

Ficus

by

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Second Reader: Daniel Nanni

My undergraduate senior thesis project, “Ficus”, was an idea that started way before it became my thesis. It started when I was facing my own demons; my own skeletons in the closet. My anxiety and depression had dictated my world, thought process, and life. For so long, I felt alone while struggling. Although I knew a few friends who had their own mental struggles, I felt that there were only a few of us out there who had these problems and were combating with them. We are becoming more comfortable talking about our struggles, our sex lives, our family; so many other personal things. The American Dream advocates for a meritocracy; those who have fought to thrive deserve rewards for all the hard work they put in. However, no one talks about the mental struggle. We sit here talking about how tough we are for getting through all the pain and suffering that we have but in truth, it’s a complete bluff; it’s a facade. Which in truth is not needed. We are all human, we all have flaws we conflict with. Why not embrace those who tend to feel sad often? Or those who get really nervous all the time? Or those who hear voices in their heads? We are all people with our own baggage and stories, all striving for happiness. It wasn’t until I reached out for help that I learned that I’m not alone at all. Yet, I did not know about it due to the lack of conversation around mental health.

When we are sick with the flu or cancer we do not say “they are the flu” or “they are cancer.” But we do say “they are bipolar” or “they are schizophrenic.” We tend to define mental illness through self-identity. Mental illness is something we are starting to talk more about, but it is only the beginning. I could have talked to anyone about mental illnesses. Yet, artists, creatives; they are the ones who are willing to speak out about challenging topics. Surprisingly, creatives have yet to talk more about issues of mental health. We are more than our illnesses. I will open the conversation of mental illness to creatives, professors and other makers through my undergraduate thesis. My thesis will open the conversation of mental illness through a podcast and booklet.

I first began my thesis in April of 2018, shortly after I had submitted my undergraduate thesis proposal. I spent my summer then researching various mental illnesses and disorders. I also took the time to refine my thesis: to narrow my focus, my form of research and design format. Although I had a loose outline, I was able to rely on it to navigate me throughout my fall and spring semesters. I took the first semester to primarily gather research. I did this by interviewing individuals within the creative industry: visual artists, musicians, dancers, culinary artists, and much more.

Emily Bottner Senior Project Thesis Advisor: Carol Bankerd Second Reader: Daniel Nanni Throughout the research semester, I learned a lot through the interviews I conducted. From my first few interviews with creatives who have mental illnesses, I learned that those who struggle with mental illnesses have a lack of privilege due to being outcasted for their illness. When placed into this “other” box, this causes those

who have mental illnesses and disorders to feel ashamed of this part of themselves. Furthermore, this caused them to feel dehumanized because they were being identified by their illness and not who they were as a person entirely.

Many of my interviewees with mental illnesses also voiced their frustration with others assuming that they are using their mental illness for attention, especially on social media. “People try to collect mental illnesses on their sleeve because it's trendy when it's just not,” said Tom Johnson, an audio engineer with OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) It's not cute and it's not funny; it's stigmatizing people with real mental illness...People don't really understand what it is they just think it's trendy to have it and I just hate that s**t.”

Not only did I interview creatives with mental illnesses, but I also interviewed professors and professional creatives in the field for their perspective on mental illness from an outside view. One of my interviewees expressed how surprised they were to learn how difficult it is just to find a therapist. We assume it's easy to get help when in reality, there is such a long process to just get support. Between finding the financial flexibility in addition to the best service that suits ones' needs, getting consistent help is a lengthy, time and energy-consuming process.

Lastly, I interviewed Sociologist, Mary Koust, for feedback and guidance on my research. She emphasized to me that ethnographies are about qualitative research, not quantity. Throughout my project, I was concerned about the lack of interviews I had. However, Koust reminded how uncomfortable this conversation still is within our society. The mere fact that people are not jumping to talk about mental illnesses shows how uncomfortable we still are with this conversation. Furthermore, the silence shows the lack of conversation revolving around this topic. Although I did hold seven interviews, they were not easy to come by. The discussion revolved around mental health is still a sensitive topic for individuals. My interview with Koust helped me really appreciate the interviews that I did receive, in addition to how much I learned from them.

A persistent message that was conveyed throughout all the interviews was that creatives tend to glorify mental illnesses. It is a habit for artists to use their flaws and problems as a form of inspiration for their creativity. This evolves into a bad dependency on suffering
Emily Bottner Senior Project Thesis Advisor: Carol Bankerd Second Reader: Daniel Nanni for the sake of art. “I've been in relationships with people who are struggling severely with depression and are fine artists and it feels like such a cliché but I've experienced this first hand and that they are highly resistant to giving treatment or help because they feel like that depression is core to their ability to be an artist,” Professor and Graphic Designer, Julia Rockwell explains. “And I think that's something that's

wrapped up in very, very legendary, almost mythical ideas of what an artist is and what they need to be tortured or have this darkness in order to create.”

With classic artists such as Vincent Van Gogh and Yayoi Kusama who are notorious for their work through their mental health struggles, it is engraved into our creative culture to undergo the hardships of mental illnesses. However, artists such as Tom Johnson, have pointed out that treating mental illnesses can improve your work, rather than deteriorate it. “For every Phil Lynott there is who dies of a heroin overdose because he can't get his s**t straight, there's an Eric Clapton who went to rehab and like came out of an experience of hardship a stronger person by dealing with it and went on to do greater things. Not despite or because of his illness, but because he was strong enough and took the initiative to conquer it.”

Another point that was brought up from these interviews was the impact of the Self-Care movement. The overarching consensus was that Self-Care is not always a healthy habit. Self-Care can be helpful to alleviate some symptoms as well as general mental wellness. However, Self Care is not a form of treatment. The popularity of Self-Care and Self-Love has drawn much attention to social media and marketing platforms. This has contributed to the misunderstanding of Self-Care replacing other forms of treatment for mental illnesses and disorders.

While interviewing these creatives, I also took the time to reflect on the content, choose platforms to best support the interviews, and begin making visuals. I realized that the best platform for the interviews would be a podcast while transcribing my first interview. The interview was more informal and personal than a professional interview. Listening to the interview invited the audience to join the conversation the most, which supports the objective of my thesis.

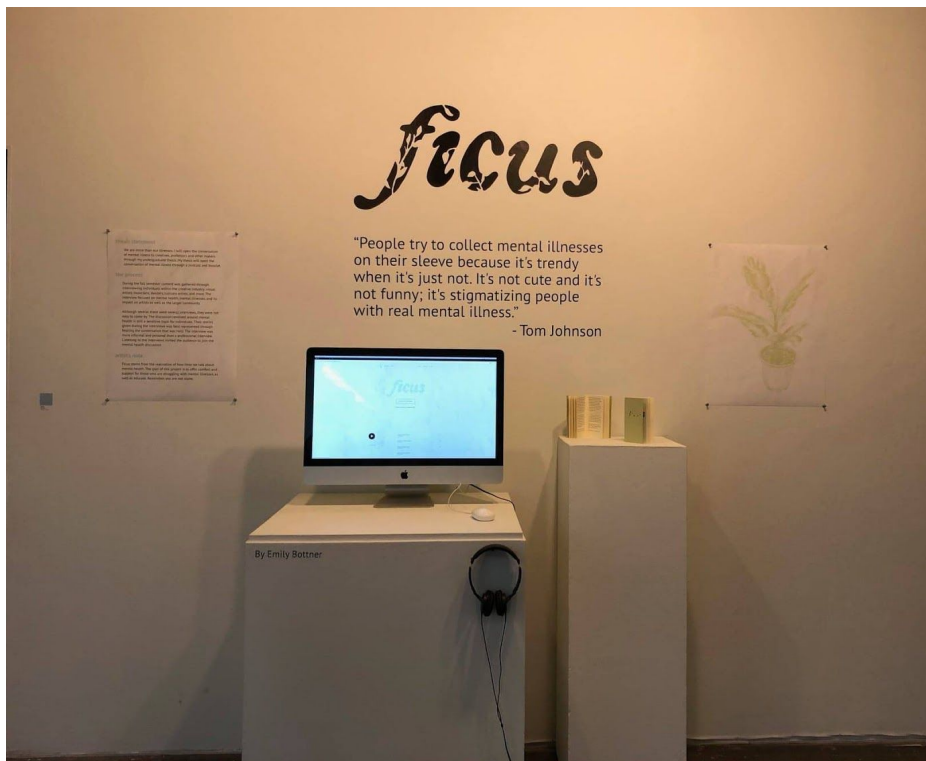
The following semester I focused on the visuals, designs, and final products of the thesis. I created the branding, the website, podcast, artist statement, booklet, and exhibition display. The idea to Ficus came to me pretty spontaneously, however after further research the meaning behind a Ficus tree aligned with the purpose of this thesis: to bring peace and unity within the community. The visuals are crafted by hand to communicate a delicacy, organic and wholesome visual language. The purpose of this Emily Bottner Senior Project Thesis Advisor: Carol Bankerd Second Reader: Daniel Nanni style of visual language is to tie in the comfort, security, and safety of the discussions held within the space of the project.

The goal of this project is to have the audience learn something new about mental illnesses. Maybe they realized that they are not alone and share similar mental illnesses with others. Maybe they learn that using ‘OCD’ as an adjective is actually defensive to

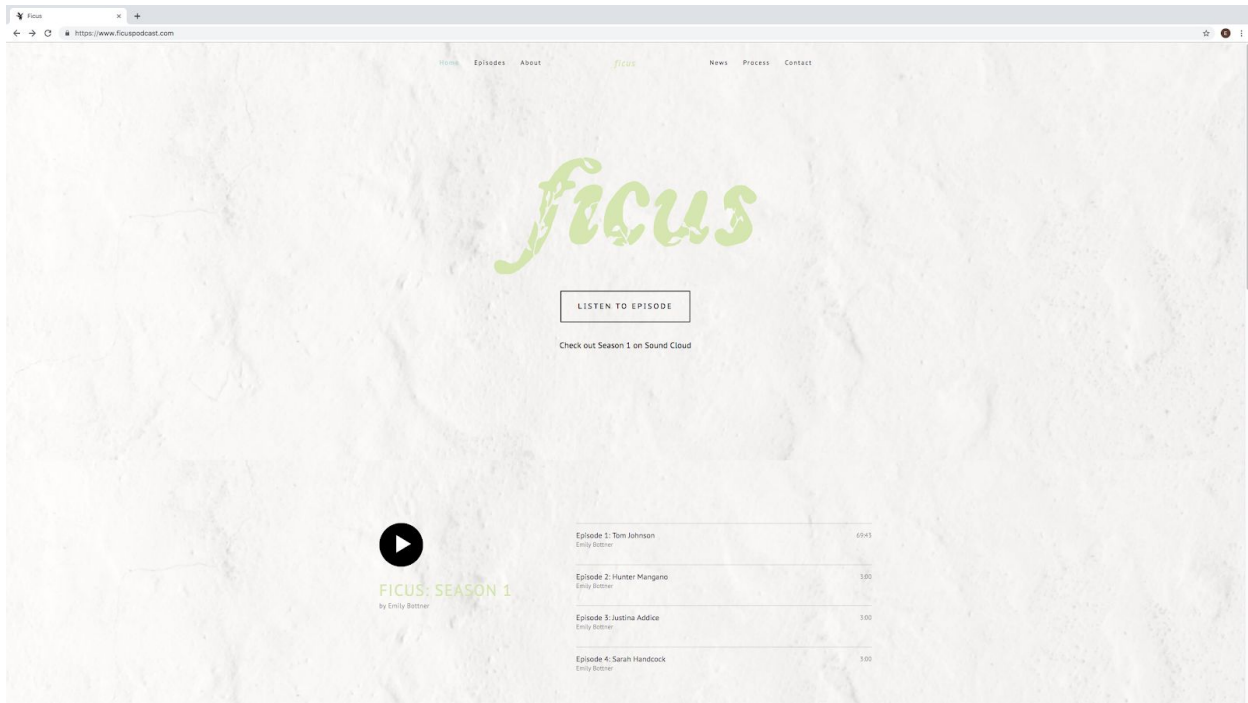
those who struggle with it. Maybe they are motivated to learn more about mental illnesses in order to better support their friends and family. At the end of the day, I strive to have my thesis bring awareness to mental health, learn about mental illnesses, and hopefully open up the dialogue more.

I had big dreams for this project. I wanted everyone and anyone to know about my thesis. It's an important conversation that I feel everyone should take part in. Originally I was thinking of asking people from everywhere to participate. I wanted to reach out to celebrities, average Joe's, students, retired folks, anyone who was willing to talk. It was naturally easier though to simply reach out to my student body. Although I did not get to interview bigger named people, I am still happy with my work. I really feel that this is just the start of something bigger and better in the future. I am excited to see where it goes and how it impacts our society hopefully for the better.

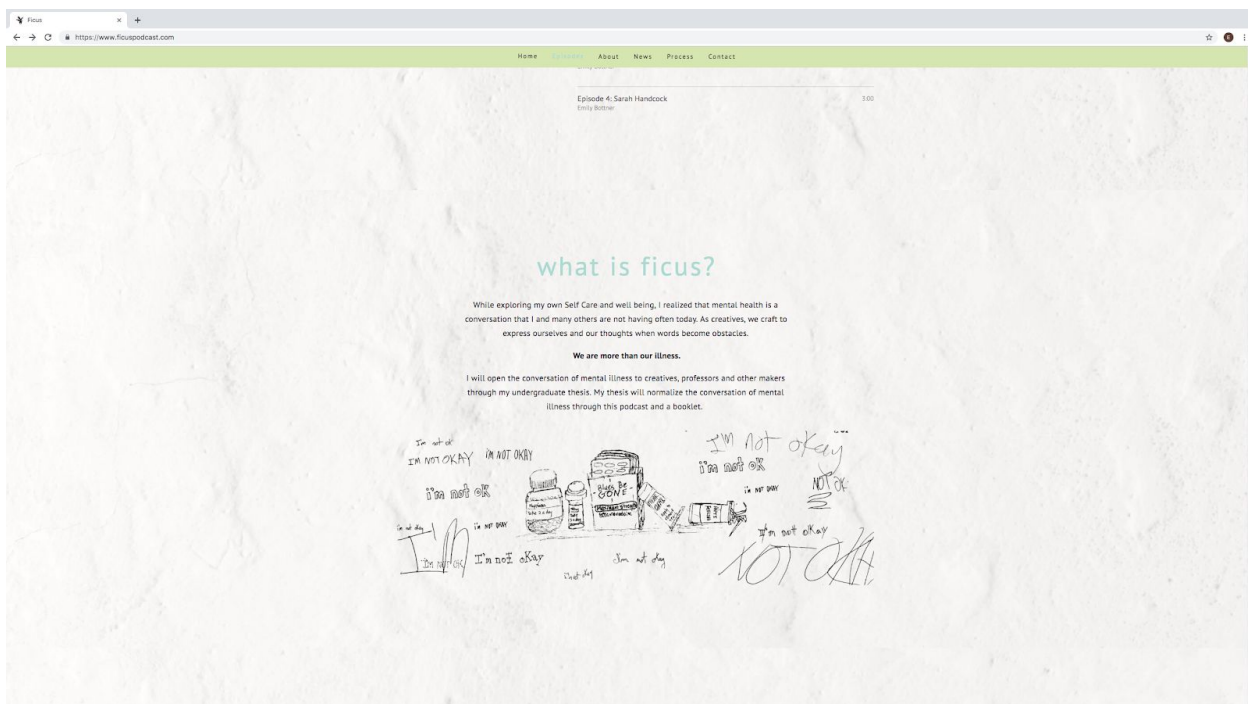
**All of the names used of interviewees are pseudonyms to keep their identity anonymous*



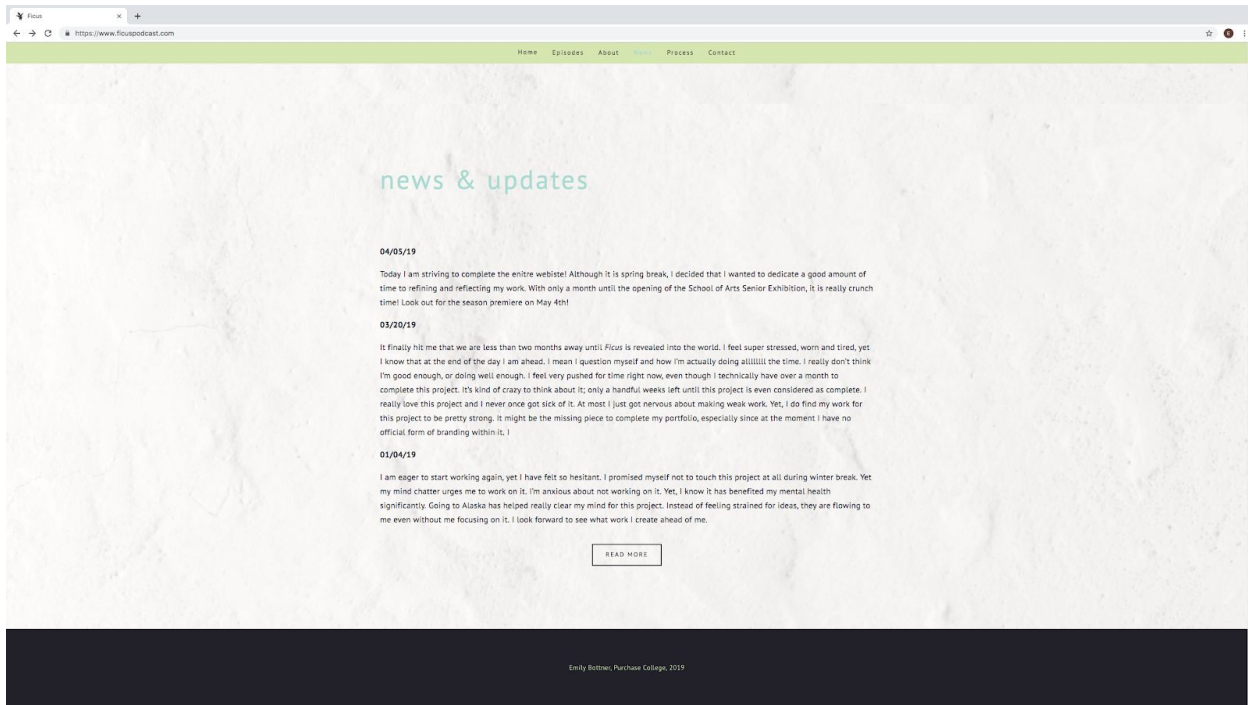
Senior Project Exhibition



Website Landing page



Website "About" page



Website "News & Updates" page



Website "Process" page