

Presenting Design Collection About Mental Health Challenges: A Phenomenological Study of Fashion Majored Undergraduates' Experiences

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A significant number of undergraduate students are struggling with mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression in the US ("National College Health", 2019). In the survey, 66.4% of students indicated that they experienced overwhelming anxiety and 46.2% of students reported that they were too depressed to function within the last 12 months. As mental health challenges on the college campus are becoming more prevalent, practitioners and researchers describe this as a mental health "crisis" or "epidemic" (Auerbach et al., 2018; Eva, 2019).

The objective of this study is to understand the lived experiences of undergraduate students, who chose their mental health challenges as their story of design collections. This study was conducted in a mid-sized University located in the midwest region of the U.S. Students in the University are required to create and present their design collections at a student fashion show before graduation. In a Collection Development Studio course, students develop a brand, design a collection of garments, construct four outfits, and present their brands and designs to the public.

Students are encouraged to develop a story with a strong theme that represents what the individual wants to communicate with the world through their designs. A design collection with a meaningful story is intended to inspire, influence, and persuade one's audience (Simmons, 2013). Therefore, student designers develop higher engagement with viewers as the dissemination also serves a purpose in their job hunt. The dissemination process consists of two venues: a fashion show and exhibit. The fashion show and exhibit resemble those of a fashion company's trunk show and promotional booth at a trade show. At the exhibit, students further promote their collections and interact with families, friends, viewers, and industry professionals.

Five students were invited to the study over three years. A phenomenological interviewing method (Van Manen, 1997) was used to understand their experiences of exploring, choosing a story, sketching, selecting colors and fabrics, constructing garments, and presenting their collections. The interviews were semi-constructed, tape-recorded, and last for up to two hours.

Phenomenology is a proper theoretical framework for the study as it is of understanding the deeper meaning of individuals' everyday experiences pre-reflectively. The phenomenological approach encourages interviewees to tell their experiences as a form of story, which allows the uncovering of meanings and understanding of their lived experiences. Texts that came from five interviews were analyzed following Van Manen's thematic analysis approach (1997). The narratives were transcribed, analyzed, and grouped by essential themes as they emerged from the researcher's reflections on them.

Participants' ages are ranged from 22 to 27. Their design collection stories include the experiences of anxiety, depression, and side effects of depression medications. Three primary themes of lived experiences emerged. Participants indicated a degree of struggles in choosing a theme of the difficulties that they experienced and worked through. Terms like "dark" were used to describe their perceptions of the stories. One participant said, "I was like sketching every day and nothing was like really connecting with me. My fiancé said, 'it would be cool for you to do something to talk about anxiety and mental health. I was like I don't want to do anything dark and gloomy...I just think it'll be a bummer to like talk about.'"

There were several incidents that participants felt in which their experiences of living with mental health challenges were minimized in importance. One participant said, "...I made eye contact with one person when I mentioned that my theme was anxiety and it was kind of my experiences put into a physical form. There was a skeptical look...like 'I don't know about that.' This anecdote illustrates that a lack of knowledge about mental health conditions appeared to be an invalidation of the participants' experiences living with mental health challenges.

Participants' design collections led to real-life conversations between the participants (designers) and viewers. It allowed the participants to feel supported and empowered and gain confidence. The collections informed, evoked empathy, and inspired viewers including their families, friends, and strangers. One participant said, "I feel like I really grew as a person, ...all these other women interacting with each other and being body positive and being mental health positive...I'm starting to realize more that fashion is not just something that you dress yourself every day. It's kind of like a collective human experience." The creation and dissemination process allowed the participants to recognize their challenges with mental health concerns as thoughts and not as something that defined themselves. The implication of the study is to start a discussion about young adults' mental health, social stigma, and fostering a community of support. Future studies could focus on how to build effective and enduring systematic changes to support students and to make this a shared value for the entire campus community.

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