

Understanding and reducing teen mental health stigma through teen-created art on social media

Jennifer Hu^{1*}

¹ Merivale High School, Ottawa, Ontario K2G 1E2, Canada

* Correspondence: jennifer.hu8888@gmail.com

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Abstract: Mental health stigma is a major issue for teenagers, often stopping them from asking for help and causing misunderstandings among peers. Traditional programs like school presentations, guest speakers, and workshops led by mental health professionals usually give information and suggest solutions. While these programs can help, their effects are often short-term. Studies and examples of teen-created content on social media suggest that art can provide a different approach. It allows teens to share and represent experiences in more interesting ways. This paper looks at how teen-created art on platforms like Instagram can reduce mental health stigma and whether it can be more engaging and inclusive than traditional programs. For this project, a comic was created and posted online, and had its engagement tracked over one week. The post received positive responses from peers and health-related accounts, showing that even small-scale teen-created content can connect with audiences. These findings suggest that teen-created art can make mental health topics more visible, and shared among peers. This paper concludes that encouraging teens to create and share their own art can improve anti-stigma efforts by making them more personal and engaging. Others can contribute by creating similar content, using social media to reach wider audiences and helping expand conversation about mental health among teens.

Keywords: Mental health, Stigma, Social media, Teen-created art

1. Introduction

Mental health stigma remains a significant barrier for teenagers, often preventing them from seeking help and fostering misunderstandings among peers (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2015). Traditional anti-stigma programs, such as school presentations and workshops led by mental health professionals or peer educators, aim to provide information and correct misconceptions, such as beliefs that mental illness is a sign of weakness or that it only affects adults (Caton, 2018). While these programs can be effective in the short term, their long-term impact is inconsistent, and they may fail to maintain the interest of students (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012). Stigma can be intensified for teens from minority backgrounds due to cultural expectations and shame (Banner, 2024). Studies and examples of teen-created content on social media suggest that art can provide a different approach. It allows teens to share personal experiences in a way that is relatable, encourages empathy, and starts conversations with peers (Stuart et al., 2014). This leads to the question of this paper: how does teen-created art, especially on social media, help reduce mental health stigma among teens, and is it more effective and inclusive than traditional methods?

Teenagers continue to face mental health stigma that prevents them from speaking up or getting help. While many programs exist to reduce this stigma, few focus on what teens can create themselves. This project argues that teen-created art, when shared through social media, can help reduce stigma by encouraging awareness and starting open conversations among peers.

2. Methods

2.1. Traditional Anti-Stigma Methods

Traditional efforts to reduce mental health stigma among teens often rely on in-person programs in schools, such as classroom presentations, guest speakers, and awareness assemblies (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2015). For example, campaigns like Bell Let's Talk School Programs and MindMatters use mental health professionals and peer educators to provide factual information and encourage discussion (Linden et al., 2022; Foulkes, 2025).

These programs are usually delivered through structured workshops, lectures, and peer discussions led by trained facilitators. While these methods do increase general knowledge and reduce some misconceptions, their long-term impact on behavior and inclusivity is inconsistent (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012). Studies show that effects often fade without ongoing engagement (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2015; Foulkes, 2025).

2.2 Art-Based Social Media Campaigns

In recent years, social media has been used to combine creative expression with awareness campaigns. A strong example is the #RevealHowYouFeel campaign, launched by the Mental Health Coalition, which encouraged young people to share personal stories via video on Instagram during Mental Health Awareness Month (The Shorty Awards, 2025). Teen and influencer participants used emotional storytelling and visuals to show the feelings behind their smiles, aiming to normalize open conversations about mental health (The Shorty Awards, 2025). Over 500 people joined the challenge, including high-profile figures like Kenneth Cole, founder and member of the Mental Health Coalition. The campaign reached more than 3 million people, and over 23 million with paid support, encouraging tens of thousands to explore mental health resources (The Shorty Awards, 2025). This demonstrates how peer-created content can spark wide engagement, emotional resonance, and increased awareness effects that traditional methods often struggle to achieve.

For this project, I created a comic and posted it on Instagram to explore how teen-created art could help reduce mental health stigma. This comic was inspired by research on teen mental-health as well as examples of health-related content from other artists on social media. I drew ideas from these artists' use of visuals and choice of words to engage their audiences and intended to design my comic in a way that was both relatable and accessible to other teens. The goal was to represent experiences and encourage discussion while testing how peer-made content can influence stigma in a way traditional programs cannot.

3. Data Collection

3.1. Traditional Methods

In-person anti-stigma programs often assess outcomes using surveys before and after interventions, measuring changes in attitudes, willingness to seek help, and knowledge of mental illness. Evaluations of

the Opening Minds initiative in Canada reported that youth who participated in school-based programs showed reductions in stigma of up to 30% immediately after the intervention (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012). However, the program also found that these effects tended to weaken over time, with long-term impact less consistent unless reinforced by ongoing engagement (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012). Similarly, a recent systematic review of youth anti-stigma interventions found a small but significant effect at post-test, which was not sustained at a follow-up (Bailie et al., 2023).

3.2 Art Based Social Media Methods

Online art campaigns often generate more lasting engagement, measured through likes, comments, and follower growth. Research analyzing Instagram posts tagged with mental health-related hashtags found that representational art accompanied by personal captions received significantly more community responses, especially when artists described their own experiences (Poole, 2018).

Further, a randomized controlled trial of an online art-based intervention revealed that participants exposed to art and writing from peer influencers on platforms like Instagram reported significantly higher mental health awareness, sympathy, and appreciation for people with mental illness compared to those who saw unrelated content (Griffith & Stein, 2024). The Instagram artist JustPeachyComic, who shares relatable comics about anxiety and mental health, has built an audience of over 260,000 followers. Many of their posts receive 10,000+ likes and hundreds of comments, showing sustained engagement and community building (Holly Chisholm (@Justpeachycomic), 2017).

For my own Instagram art post, I tracked the positive engagement over the first week after posting the comic (Figure 1). During this time, the post gained 40 likes and 33 new followers. In addition to likes, other positive interactions occurred, including a comment from a health-related media producer saying, “Love this!!”, which highlighted that the comic was able to reach beyond my immediate circle. Although smaller in scale than established creators, the post still sparked peer interaction through likes and positive responses, showing the potential impact of even small-scale teen-created content.



Figure 1. Comic created for this project depicting a teen experiencing misunderstanding by peers

4. Discussion

The data suggests traditional programs provide a strong base of knowledge, but their influence tends to be short-term and limited to those physically present. Social media art, on the other hand, allows for ongoing visibility and interaction. Relatable, peer-created content makes the message feel authentic, encouraging teens to discuss their experiences and challenge stereotypes in a way formal lessons often cannot. While traditional methods risk fading without reinforcement, online art campaigns remain accessible and can grow organically as they are shared. A combined approach may be most effective where traditional programs provide factual accuracy, while art-based social media makes the conversation personally meaningful and widely visible.

Other teens or small artists can contribute by creating and sharing their own art, comics, videos, or written pieces about mental health on social media. They can use hashtags to connect with campaigns, share personal experiences to make it more relatable, or just comment and engage with other posts. By actively participating in any of these ways, anyone can help spread anti-stigma efforts.

5. Conclusions

Teen-created art on social media shows clear advantages in reducing stigma compared to traditional methods. While programs like Opening Minds provide structure and knowledge, they often lack lasting impact. Social media art is inclusive, emotionally engaging, and sustainable, with both large creators and smaller individual posts showing the ability to reach peers directly. However, my project has its limitations and the comic had reached a relatively small audience. Future contributors can expand on this work by creating more posts, exploring different formats like animations or interactive content, and collaborating with other creators/artists to reach a wider audience. Together, these findings show that encouraging teens to share their own art online can serve as a powerful complement to traditional education, making anti-stigma efforts more effective and accessible for youth.

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