ 3: What role does gender play in the way Anna Akana discusses mental health, and how does she address gender-specific issues related to mental health and female subjectivity in her content?

2.2 YouTube as a Platform for Mental Health Communication

2.2.1 Digital Mental Health Interventions

With the acknowledgement that mental health care is under greater pressure and people with mental health problems around the world have limited access to psychological help, Bucci et al. (2019, p. 278) highlight the opportunity created by the digital revolution for mental health care. Technological innovations and digitally mediated communication, such as mobile apps, social media platforms, network information, and online therapy, are transforming health care delivery, which is often referred to as digital mental health interventions (Bucci et al., 2019, p. 279). Digital platforms allow people to self-monitor and

self-manage their mental health problems by gathering information on the internet, discussing their experiences, and building connections with other individuals during social networking (Bucci et al., 2019, p. 281). Lattie et al. (2019, p. 9) find that digital mental health interventions can be effective for improving depression, anxiety, and psychological well-being among college students who often encounter barriers to seeking traditional mental health treatments. 80% of interventions were provided on a website, with internet-based cognitive behavioral therapy (31%) being the most widely used intervention (Lattie et al., 2019, p. 4).

Both Borghouts et al. (2021, pp. 1-29) and Liverpool et al. (2020, pp. 1-17) further explore the barriers to and facilitators of digital mental health interventions. Common barriers are identified as a lack of personalization, technical issues, and serious mental health conditions that hinder engagement, while common facilitators include a feeling of control over one's own health, increased knowledge of mental health, and social connection strengthened by the intervention (Borghouts et al., 2021, p. 9; Liverpool et al., 2020, p. 8). Fu et al. (2020, p. 862) also find that digital psychological interventions for mental health problems are helpful to close the mental health care gap in low-income countries.

2.2.2 YouTube and Mental Health Communication

In the realm of online content, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for health communication as it offers a medium for the public, patients, and health professionals to communicate about health issues with the possibility of potentially improving health outcomes (Moorhead et al., 2013, p. 8). Latha et al. (2020, p. 3) spot an increasing trend in awareness of mental health with the effective use of social media as a platform for sharing information. The authors further explain that using social media to conduct mental health campaigns can be a good initiative to reach out to a large number of people in a short time frame (Latha et al., 2020, p. 4).

Of all the platforms, Lam et al. (2017, p. 821) put their focus on the role of YouTube in disseminating psychoeducation. By sharing accurate information, fostering open conversations, and connecting individuals with resources, YouTube can significantly contribute to promoting responsible and effective mental health education. It can also serve as a peer-to-peer support space for people with mental illness to share personal

stories, challenge stigma, and inspire others to seek help (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 115), which makes it possible to create a sense of belonging and reduces the isolation often experienced by individuals with mental health challenges. Despite the benefits of using social media for health communication, Moorhead et al. (2013, p. 8) also argue that the information exchanged needs to be monitored for quality and reliability.

So it's understandable why people are turning to YouTube for help, which can be defined by Tan & Goonawardene (2017, p. 1094) as health information-seeking behavior. The authors also argue that patients have better access to health information through the Internet and expect to be more engaged in health decision-making (Tan & Goonawardene, 2017, p. 11). And according to the survey conducted by Basch et al. (2018, p. 1097), younger individuals are more likely to visit the Internet for health information than consult a health or medical professional. Cline and Haynes (2001, p. 671), however, raise quality concerns given that 50 million people seek health information online, alongside widespread access to health information offered by the Internet. Limited information-evaluation skills add to consumers' vulnerability, and establishing quality standards and widespread criteria for evaluating health information is emphasized (Cline and Haynes, 2001, pp. 681-682).

2.2.3 Encoding and Decoding Model and Representation Theory

In his study titled "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," Stuart Hall (1973) introduces the encoding and decoding model of communication, which aims to offer a theoretical approach to how media messages are produced, disseminated, and interpreted. According to the model, producers are the encoders of media messages, and the encoding process involves not only content creation but also how the message is framed and the intended meaning that the producer wants to convey to the audience. And the audience acts as a decoder to interpret the ideas or ideologies embedded in the media text, whose role in decoding media messages is particularly emphasized because individuals bring their own cultural backgrounds and social context around them to the interpretation of a message and are capable of reconstructing the original ideas (Stuart Hall, 1973, p. 4). The encoding and decoding model plays an important role in understanding how mental health representations are constructed by influencers on YouTube and shape our perceptions. And this study focuses on the encoding process of media messages as it aims to investigate how mental health is represented through the created content of

female influences instead of how these discussions affect the perceptions and opinions of viewers towards mental health.

Hall (1997, p. 17) defines representation as “the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language.” It is the process of using language, symbols, images, and practices to convey meaning within a culture. Hall (1997, p. 19) further explores the foundational role of language and symbol systems in understanding and constructing meaning because they actively participate in the generation and communication of meanings rather than being merely tools for conveying existing meanings. The core of representation theory lies in the constructed nature of cultural representations, arguing that meanings are not inherent in cultural objects or practices but are produced and communicated through the complex interplay of language, symbols, and social contexts (Hall, 1997, p. 21). Chandler (2007, p. 70) further states that “any representation is more than merely of reproduction of that which it represents; it also contributes to the construction of reality.” As outlined by Grossberg (2005, p. 220), media representation can act as a power tool in shaping people’s social identities of who they are and who others are through stereotypes and cultural constructions.

2.2.4 Media Representations of Mental Health

Srivastava et al. (2018, p. 4) highlight the media’s power, due to its tremendous reach and constant exposure, to shape public attitudes towards mental health, for better or worse. As outlined in the study, responsible and balanced media reports help the community better understand the experience of mental illness, while frequently negative portrayals of mental health issues in general reinforce mistaken beliefs and myths about mental illness (Srivastava et al., 2018, p. 4). Sieff (2003, p. 267) explores how frequently negative frames used by the media can shape the public’s stereotypes about those affected by mental illness and suggests that changing the narrative frames used in the media could help improve public perceptions and reduce stigma. And inaccurate portrayals of personal recovery stories also promote skeptical views of psychiatric treatment (Stuart, 2006, p. 102). Moreover, in the study of Murphy (2015, p. 173), negative representation of the mentally ill and mental health care not only affects the general public but also influences practitioners’ thoughts and actions, for example, the trustworthiness and perception of individuals with mental illness.

Given that various studies have focused on “the illness side” of mental health by examining the negative representation of mental illness in the media, Atanasova et al. (2019, p. 2) explore how media narratives are shifting “from illness to wellbeing,” like people’s recovery stories, and highlight the importance of positive media portrayals in improving public understanding of mental health and reducing stigma. Lind & Wickström (2023, pp. 1-3) aim to study the representations of mental health and mental health problems in content published by female social media influencers on YouTube. It was found that the content is more about personal experiences of mental health problems that are perceived as manageable than ongoing mental illness or distress (Lind & Wickström, 2023, pp. 13-14). And these influencers are being open about vulnerability related to mental health problems, promoting self-acceptance and self-love that resonate with positive psychology (Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 13). With the same focus on female influencers, this study aims to explore how Anna Akana, one of the most influential female YouTubers who consistently advocates mental health, leverages her content as a digital mental health intervention to educate the public about mental health issues. Thus, this leads to the fourth sub-question of this study:

Sub-RQ 4: How does Anna Akana portray mental health issues in her videos, and what themes emerge from her discussions on mental health?

2.3 Female Influencers and Mental Health Communication

2.3.1 Influencers and Their Impact on Viewer Perceptions

Lokithasan et al. (2019, p. 24) describe social media influencers as people who have the ability to influence the audience that follows them through their social media platforms and have established a reputation for themselves on social media. Various studies have shown social media influencers’ impact on viewers’ perceptions and behaviors. Lokithasan et al. (2019, pp. 25-27) highlight influencers’ role as a marketing tool for organizations and their ability to influence audiences’ purchase decisions due to their power, information, and relationship with their audience. Croes & Bartels (2021, p. 7) further explore in their study why young people buy the products endorsed by social influencers on social media platforms and prove social identification plays an important role in buying behavior, meaning the more young adults identify with the influencer, the more likely and frequent they will click and buy the product. The study also identified six key factors that motivate

young adults to follow their selected influencers, namely “information sharing, cool and new trends, relaxing entertainment, companionship, boredom/habitual pass time, and information seeking.” (Croes & Bartels, 2021, p. 7).

According to Jegham & Bouzaabia (2022, p. 1003), fashion influencers, also known as opinion leaders, influence female millennial followers to follow fashion recommendations and buy fashion products because these followers have built a sense of perceived credibility and psychological closeness to the influencer through the originality of the content (Jegham & Bouzaabia, 2022, p. 1004). Pop et al. (2022, p. 837) explore the impact of social media influencers on travel decisions by increasing and stimulating the desire to travel when consumers search for information about their next journey. And except for influencers as a marketing tool, their trustworthiness serves as a highly important factor in successfully influencing tourists’ destination decision-making.

Roberti (2022, p. 1) put their focus on female influencers and the representation of female subjectivity on social media, especially how they build gendered narratives and create bonds with their followers. Influencers sharing personal information is highlighted as a crucial reason for creating a special relationship of trust and intimacy with their female audience since they are perceived as real and honest (Roberti 2022, p. 5). And these female figures contribute to the construction of “a common female imaginary of what it means to be a woman in today’s society.” (Roberti 2022, pp. 5-6).

2.3.2 Self-presentation and Authenticity

Influencers professionally stage their lives for their audience through self-representation on social media. The concept of “self-presentation” was first introduced by Goffman (1959, p. 1-5), who examined how individuals construct and present their identities in social interactions and explained it with theatrical metaphors. According to the self-presentation theory of Goffman, social interactions can be seen as a stage, and individuals are actors who perform different roles to create the impression they desire. This metaphor highlights the performative nature of social life and the active role individuals play in constructing and managing their public image. During the constant engagement of “impression management,” individuals use strategies to control how others perceive them (Goffman, 1959, p. 9), including carefully curating one’s behavior, appearance, and communication to create a desired impression.

While we might naturally think that the disclosure of an influencer's personal experiences with mental health problems could make them appear vulnerable, Lee et al. (2021, p. 1932) argue that it allows fans to see them as an authentic person with relatable emotions and vulnerabilities who feels more close to them, thus forming a sense of authenticity and trustworthiness. And according to the study conducted by Martensen et al. (2018, p. 341), trustworthiness is identified as the most important source characteristic contributing to the persuasiveness of the influencer, compared with the other four characteristics: expertise, likeability, similarity, and familiarity. Influencers build trust with viewers by sharing their own opinions and personal expressions, while viewers will perceive content that lacks a personal aspect as fake (Martensen et al., 2018, p. 341).

During the study of representations of mental health in Anna's videos, whether she shares personal stories and experiences and opens up about her own struggles, thus obtaining a sense of connection and intimacy with her views and establishing a relatable and genuine persona that viewers can trust, will be evaluated. And the final sub-question is:

Sub-RQ 5: How does Anna Akana balance authenticity and self-presentation in her discussions about mental health?

2.3.3 Peer-to-peer Support and Mental Health Advocacy

Peer-to-peer support is defined by Naslund et al. (2016, p. 114) as people with mental illnesses turning to popular social media to share their illness experiences or seek advice from others, thus creating self-forming online communities. The key opportunities are identified as challenging stigma, increasing consumer activation, and accessing online interventions for mental and physical well-being (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 114). Through interacting with peers online and sharing personal stories and strategies for coping with the day-to-day challenges of living with a mental illness, individuals with serious mental illnesses may have the power to challenge stigma (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 116). By learning from peers online, they may gain insight about important health care decisions, which could promote their mental health care seeking behaviors (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 117).

Naslund et al. (2014, p. 1) further define the phenomenon of individuals with mental illness uploading videos to YouTube and posting and responding to comments as a form of naturally occurring peer support. By studying the comments on these videos, individuals are reported to have less sense of isolation and more hope and support through peer exchange

and reciprocity (Naslund et al., 2014, p. 5). Sangeorzan et al. (2019, p. 425) share similar findings that engaging in vlogging about mental illness may benefit and encourage recovery in individuals with mental illness by providing them with peer support, enhancing self-efficacy, and reducing self-stigma. Biagiante et al. (2018, p. 377) point out that peer support is so important for those affected by mental illness because of the harm of social isolation and loneliness to mental health. Social isolation is associated with the occurrence of mental illness, and individuals with psychotic disorders are particularly affected by loneliness (Biagiante et al., 2018, p. 377).

With the digital intervention of YouTube, influencers like Anna Akana, who continuously post videos about mental health, including personal experiences of depression, can be seen as offering peer support and obtaining peer support at the same time. For the purposes of this research, the focus is placed on how representations of mental health in her videos could potentially provide support to the viewers and contribute to mental health advocacy.

2.4 Summary

To summarize, this chapter constructs a theoretical framework that serves as guidelines for exploring how female influencers on YouTube, exemplified by Anna Akana, portray and discuss mental health issues. This study is built on critical insights into mental health awareness and literacy (Winch, 2014, pp. 9-15; Jorm, 2000, pp. 396-400; Kelly et al., 2007, pp. 26-31), the stigma surrounding mental health (Byrne, 2000, pp. 65-69; Corrigan et al., 2014, pp. 42-44; Clement et al., 2015, p. 11), and gender differences in mental health experiences (Afifi, 2007, pp. 385-389; Mackenzie et al., 2006, p. 575; Rosenfield & Mouzon, 2013, p. 284). Through the lens of the encoding and decoding model (Hall, 1973, p. 4) and representation theory (Hall, 1997, pp. 17-21), the study discusses YouTube's role as a platform for mental health communication and how content created by influencers acts as digital mental health interventions.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

In order to address the research question and the sub-questions above, a qualitative methodology was chosen for this study. According to Braun & Clarke (2013, p. 2), qualitative research uses words as data, in contrast to quantitative research, which uses numbers as data and statistical analysis. Qualitative research operates within a paradigm that values the depth, richness, and complexity of data (Braun & Clarke, 2013, pp. 3-4), allowing for understanding and interpreting patterns of meanings and recognizing data as gathered in a context (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 14). The core of qualitative research is to recognize and describe social phenomena in context (Boeije, 2012, p.10).

Specifically, qualitative thematic analysis was chosen as the most appropriate for this research. Clarke & Braun (2017, p. 297) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data. It is not tied to any specific theoretical framework, and this flexibility of the method allows for a wide range of analytic options and can potentially provide a rich and detailed, complex account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). It allows researchers to explore the data freely and deeply to uncover rich and detailed insights, which fits well with the research question of studying complex phenomena like mental health discussion on digital platforms, given the evolving nature of YouTube content and the personal and informal way mental health issues are discussed in female influencers’ videos.

Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 87) introduce a step-by-step guide to doing thematic analysis, starting with data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Thematic analysis is not just about organizing and describing data but also interpreting key features of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). Through this process, this method enables researchers to deeply engage with the data and understand the ways mental health issues are portrayed and discussed by content creators like Anna Akana on YouTube—not just what is being said but how it is being communicated.

Moreover, Braun & Clarke (2013, p. 3) highlight qualitative research’s sensitivity to context and argue we should not consider knowledge outside of the context in which it was generated, including both the context of data generation and the broader sociocultural and political contexts of the research. This is essential for understanding the portrayal of

mental health issues, as these are deeply influenced by societal norms, stigma, and the influencer's personal experiences.

Thus, given its flexibility, depth of understanding of data, and sensitivity to context, qualitative thematic analysis is selected to understand the portrayal and discussion of mental health issues on YouTube. This method aligns closely with the research question by enabling a comprehensive exploration of both the content and context of Anna Akana's discussions on mental health. Visual analysis also acts as a supporting method to thematic analysis in this study to help deeply explore the psychological themes in Anna's videos. This approach aligns with Prosser & Loxley's (2008, p. 10) framework, which uses an in-depth interpretation of visual elements such as character portrayal, costume, setting, and facial expressions to uncover layers of meaning that are conveyed through visual rather than textual elements.

3.2 Sampling

3.2.1 Sampling Strategy

This study chose a purposive sampling strategy, focusing specifically on criterion-based sampling, to select a female influencer as well as the videos from her YouTube channel that discuss mental health issues. Babbie (2010, p. 193) defines purposive sampling as "a type of non-probability sampling in which the units to be observed are selected on the basis of the researcher's judgment about which ones will be the most useful or representative." As Patton (2014, p. 264) further explains, purposive sampling is capable of focusing on information-rich cases and emphasizing the depth and contextual understanding of social phenomena. It is aligned with the research's aim to deeply explore how female influencers on YouTube address mental health and have an in-depth analysis of content directly related to mental health discussions.

Anna Akana, a female influencer who has a significant presence and popularity on YouTube in the field of mental health communication, has been chosen as a representative for the study. She has 2.84 million subscribers on YouTube and has been openly sharing her personal experiences with mental health and consistently creating content on mental health topics, which makes her an ideal influencer for an in-depth analysis. Focusing on one representative female content creator allows for a more concentrated, detailed, and in-depth understanding of the study.

3.2.2 Sampling Procedure

While searching for the research units, the sampling procedure involved the following steps to decide which videos from Anna Akana's YouTube channels were suitable for the research sample:

Step 1: Initial screening

In the initial screening phase, I started by scanning the video list from the most recent to the oldest on Anna Akana's YouTube channel. Each video has been examined based on its title to get an overview of the content, during which I wrote down the titles and publication dates of videos that were potentially relevant to my topic in an Excel spreadsheet. Related keywords has also been used, such as "mental health," "depression," "anxiety," etc., to search videos in her video list, making sure those directly related videos were included. At the end, around 45 potential videos out of 524 were identified from 2024 back to 2018 as the initial database for further review.

Step 2: Detailed review

Then a detailed review has been made of watching the full video to confirm that each video shortlisted from the initial screening is directly related to mental health, personal growth, and emotional well-being. This includes, but is not limited to, coping with negative emotions, understanding and improving one's mental health state, coping mechanisms, and tackling the stigma around mental health, all aimed at informing and empowering the audience. Those that did not meet the criteria have been marked in the Excel spreadsheet.

Step 3: Final selection

After careful consideration of each video's contribution to the diversity and comprehensiveness of the sample, a total of 30 YouTube videos, each approximately 3 to 5 minutes in length from 2024 back to 2018, have been selected from Anna Akana's YouTube channel (see Appendix A). Each video's title, publish date, and brief description have been documented. It strikes a balance between covering the range of discussions on mental health and ensuring the dataset is manageable for in-depth analysis.

3.3 Key Concepts and Operationalization

3.3.1 Operationalization of mental health literacy

A comprehensive definition of mental health literacy is provided by Jorm et al. (1997, p.

182) as knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders that aid their recognition, management, or prevention. It includes “the ability to recognize specific disorders; knowing how to seek mental health information; knowledge of risk factors and causes, of self-treatments, and of professional help available; and attitudes that promote recognition and appropriate help-seeking” (Jorm et al., 1997, p. 182).

Jorm (2012, p. 232-237) shifts focus towards actionable steps and interventions that can empower individuals and communities for better mental health and outlines specific components of mental health literacy, which provide theoretical support for recognizing and identifying these concepts in Anna Akana’s video content:

1) Recognition of developing mental disorders to facilitate early help seeking: Jorm discusses the significant delays in seeking professional help for mental disorders and the importance of recognizing a disorder to facilitate early intervention. (p. 232).

2) Knowledge of professional help and effective treatments available: Jorm states, “If a person recognizes his or her problem as a mental disorder, this may assist in seeking help, but in order to get effective help, the person also needs to know about the range of professional help and evidence-based treatments available” (p. 233).

3) Knowledge of effective self-help strategies: Jorm points out the importance of self-help strategies for managing mental health issues, despite the varied evidence supporting their effectiveness (p. 234).

4) Knowledge and skills to give mental health first aid and support to others: Jorm emphasizes, “As well as being able to deal with mental health problems in themselves, members of the community need to know how they can best assist and support others” (p. 235).

5) Knowledge of how to prevent mental disorders: Jorm points out that the less developed area of mental health literacy is the prevention of mental disorders (p. 237).

Jorm (2012, pp. 236-237) further lists self-help strategies recommended by both professional and consumer experts for managing subclinical depression and key elements of practicing good mental health first aid (see Appendix B), which acts as a reference to identify the explicit and implicit messages of how Anna Akana’s videos contribute to disseminating practical mental health knowledge during the coding process. Criteria for coding will be based on the direct promotion or discussion of the elements listed, with particular attention to the practical advice and strategies shared with viewers.

3.3.2 Operationalization of mental health stigma

Link & Phelan (2001, p. 363) define stigma as the co-occurrence of several components: labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination, emphasizing that power must be exercised for stigmatization to occur. According to the study, labeling refers to how people distinguish and label human differences, which involves identifying and naming human differences physically, psychologically, or behaviorally. Once individuals or groups are labeled, societal beliefs attach negative stereotypes to these labels, which is stereotyping. And then, labeled individuals are seen as fundamentally different, leading to a separation of “us” (the non-stigmatized) from “them” (the stigmatized). They “experience status loss and discrimination that lead to unequal outcomes.” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367). Finally, the process of stigmatization cannot be complete without “access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination.” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367). This comprehensive overview of the conceptualization of stigma offers a strong guide for the operationalization of mental health stigma.

Corrigan (2004) further explains how stigma interferes with mental health care and the concepts of self-stigma and public stigma, as well as strategies to reduce stigma. Self-stigma refers to the process where individuals with mental health issues internalize societal prejudices and stereotypes about mental illness, which lead to diminished self-esteem, self-efficacy, and a sense of worthlessness (Corrigan, 2004, p. 618). Public stigma involves the reactions of the general society to individuals with mental health conditions, which often include stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (Corrigan, 2004, p. 616). Three strategies are introduced to reduce stigma, which are protest, education, and contact (Corrigan, 2004, p. 620). The protest aimed to challenge negative representations and stereotypes of mental illness in the public media. Education focuses on providing accurate information about mental illness to the public to correct misconceptions. Contact is based on the principle that direct interaction with individuals who have experienced mental illness can challenge and change stigmatizing attitudes.

Both the key components of stigma by Link & Phelan (2001) and stigma definition and reduction strategies by Corrigan (2004) allow the researcher to recognize how stigma is

addressed and challenged within Anna Akana's YouTube content. During the coding process, each video will be analyzed based on the identified components of stigma to determine whether Anna Akana directly or indirectly addresses mental health stigma through personal experience, advocacy, and educational content (see Appendix C).

3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study is based on a six-phase thematic analysis process by Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 87) to answer the sub-questions and the main research question. During phase one, the researcher became familiar with the collected data by watching the videos multiple times, reading the transcriptions carefully, and taking notes on initial observations and reflections. Special attention was given to the portrayal of mental health issues, the presence of stigma, gender-specific discussions, and the overall narrative style to get an overview of the content.

Following data familiarization, phase two involved writing down initial codes by labeling the video scripts that were relevant to mental health discussions. This coding was done manually with the help of the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti, ensuring that every relevant piece of data was taken into account. Codes were both descriptive and interpretative, ranging from direct mention of "accepting negative emotions" to more explicative discussion on "managing social expectations."

After the initial coding, phase three was searching for overarching themes and patterns within the codes. This included sorting and merging the similar open codes together to form potential themes and sub-themes. This process required the researcher to move back and forth between the data, the codes, and the developing themes. For example, codes related to "self-regulation," "communicating needs," and "seeking support" were grouped under the broader theme of "emotional stability and self-healing."

During phase four, the potential themes identified were further reviewed and refined, making sure that the codes within each theme aligned with each other and supported the theme, and that the themes had clear and identifiable distinctions between them to reflect the entire dataset. Themes that did not have sufficient support from the data were either discarded or merged with other themes to best represent the data.

Once the themes were finalized, phase five was to define and name them to reflect the essence of each theme and its distinct aspects, in combination with the literature discussed

in the theoretical framework. This process made sure that each theme was not only deprived of data but also aligned with existing academic discussions. For instance, the theme “misconceptions and social stigmas” was analyzed in light of stigma theories about mental health.

The final phase is producing the report, which serves as the results and discussion chapter, explaining the identified themes regarding how Anna Akana portrays and discusses mental health issues in her YouTube videos. A coding tree with the four themes, sub-themes, and open code examples was created to show the results of the coding process (see Appendix D).

3.5 Validity and Reliability

It is acknowledged that the interpretation and manipulation of qualitative research methods contain a form of subjectivity. To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, step-by-step sampling and a six-phased coding process are explained and documented in detail to make sure the data analysis is as transparent and reliable as possible (Silverman, 2011). It began with a comprehensive review of the literature to build a strong theoretical framework and then moved to the careful selection of video content based on defined criteria to ensure its relevance for the analysis. And by following the well-established method by Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 87), the coding and theme development were conducted systematically and transparently. By implementing these strategies, the study aimed to ensure that data collection and analysis were both credible and reliable.

4. Results

This chapter presents the results of thematic analysis addressing the portrayal and discussion of mental health issues by the female influencer Anna Akana in her YouTube videos. Four main themes have been identified in exploring Anna's personal approach to mental health advocacy. The first theme, "Daily Self-Care and Inner Growth," explores how Anna delves into routine self-care practices and self-worth and self-esteem to build a solid foundation for one's mental well-being. The second theme, "Mental Health Strategies and Interventions," introduces various coping mechanisms, from therapeutic methods to understanding emotions and pursuing happiness. The third theme, "Mental Health Misconceptions and Social Stigma," addresses the widespread misconceptions and societal stigmas surrounding mental health discussions, for example, the misuse of psychological terms and informal psychological labels. The fourth theme, "Anna's Personal Journeys to Healing and Empowerment," shows how Anna shares genuine personal experiences of overcoming mental health challenges and embraces vulnerability to promote mental health awareness.

4.1. Theme 1: Daily Self-Care & Inner Growth

4.1.1 Practical self-care and self-love practices

Self-care and self-love are among the most important themes in Anna Akana's videos, and she often uses humor and personal experience to cover a broad range of related topics, from practical daily self-care techniques to understanding the essence of self-care and self-love, the connection between financial health and mental well-being, and sharing her personal journey from self-hatred to self-love.

By bringing daily self-care practices that are supported by scientific research into everyday routines, Anna validates these self-care strategies and encourages viewers to critically evaluate traditionally accepted health behaviors. For example, Anna's video "3 Hacks from a Neuroscientist That Changed My Life" introduces three simple, science-based protocols recommended by Dr. Andrew Huberman, who is a neuroscientist and professor at Stanford University. She emphasizes practical, research-based strategies such as exposure to morning sunlight, which is supported by Dumont & Beaulieu (2007, p. 558) for its benefits in enhancing sleep quality, and cold exposure, which Shevchuk (2008, p. 997) advocates for anxiety relief and improved energy levels. Anna's decision to give up alcohol,

citing Dr. Huberman's insights, offers a critical perspective on common health misconceptions and challenges the social norm of alcohol consumption. This shows how Anna not only uses scientific evidence to validate self-care practices but also engages her audience in a critical evaluation of widely accepted health behaviors.

Anna further supports the idea that mental health self-care should be free and available to everyone and challenges the common idea that we often link self-care with spending on luxuries or spoiling ourselves. She argues that true self-care shouldn't be just for those who can afford it and points out a need for a broader understanding of economic fairness in mental health care. This focus on making self-care practices affordable highlights the importance of methods that everyone can use, no matter their financial situation. She defines genuine self-care as the act of taking responsibility for one's life (Wilkinson & Whitehead, 2009, p. 1145) and introduces various free and accessible ways to nurture oneself through simple, daily actions such as physical exercise and educational resources. This approach is especially important in situations where many people can't afford expensive self-care products, thus making it inclusive. Her emphasis on practical actions that people can take on their own, which align with the ideas of Hollon & Beck (2013, p. 393), shows that changing our behavior by ourselves can have a big impact on our mental health.

Anna creatively uses Gary Chapman's concept of love languages (2009, p. 11–18) to connect theories about relationships with personal self-care, showing how theories from one domain can enrich another. As a marriage counselor and relationship expert, Chapman noticed that couples' misunderstandings and conflicts often come from their different expectations and preferences about how love should be expressed and received. He categorized these into five types: words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch, which aim to help individuals and couples better understand and communicate their emotional needs and enrich their relationships. This application of the love languages to self-care not only supports personal growth but also helps us understand self-care as a way to communicate with ourselves. Anna talks openly about how to fight negative self-talk, supported by Neff's research (2011, p. 9) on self-compassion and how compassionate self-dialogue can fundamentally change one's relationship with oneself.

Anna also stresses that self-love takes time. It's not a "magical instant process," but an

ongoing one that needs patience and persistence. As Denyes et al. (2001, p. 49) highlight, “The production of self-care is a process.” The structure of the self-care process involves deliberately performed actions and sequences for identifying, formulating, and expressing self-care requisites; making judgments and decisions about required actions; and executing those actions with known validity (Denyas et al., 2001, p. 49). Thus, Anna advocates being kind, patient, and encouraging to ourselves and forms the mindset of taking care of oneself because “if we don’t, who will?”

4.1.2 Self-worth and self-esteem

Resonating with Frankl’s notion (1985, p. 131) that “everyone has their own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment,” Anna highlights the importance of finding and committing to one’s purpose in her exploration of building self-worth and self-esteem. She promotes practices such as stillness, silence, creative visualization, and meditation as tools for fostering a connection with one’s inner voice and clarifying personal goals. These consistent practices help strengthen the connection to one’s highest self and enable individuals to listen to their intuitions and impulses and let the highest self guide them (Kabat-Zinn, 2023, p. 73).

In the video “How to Actually Gain Self Esteem,” Anna uses the metaphor of becoming one’s own best friend to explain how to enhance self-esteem (Neff, 2011, p. 9). It means treating ourselves as we would treat any of our friends by keeping promises to ourselves, giving ourselves time, energy, and space, and celebrating our successes. She stresses that self-esteem is cultivated by repeated acts of self-kindness, reinforcing the message that one is worthy of care and capable of self-support.

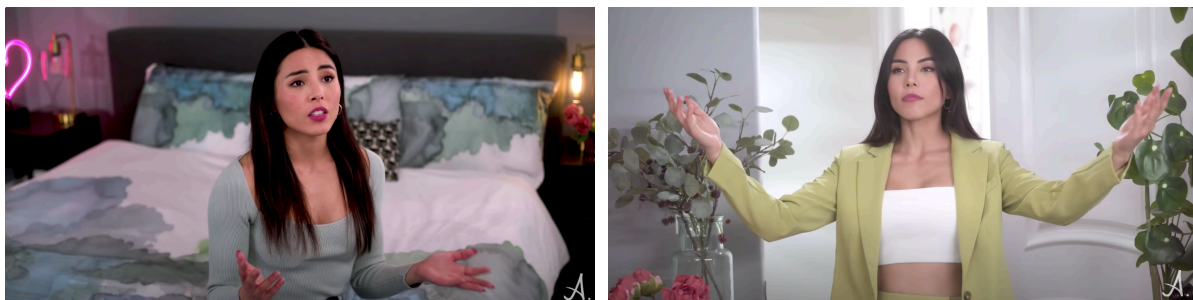
Further, Anna addresses self-validation through a creative portrayal of her “highest self,” an inspired concept that adds depth to the discussion of internal versus external validation (see Figure 4.1). This persona, depicted as descending in a green suit, symbolizes wisdom and the importance of relying on internal validation. The visual contrast between Anna’s everyday self, seeking external validation, and her “highest self,” embodying internal wisdom, underscores the tension between societal expectations and personal authenticity. This dual portrayal effectively illustrates the internal struggle many face between seeking societal approval and fostering self-validation.

This representation of multiple personas is particularly powerful in discussing mental

health, as it visualizes the conflict between different facets of self-perception. By role-playing these personas, Anna brings to life the theoretical concept that true self-esteem stems from a robust internal foundation rather than external approval. It visually reinforces her narrative that one should not depend on others for approval but should instead cultivate a strong, self-validating internal dialogue (Beattie, 1992, p. 52). Anna’s narrative encourages viewers to trust their own judgments and feelings and promotes the balance of self-acceptance, goal setting, and enjoyment of personal growth. Her use of multiple personas in her videos serves as a creative method to challenge traditional views on mental health. This technique provides viewers with various perspectives on internal validation and self-growth.

Figure 4.1

These screenshots from “How to Validate Yourself” show a stark contrast between two personas of Anna.



Note. On the left, Anna is depicted longing for external validation. On the right, her “Highest Self” descends in a green suit, representing wisdom and the call for internal validation.

4.2. Theme 2: Mental Health Strategies & Interventions

Strategies for Maintaining Mental Health emerge as the second major theme in Anna’s content. She shares insights from her personal therapy sessions, along with advice for those unable to afford therapy. Anna places special emphasis on managing emotions and pursuing happiness.

4.2.1 Coping strategies and therapeutic methods

Anna introduces four main lessons she has learned from her therapy sessions over the last decade, which have helped her regulate emotions and improve her life. She highlights

the transformative power of kind, forgiving, and encouraging self-talk. This practice aligns with cognitive-behavioral theories, which suggest that changing how we talk to ourselves can significantly impact our mental health (Hollon & Beck, 2013, p. 393). She stresses that all emotions are valid by highlighting the idea that “feelings are facts.” As Greenberg (2004, p. 7) points out, it’s important to become aware of, accept, and make sense of one’s emotional experience. She also discusses the importance of setting personal boundaries, which connects deeply with Cloud & Townsend’s (2017, p. 312) idea that boundaries are freeing our yes and our no and learning when to say yes and how to say no to get control of one’s life. By clearly communicating one’s limits, discomforts, and values, it is crucial for personal autonomy and mental well-being. Furthermore, her reflections on expectations and personal pain highlight a well-known idea in psychology that not meeting expectations can cause a lot of emotional upset.

Addressing barriers to traditional therapy, Anna offers strategies that can be integrated into daily routines and emphasizes the importance of a solid foundation for mental health—adequate sleep, healthy eating, and exercise. This approach democratizes mental health care, making it accessible to those who may not have the resources for traditional therapy sessions. By introducing cognitive-behavioral techniques like the thought record, Anna provides tools for individuals to examine and adjust their thinking patterns, a method supported by Greenberger & Padesky (2015, p. 117). Anna emphasizes that this method is for any and all situations, whether it’s related to family, career, or friendships, if individuals want to change their patterns and habits. This technique empowers individuals to take active roles in their mental health management, reflecting a shift towards self-reliance in mental health practices.

Her depiction of the conflict between negative and positive personas highlights the cognitive battles individuals often face. Anna also visualizes both negative and positive self-talk by portraying these conflicting internal dialogues (see Figure 4.2). The negative persona displays a critical and disapproving expression that makes her self-talk sound harsher. While the positive persona shows a warm and reassuring expression, adding the healing power of kind and supportive self-talk. In the middle, Anna herself looks confused and vulnerable. This portrayal shows the struggle many individuals face with their inner critics and highlights the importance of supportive self-talk in overcoming self-doubt. It teaches the viewer about cognitive techniques for identifying and countering negative

thoughts, a key aspect of cognitive-behavioral therapy, as discussed by Hollon & Beck (2013, p. 393). This visualization serves as a practical illustration of cognitive-behavioral principles in action, showing how internal dialogues can significantly affect one's mental health and self-esteem.

Figure 4.2

These screenshots from "Maintaining Mental Health" show Anna portraying three roles.



Note. The negative persona with critical internal dialogue is on the left, herself is in the center, and the positive persona with supportive internal dialogue is on the right.

Anna also mentions that mental health is a personal journey, meaning what works for one person is not going to work for another, but these very unsexy fundamentals are great guidelines and foundations to build a personal routine for better mental health. Anna's integration of these therapeutic methods and coping strategies into her content not only provides practical advice but also offers a deeper reflection on the shift towards personalized, accessible mental health solutions in digital media.

4.2.2 Understanding and navigating emotions

In her videos, Anna dives deeply into various emotions such as anger, pain, sadness, or generally feeling bad. She emphasizes the profound impact of personal boundaries and self-awareness on managing and understanding one's emotions. She links poor boundaries

to emotional distress. This can be from agreeing to things one doesn't want to do or allowing others to dismiss one's emotions. Boundaries are crucial for protecting and asserting one's authentic self, including emotional, physical, spiritual, intellectual, and sexual boundaries (Cloud & Townsend, 2017, p. 237). Anna states that both detrimental and beneficial boundary behaviors can be learned and relearned, and she advocates for personal accountability in emotional responses.

In discussing the obstacles to healing, Anna shares that people often fail to heal because they are too attached to and identified with their pain and trauma. Inspired by Caroline Myss's insights on the commodification of trauma in relationships and Viktor Frankl's perspective on finding meaning in suffering, she challenges viewers to reframe their adversities into opportunities for growth. This approach aligns with Frankl's existential framework (1985, p. 131) that suffering becomes comfortable and familiar, but by finding a purposeful and beautiful outcome from it, one can begin to transform their experience.

Anna also addresses the concept of misattunement, which she describes as a fundamental lack of recognition and understanding that can lead to long-lasting emotional pain. Based on the study of Spiegel et al. (2000, p. 26), early positive attunement experiences lead to joy and vitality, while misattunement can result in feelings of shame and inadequacy and subsequent impacts on adult interpersonal relationships, "social blindness," and depression. Anna advocates for reparenting, a therapeutic approach aimed at nurturing oneself and recognizing one's needs to overcome patterns of neglect and misrecognition. This concept is defined by James (1974, p. 32) as "a procedure for updating and restructuring the parent ego state": showing up for oneself, recognizing one's needs, and learning to be seen and understood. Such efforts can pave the way to healing, self-acceptance, and ultimately happiness.

Further, Anna offers practical advice for emotional regulation, drawing from neuroscience to suggest techniques like the physiological sigh for stress relief, suggested by Dr. Andrew Huberman, and movement exercises to manage anxiety and sadness. These strategies not only provide immediate tools for emotional management but also reflect a broader implication of neuroscience in everyday mental health practices. Through her videos, Anna not only educates her audience on the mechanics of emotional experiences but also empowers them with tools to navigate their emotional worlds more effectively.

4.2.3 Happiness and positive psychology

Anna's exploration of happiness and positive psychology brings a fresh perspective to the traditionally problem-focused field of psychology. She introduces the concept of positive psychology, developed by Martin Seligman, who is known as the father of happiness science. She discusses the evolution of psychology from a field focused predominantly on severe mental illness and what's wrong with people to a more balanced perspective that also considers what's right. As Seligman (2002, p. 3) put it, "the aim of positive psychology is to catalyze a change in psychology from a preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building the best qualities in life." Seligman identifies three dimensions essential for happiness: the pleasant life, which is achieved by savoring and appreciating basic pleasures, such as our environment, our needs, and companionship; the good life, which is achieved by discovering and employing personal strengths and virtues to enhance one's life; and the meaningful life, which involves using strengths for purposes greater than oneself (Seligman, 2002, p. 3). These elements offer a framework for cultivating happiness and fulfillment. Through fostering positive emotions, traits, and relationships from the perspective of positive psychology, Anna suggests it's a way for us to "look at people in the world who are happy and content and start modeling our behavior around them so that everyone, everywhere, regardless of how severe or mild your mental state is, can benefit from that." According to Seligman (2002, p. 4), human strengths such as courage, future-mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skill, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, the capacity for flow, and insight can act as buffers against mental illness.

Through her videos, such as "How to be Happy Now" and "I Took Yale's Course on Happiness, Here's the Takeaways," she explains these concepts with personal experience and the practical application of positive psychology principles. For instance, the story of her friend Linda and insights from Yale's happiness course emphasize the importance of adopting a growth mindset and actively cultivating happiness through practices like mindfulness, gratitude, and setting intentional goals. As the study by Van Tongeren & Burnette (2018, p. 102) outlines, individuals with a growth mindset towards happiness who believe happiness is malleable experience higher levels of well-being. Happiness is a mindset that must be actively cultivated through reframing situations and curating thoughts. It can be increased through efforts and strategies. Anna also highlights

misconceptions about happiness, such as the belief that material goods bring lasting joy. She points to evidence that investing in experiences and social connections fosters deeper happiness (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003, p. 1193).

4.3. Theme 3: Mental Health Misconceptions & Social Stigma

In her videos, Anna also discusses the misuse of psychological terminology and many popular misconceptions. Her focus is not on any specific disorder but rather on general mental health. An example is external validation. Anna challenges the stigma that seeking external validation is a sign of weakness or insecurity. She argues that if the external validation is balanced and healthy, it can be a positive force to encourage self-improvement and a deeper understanding of oneself and one's abilities. Another example is enjoying attention. She says desiring attention and feeling appreciated are human nature. And it's inappropriate to label individuals as narcissistic for expressing liking attention from others openly, because, according to Link & Phelan (2001, p. 363), labeling is defined as one of the components of stigma. As long as one doesn't gain it through harmful behaviors, seeking attention is a normal part of human social interaction. Moreover, Anna discusses the societal pressure to remain constantly productive, highlighting the importance of rest and relaxation. She counters the misconception that productivity is synonymous with value, emphasizing the psychological and emotional benefits of allowing oneself downtime without guilt.

Anna also notices a recent trend where "psychobabble has been distorted, twisted, and sometimes even weaponized." Lilienfeld et al. (2015, p. 2) highlight that clarity in psychological and psychiatric disciplines is crucial where most phenomena, such as emotions, personality traits, and mental disorders, are "open concepts." She points out that people often misuse psychological concepts like trauma and abuse and diagnose others who have hurt them in order to dismiss their own pain. By misusing terms such as trauma, gaslighting, narcissism, and emotional labor, individuals prioritize their own discomfort or hurtful feelings over meaningful dialogue and understanding with each other. Anna acknowledges the trend's upsides. For example, it encourages people to seek help, gives them tools to recognize unproductive patterns, and provides language to more accurately communicate their feelings. However, "boundaries are meant to keep people in, not out," and being triggered should be seen as an opportunity for self-reflection rather

than a means to censor or blame others. Anna also points out that invoking therapy speak, especially outside of a professional setting, can lead to a lack of accountability and reflection and potentially minimize the experiences of those who genuinely suffer from conditions like narcissistic personality disorder or PTSD. She encourages viewers to “take the space to adequately describe them without using pop psychology or emotional shorthand and validate your own experience.” By dissecting the casual misuse of psychological language, she advocates for a more informed and reflective approach to discussing mental health, which can contribute significantly to reducing stigma and promoting genuine understanding.

4.4. Theme 4: Anna’s Personal Journeys to Healing and Empowerment

The final theme relates to the personal journey Anna shares in her videos, where she openly shares her own relevant experiences, whether it’s personal growth or pain. In line with Goffman’s self-presentation theory (1959, p. 1), Anna openly talking about her personal traumas and mental health challenges can act as a strategic self-presentation that builds her authenticity with viewers. In her video “Why You’re Not Healing and How You Can,” Anna explains how to find meaning in suffering to lead a more fulfilled and purposeful life. She offers examples from her own experiences: “In the case of my sister’s suicide, I realized that if I could help heal others and prevent them from taking their own lives, then my suffering would have meaning. In the case of a painful breakup, I thought that if I could use this pain to become the best version of myself and learn to love myself, then my suffering would have meaning. In the case of being abandoned by my best friend during the worst year of my life, I realized I could make that the best thing that ever happened to me by finally learning to choose myself, validate myself, and become my own best friend.” In the three examples Anna provides, she openly discusses her past traumas, including her sister’s suicide, a painful breakup, and being abandoned by a friend. She uses her personal journey of infusing her pain with meaning to explain it to viewers.

In her video “Maintaining Mental Health,” Anna employs visual storytelling to openly share her struggle to maintain her mental health, describing her usual state as “this very thin ice of contentment concealing an iceberg of anxiety and depression.” She shares her therapy journey: “I’ve been in therapy for the past decade, on antidepressants, off antidepressants, and just fully immersed in the world of mental health for quite some time.

My highs are super high, but my lows are awfully low.” She uses role-playing to show her emotional extremes (see Figure 4.3). During moments of “highs,” she is shown joyfully spinning on a swing in a sunlit room. However, her “lows” are portrayed in a dimly lit room, where she is seen reading and taking deep breaths to calm herself and manage her anxiety and depression. The strategic use of lighting, setting, and activities in these scenes provides a richer narrative of the complexities of her emotional state. These portrayals serve to demystify mental health struggles and make them relatable.

Figure 4.3

These screenshots from “Maintaining Mental Health” show Anna’s contrasting emotional states.



She is not afraid to show her emotionally vulnerable side, letting viewers know that despite appearing articulate, humorous, talented, and creative on camera, she too struggles and is constantly working to improve her mental health. This transparency extends into other aspects of her life, as seen in “Money and Mental Health,” where she discusses her financial struggles to highlight the often-overlooked link between financial stability and mental well-being. Lee et al. (2021, p. 1932) suggest that by sharing personal vulnerabilities, Anna invites her viewers into her private world, which not only presents a more authentic side of herself but also strengthens her trustworthiness. This authenticity makes her not just a distant, perfect online persona but more of a relatable individual facing real-life challenges. Her stories resonate with viewers because they reflect broader social realities and personal vulnerabilities, and facilitate a stronger connection and greater impact on her audience’s perception of mental health.

5. Conclusion

This research aims to explore how female influencer Anna Akana portrays and discusses mental health issues in her YouTube videos. Based on the qualitative thematic analysis of selected YouTube videos from her channel, four major themes were identified that helped answer the research questions proposed at the beginning of this study. The thematic content was guided by theories of representation theory as well as previous research done regarding mental health literacy and mental health communication.

5.1 Addressing the Research Questions

Sub-RQ 1: In what ways does Anna Akana contribute to improving mental health literacy and awareness through her YouTube videos?

Anna contributes to improving mental health literacy and awareness by introducing a diverse range of educational content and practical advice. In her YouTube videos, Anna includes a wide range of practical self-care techniques, such as building healthy daily routines, applying self-love languages, practicing positive self-talk, and becoming one's own best friend to enhance self-esteem. She advocates for accessible self-care without spending money, like walking, yoga, journaling, and using free educational resources. Unlike the usual medical approaches, she focuses on giving individuals the tools to manage their own mental health, and her methods are easy to use and help empower people.

In addition to basic self-care, Anna delves into more complex mental health strategies and interventions. She shares the lessons she has learned from her therapy sessions over the last decade, helping viewers understand the importance of emotion regulation and setting personal boundaries. She connects academic psychological theories with practical, accessible mental health strategies and shows how individuals can take active roles in their emotional well-being. Anna also introduces cognitive behavioral therapy (Hollon & Beck, 2013, p. 393) and provides step-by-step guides on how to use thought records to manage the interactions between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Additionally, Anna introduces concepts of positive psychology and the three dimensions essential for happiness: the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life (Seligman, 2002, p. 3) for cultivating happiness and fulfillment.

These practices not only make mental well-being achievable for a broader audience but also improve mental health literacy by sharing knowledge on how to seek mental health

information and developing positive attitudes toward appropriate help-seeking, as outlined by Jorm (2000, p. 396). It supports Jorm's (2012, p. 238) observation that educational initiatives can serve as digital mental health interventions that significantly improve mental health literacy and foster a supportive community focused on mental health awareness and advocacy.

Sub-RQ 2: To what extent does Anna Akana tackle the stigma associated with mental health in her videos, and what strategies does she use to encourage viewers to seek help and support for mental health issues?

In addressing the stigma associated with mental health, Anna discusses the dangers of labeling, which is one of the key components of stigma as described by Link & Phelan (2001, p. 363). They note that stigma involves distinguishing and labeling human differences, whether physically, psychologically, or behaviorally. She reminds audiences to be careful when using psychological terms to label others outside of a professional setting. By challenging the viewers to rethink how they interpret and use psychological language, it will be helpful to develop a more compassionate and accurate understanding of mental health.

Anna also challenges common misconceptions surrounding mental health, such as seeking external validation and enjoying attention, and discusses the misuse of psychological terms such as trauma, gaslighting, narcissism, and emotional labor. It directly combats public stigma by transforming misconceptions into a more enlightened understanding of mental health, as Corrigan notes (2004, p. 616). By correcting false beliefs about mental health, it in turn promotes a healthier public discourse around these often-misunderstood topics.

She also shares her personal mental health experiences, including her challenges and insights from therapy, which help reduce self-stigma (Corrigan, 2004, p. 618) by normalizing these discussions and demonstrating that mental health issues are a common human experience, not a source of shame. This normalization encourages viewers to accept their conditions and consider therapy or other forms of support without fear of judgment.

Her methods align well with the proven interventions outlined by Corrigan (2004, p. 620), who emphasizes the role of education in reducing stigma. This educational approach

not only informs her audience but also reshapes broader societal discourse, thereby reducing the discrimination and stereotypes that people with mental health issues often face.

Sub-RQ 3: What role does gender play in the way Anna Akana discusses mental health, and how does she address gender-specific issues related to mental health in her content?

Although, according to Afifi (2007, p. 385), effective strategies for mental disorder prevention must consider gender differences due to gender-specific risks and health-seeking behaviors, the thematic analysis of Anna's videos did not specifically highlight discussions centered on gender-specific issues in mental health. However, her role as a female public figure that is openly discussing various personal challenges provides significant insights into how women can manage emotional difficulties and maintain mental health. This open discussion of mental health becomes even more crucial given that women's status and life opportunities remain low worldwide, posing a significant mental health risk (Afifi, 2007, p. 389).

As a woman in the public eye, Anna embodies and promotes the image of a proactive approach to seeking mental health support, which is aligned with Mackenzie et al.'s (2006, p. 575) finding that women are more likely to seek help from mental health professionals due to their more positive attitudes towards psychological openness. Her example serves as a powerful form of indirect gender advocacy in a way that resonates with her female audience and empowers her viewers to embrace their mental health needs and seek necessary support. She acts as a role model for how to perceive and react to mental health challenges, and this resilience and proactive health management could extend beyond gender.

Sub-RQ 4: How does Anna Akana portray mental health issues in her videos, and what themes emerge from her discussions on mental health?

Through the qualitative thematic analysis of Anna's videos, four main themes have been identified. The first theme is Daily Self-Care and Inner Growth, which explores practical self-care and self-love practices as well as fostering self-worth and self-esteem. By bringing daily self-care practices that are supported by scientific research into everyday routines, Anna validates these self-care strategies and encourages viewers to critically

evaluate traditionally accepted health behaviors. Anna further advocates that mental health self-care should be free and available to everyone. It emphasizes that mental health is an important part of everyday life, and mental health problems are perceived as more manageable than ongoing mental illness or distress (Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 13).

The second theme is Mental Health Strategies and Interventions, which delves into coping strategies, therapeutic methods, the understanding and navigation of emotions, happiness, and positive psychology. By highlighting positive portrayals in improving public understanding of mental health and reducing stigma, Anna's content serves as an example of how media narratives are shifting "from illness to wellbeing," as discussed by Atanasova et al. (2019, p. 2).

In the third theme, Mental Health Misconceptions and Social Stigma, Anna challenges societal misconceptions and the misuse of psychological terminology. She discusses the benefits of how appropriately used psychological terminology provides individuals with the language and tools to accurately communicate their feelings. However, incorrect usage, especially outside of professional settings, can lead to a lack of accountability and diminish the experiences of those who genuinely suffer from mental health conditions. By critically analyzing the casual misuse of psychological language, Anna advocates for a more informed and reflective approach to discussing mental health.

In the last theme, Anna's Personal Journeys to Healing and Empowerment, she shares her own experiences with maintaining her mental health. She is not afraid to show her emotionally vulnerable side, and she too struggles and is constantly working to improve her mental health. This is particularly aligned with the findings of Lind & Wickström (2023, p. 13) that female influencers are being open about vulnerability related to mental health problems and tend to promote self-acceptance and self-love that resonate with positive psychology.

Sub-RQ 5: How does Anna Akana balance authenticity and self-presentation in her discussions about mental health?

Being authentic and open about showing her vulnerable side is an important part of Anna's self-presentation. Her public image is that of an articulate, humorous, talented, and creative content creator who discusses mental health in a light and approachable manner. However, when diving deep into her content, no matter the topic or the type of humor she

employs, there is always a high level of genuineness and openness about her personal experience, private emotions, and mental health struggles. Her openness about her vulnerabilities not only encourages viewers to seek help when needed but also amplifies the impact of her mental health advocacy.

This is particularly obvious when she shares her personal experiences, such as her journey from self-hatred to self-love, her unstable emotional states, dealing with her sister's suicide, enduring painful breakups, and managing her mental health through therapy. It is also reflected in the sensitivity and directness of the topics Anna chooses to discuss. She touches on sensitive issues such as suicide and explains the situations in which she wants to die and how she overcomes the extreme thoughts. She openly discusses her abandonment issues and how she has worked through learning emotional permanence and tackling the emotional challenges many people face. Further, through her creative role-playing, whether it's her negative persona or internal negative emotions, she visually represents the real inner struggles of the audience. It not only brings humor to the presentation but also enhances emotional resonance with her audience.

Goffman's self-presentation theory highlights the performative aspects of social interactions, where individuals manage impressions to influence how others perceive them. Anna's balance of authenticity and self-presentation in integrating her genuine self with her public persona shows how YouTube influencers can use self-presentation not only as a tool to build an image but as a way to authentically engage with their audience on sensitive topics like mental health. It aligns with Lee et al.'s (2021, p. 1932) theory that sharing personal vulnerabilities while maintaining a professional public image forms a sense of authenticity and trustworthiness for her audience.

5.2 Implications of the Findings

The detailed study of Anna Akana's YouTube content on mental health has broader implications for digital mental health communication, influencer marketing, and media studies. Anna has created her unique and humorous narrative style by combining educational content with her personal stories to enhance mental health literacy. Her approach helps to make psychological concepts and self-care strategies accessible to everyone, which serves as a good example of how influencers can bridge the gap between expert knowledge and public understanding of mental health (Lokithasan et al., 2019, p.

24). This highlights the fact that digital creators have the potential to play a more proactive role in public health (Corrigan, 2004, p. 620).

Anna's open discussions about her personal mental health challenges, including her therapy journey, coping strategies, and societal misconceptions, help reduce public stigma towards mental health. This aligns with the findings of Corrigan et al. (2004, p. 620), who suggest that education focusing on providing accurate information is an effective strategy against mental health stigma. It implies that influencer platforms and content could be fully utilized to share diverse stories and foster more inclusive conversations about mental health, thus improving public understanding of mental health and reducing stigma (Atanasova et al., 2019, p. 2).

While the study did not find that Anna discusses gender-specific issues directly in mental health, her role as a female influencer enriches the understanding of how women discuss and manage mental health differently. Her content provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by women in mental health. Her narratives often dive deep into themes of empowerment, resilience, emotional issues, and self-care, which are crucial in the context of mental health discussions among women, who may face specific psychological stressors and higher rates of certain mental health disorders like anxiety and depression (Afifi, 2007, p. 389). It implies that it's important to consider gender within media studies and health communication strategies, especially when discussing the media representation of mental health issues.

And through the examination of the use of YouTube content for mental health advocacy, it shows that social media can serve as a powerful tool for public health communication (Moorhead et al., 2013, p. 8). Compared with traditional health communication, such as books and newspaper, social media platforms like YouTube has the ability to reach vast audience and connect emotionally with viewers through creative storytelling. Although the audience feedback is not the part of this study, social media enable real-time interaction and gather immediate feedback from audiences, which encourages community engagement and support networks that provide peer support and enhance the dissemination of health information.

Having said all of the above, this study has a deeper societal implication, which is how the power of non-professional but influential mental health advocates, like Anna Akana, can be fully utilized to disseminate mental health knowledge through social media channels

to a broad audience. Self-growth content creators like Anna usually have a large viewer base, and the mental health knowledge they share is mostly from their self-learning, therapy sessions, and personal experiences. This presents an opportunity for mental health professionals, organizations, or policymakers, such as licensed therapists and psychologists, as well as WHO, to explore collaborations with these influencers and leverage their digital platforms for greater engagement and impact. Atef et al.'s (2023, pp. 2665-2688) study examined the self-presentation of medical professionals who create health-related videos on YouTube and Facebook. It's been found that they present themselves as approachable, knowledgeable, and popular, indicating the importance of impression management in health management (Atef et al., 2023, pp. 2671-2680). Their advantage is that they often possess more specialized knowledge, but how to process and present knowledge in ways that are easier for the audience to understand and more engaging, thus reaching a wider audience more effectively, can be challenging.

Through collaborations, they can provide expert support, co-create content, or organize themed lectures and workshops through influencer channels. These collaborations can ensure the accuracy of information while taking advantage of the creativity and approachability of influencers to make the content more attractive. For instance, organizations like the WHO can create educational videos or social media posts that align with the influencer's style and audience preferences while ensuring the content is scientifically sound and practical. Such approaches can not only expand the reach to a broader audience but also enhance public perceptions positively toward mental health issue, which aligns with Lokithasan et al.'s findings (2019, p. 24) that social media influencers have the ability to influence the audience and impact viewer perceptions.

Except for societal implications, this study contributes to the existing media representations of mental health. As Srivastava et al. (2018, p. 4) emphasize the power of media, Anna's channel, with its tremendous reach and exposure on social media, has the ability to shape public attitudes towards mental health for the better. In Anna's content, the "illness side" of mental health is rarely touched upon. This further confirms Atanasova et al.'s (2019, p. 2) observation that media narratives are shifting "from illness to wellbeing," highlighting the importance of positive media portrayals in improving public understanding of mental health and reducing stigma.

This shift from illness to wellbeing has implications for how mental health is discussed

in public. By emphasizing recovery, resilience, and self-care through personal stories and humor, Anna's content not only helps normalize mental health discussions but also inspires viewers to seek help and adopt healthier coping strategies. It expands existing understanding of how positive media portrayals can contribute to mental health literacy and stigma reduction.

5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the detailed analysis of how Anna portrays and discusses mental health issues in her YouTube videos, this study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research.

Firstly, while the research question focuses on how female influencers on YouTube portray and discuss mental health issues, this study takes Anna Akana as a case study and mainly examines the content of only one influencer. Thus, there is a limitation in scope because the findings may not fully represent the different approaches and perspectives of other female influencers regarding mental health. Future research could expand the scope to include a broader range of female influencers, which would help in understanding a more comprehensive range of narratives and strategies used by female YouTube influencers. Moreover, it is worth noting that Anna Akana does not have a professional background in psychology or mental health counseling. She is more of a self-growth and lifestyle content creator who is interested in mental health topics. On YouTube, there are also many professional influencers who are licensed therapists, psychologists, or mental health experts. Studying their content would also be highly valuable, as it would provide insights into how professionals utilize digital platforms to disseminate mental health knowledge to the public.

Secondly, the analysis was mainly focused on Anna's YouTube video instead of the impact of her content and viewers interactions or responses, such as comments under her videos or engagement between her and her viewers. It restricts the understanding of the impact her content has on her audience, the role of viewer feedback in shaping the ongoing discussion of mental health, and how peer-to-peer support works within the community. Future studies could include analyses of audience reactions and interactions to better understand the effectiveness and reception of content creators' mental health narratives on social media platforms. For example, conducting surveys or interviews with

her audience could offer insights into how her content influences viewers' understanding and attitudes toward mental health.

Thirdly, after the thematic analysis of how Anna addresses mental health, the study did not find extensive discussions on gender-specific mental health issues, which limits the depth of analysis about gender differences around mental health. While Anna's content addresses general mental health themes, it may not fully engage with issues that are unique to women. Future research could specifically focus on how YouTube influencers address gender-specific issues in mental health and the potential role of gender in digital mental health communication. For example, comparative studies can be conducted to analyze content from both male and female influencers to identify gender-specific themes, challenges, and communication styles.

Fourthly, this study mainly uses thematic analysis, supported by visual analysis. While thematic analysis dives deep into the video content, the visual analysis could be expanded in future research to explore more of the visual communication and its impact on viewer perception and engagement. The current study has briefly analyzed the role-playing elements in some of Anna's videos. Given that Anna is also an actor, this performance part plays a significant role in her content compared to other influencers who primarily use a monologue format when discussing serious topics like mental health. A more detailed visual analysis of role-playing could add additional layers of meaning and effectiveness to Anna's portrayal of mental health topics. For instance, analyzing how character embodiment, costume choices, and expressive gestures can contribute to the impact on viewers or how camera angles, lighting, and editing styles could help enhance the emotional engagement of the viewers.

These limitations indicate that there is a need for more diversified research to study mental health discussions led by influencers on social media. Haq et al. (2022, pp. 2-7) have studied the role of Instagram influencers who coach people with mental health issues and focused on the effect of their vocabulary and language on audience engagement. From Lind & Wickström's research (2023, pp. 7-12), YouTube videos published by four Swedish female influencers were analyzed, and it was found that much of the content contributes to discourses of positive psychology, and mental health problems are represented as manageable. With a focus on studying the impact on the audience or multiple female influencers from a specific cultural background, both studies offered unique angles for

future research that contribute to the broader media representation of mental health. By broadening the research scope to include multiple female influencers, studying viewer interactions, focusing on gender-specific discussions, and enhancing the methods of visual analysis, future studies can have a more comprehensive understanding of the role played by female influencers in digital mental health advocacy.

In addition to the suggestions based on the current limitations, another possible future research direction could be to investigate how influencers on different social media platforms promote mental health content. Content creators on Instagram and TikTok often utilize features such as quick edits, engaging visuals, and concise messaging to capture viewers' attention quickly. Especially because viewers have less patience to focus on long-form content, it is important to study how influencers on Instagram and TikTok use short video clips to disseminate mental health knowledge. And future research could analyze whether these short-form videos are effective in educating audiences and changing perceptions about mental health compared to the more traditional, longer formats on platforms like YouTube.

Alternatively, future research could focus on the representation of specific mental health interventions, such as emotional first aid. While the concept of first aid is familiar to most people, emotional first aid is not as widely recognized. As psychologist Guy Winch gives as an example in his TED talk, when a person scrapes their leg, they know to use a bandage, but do people have enough knowledge to help themselves when they encounter emotional problems? Examining how emotional first aid is represented in the media could explore whether media representations equip people with the necessary knowledge to address their emotional issues and how these portrayals influence public understanding and acceptance of emotional first aid as a valuable tool for mental health management.

In conclusion, exploring these research directions is crucial to understanding and improving mental health communication in our digital age. Mental health is deeply connected to everyone's daily life. By addressing the limitations of this study and investigating new areas, it will help create a more informed and supportive community, equip everyone with the knowledge and resources to manage their mental well-being effectively, and contribute to a healthier, more empathetic society.

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Appendix A

Overview of the YouTube video sample

Video Title	Publish Date	Brief Description
How to Practice Self Care Without Spending Money	2024/1/11	Anna discusses self-care practices that don't require money, emphasizing self-responsibility and mental health care.
3 Hacks from a Neuroscientist	2023/11/2	Anna shares three neuroscience-based tips for improving mental health and emotional well-being.
I Healed My Abandonment Issues by Learning Emotional Permanence	2023/10/26	Discusses overcoming abandonment issues through understanding emotional permanence, linking personal growth to mental health.
If You Can't Afford Therapy, Do This	2023/10/19	Provides alternatives to traditional therapy for those facing financial barriers, emphasizing accessible mental health care.
I Got Tested for a Personality Disorder	2023/10/12	Shares the personal experience of being tested for a personality disorder, reflecting on self-awareness and the stigma surrounding mental health diagnoses.
I took Yale's course on happiness, here's the takeaways	2023/9/21	Summarizes key takeaways from Yale's course on happiness, emphasizing misconceptions about happiness and strategies to improve well-being.
An argument for positive psychology	2023/9/14	Presents positive psychology principles and their effects on well-being, debunking common misconceptions about happiness.
You're Not Traumatized, You're	2023/9/7	Anna discusses the difference between being traumatized and being hurt, challenging the

Just Hurt		misuse of psychological terms.
Give Yourself an Emotional Facelift	2023/8/10	Anna discusses how to lift your spirits and improve your emotional well-being through self-care and mindset shifts.
Becoming Your Highest Self	2023/6/1	A guide on personal growth and self-improvement, focusing on becoming one's highest self for better mental health.
How to Validate Yourself	2023/5/25	Encourages self-validation and autonomy, aiming to foster self-worth and reduce reliance on external validation.
Why You're Not Healing and How You Can	2023/5/16	Offers insights into why personal healing might feel stagnant and strategies to foster genuine healing.
How to Actually Cultivate Self Love	2023/4/13	Explores practical steps and mindset changes necessary for cultivating self-love and enhancing mental health.
Why You Feel Like Trash	2023/3/2	Explores reasons behind feeling unwell and the impact of lifestyle choices on mental health.
How to Actually Gain Self Esteem	2023/2/9	Offers insights into building self-esteem through acceptance and understanding of one's worth.
6 ways to regulate your nervous system (according to neuroscience)	2022/11/17	Provides strategies based on neuropsychology to regulate the nervous system and manage emotions.
5 Things to Stop Feeling Guilty About	2022/1/6	Anna talks about common sources of guilt and why we shouldn't feel guilty, promoting mental wellness.
Why Trying to Be Happy is Making You	2021/4/29	Discusses the paradox of striving for happiness and how it can lead to feelings of inadequacy and

Miserable		misery.
Why You're So Sad All The Time	2020/9/10	Anna talks about the causes of persistent sadness and the concept of misattunement.
Money and Mental Health	2020/7/30	Discusses the relationship between financial literacy and mental health, stressing the importance of financial education.
4 Lessons From Therapy	2019/9/5	Reflecting on personal therapy sessions, Anna shares four key lessons for emotional growth and mental health.
Know Your Value	2019/7/25	Discusses recognizing and asserting one's worth in personal and professional settings, advocating for self-respect and mental wellness.
The One Step to Self Love	2019/1/25	Anna talks about discovering self-hate and the journey towards self-love through journaling affirmations.
Feel Good About Feeling Bad	2019/1/17	Discusses the importance of accepting negative emotions for overall mental health.
Why You're Angry for No Reason	2018/12/20	Discusses the root causes of inexplicable anger and the importance of setting boundaries for emotional health.
How to Be Happy Now	2018/11/8	Anna shares tips on finding happiness in the present moment, regardless of external circumstances.
When I've Wanted To Die	2018/10/11	Reflects on moments of despair and the thought process of overcoming suicidal thoughts.
Maintaining Mental Health	2018/8/23	Offers strategies for maintaining mental health in the face of daily stresses and challenges, emphasizing proactive self-care.

What Self Care Really Looks Like	2018/2/22	Debunks common misconceptions about self-care and shares personal self-care practices.
Overthinking the Hell Out of Overthinking	2018/1/4	Delves into the pitfalls of overthinking and offers strategies for managing it.

Appendix B

Coding table of self-help strategies by Jorm (2012, pp. 236-237)

Category	Subcategory	Definition/Action
Self-help strategies that professional and consumer experts agree are likely to be helpful for subclinical depression	Physical Activity	Engage in exercise or physical activity
	Sleep Hygiene	Practice good sleep hygiene and maintain a regular sleep schedule
	Enjoyable Activities	Do something you enjoy and try to remain involved in purposeful activities for at least a small part of every day
	Past Strategies	Make a list of strategies that have worked in the past for depression and use them
	Achievement	Engage in an activity that gives a feeling of achievement
	Social Support	Enlist a trusted friend or relative to help you get out and about or do activities
	Outdoor Activity	Make sure you get out of the house for at least a short time each day
	Rewards	Reward yourself for reaching a small goal
	Relaxation Methods	Learn relaxation methods
	Supportive Conversations	Talk over problems or feelings with someone who is supportive and caring
	Communication	Let family and friends know how you are feeling so that they are aware of what you are going through
Healthy Diet	Eat a healthy, balanced diet	

Appendix C

Coding table of mental health stigma (Link & Phelan, 2001, pp. 363-367; Corrigan, 2004, pp. 616-620)

Category	Subcategory	Definition
Stigma Components (Link & Phelan, 2001, pp. 363-367)	Labeling	Distinguishing and labeling human differences physically, psychologically, or behaviorally.
	Stereotyping	Attaching negative stereotypes to labeled individuals.
	Separation	Seeing labeled individuals as fundamentally different, leading to an “us vs. them” mentality.
	Status Loss and Discrimination	Labeled individuals experience loss of status and discrimination, leading to unequal outcomes.
	Power	Stigmatization involves social, economic, and political power to enforce labels, stereotypes, and discrimination.
Public Stigma (Corrigan, 2004, pp. 616-620)	Societal Reactions	General society’s reactions to individuals with mental health conditions, including stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination.
Self-Stigma (Corrigan, 2004, pp. 616-620)	Internalization of Prejudice	Individuals with mental health issues internalize societal prejudices and stereotypes about mental illness.
Stigma Reduction (Corrigan, 2004, pp. 616-620)	Protest	Efforts to challenge negative representations and stereotypes of mental illness in public media.
	Education	Providing accurate information about mental illness to correct misconceptions.
	Contact	Direct interaction with individuals who have experienced mental illness to challenge and change stigmatizing attitudes.

Appendix D

Coding tree with themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Open Codes
Daily Self-Care & Inner Growth	Practical self-care & self-love practices	Morning sunlight exposure, cold exposure, giving up alcohol, love languages towards oneself, loving self talk, physical activities, breathing exercises, reading, self education, journaling and self reflection, planning and Introspection, financial education, making healthier food choices
	Self-worth & Self-esteem	Discovering purpose, meditation, creative visualization, journaling for guidance, gratitude practice, affirmations, embracing change and letting go, becoming your own best friend, prioritize growth, radical acceptance, self-validation, positive resilience
Mental Health Strategies & Interventions	Coping strategies & Therapeutic methods	Mindfulness, practicing compassion problem solving, emotional validity, managing expectations, compassionate self-talk, setting boundaries, sliding scale therapists, foundation check, journaling, thought record, cognitive behavioral therapy, therapy
	Understanding & Navigating emotions	Emotional relapses, physiological sigh for stress, walking for anxiety, acknowledging and validating feelings for sadness, dilated gaze for impulsivity

		or anger, focused attention for low motivation, writing strengths for insecurity, setting emotional boundaries, listening to intuition, self-attunement, finding meaning from suffering, accepting negative emotions
	Happiness & Positive psychology	Three dimensions of happiness, criticisms of positive psychology, positive psychology's goals, misconception about happiness, happiness as an internal state, happiness and comparison, perception shifting
Mental Health Misconceptions & Social Stigma	/	Misuse of psychological terms, guilt over self-care, stigma around seeking external validation, oversimplified therapy speak, informal psychological labels
Anna's Personal Journeys to Healing and Empowerment	/	Vulnerability, self-discovery, resilience, therapy insights, mental health management, emotional regulation, financial literacy, creative expression, advocacy and sharing, empowerment through knowledge, breakup experiences, sister's suicide, personal growth, overcoming adversity, self-acceptance, end of friendships