

**Vanity**

*Exploring the Impact of Social Media on Mental Health*

*Through the Lens of a TikTok Persona*

by

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In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital communication, the intersection of identity, mental health, and societal norms has become increasingly complex and nuanced. The advent of social media platforms like TikTok has provided individuals with unprecedented opportunities for self-expression and connection. It has also raised questions about the authenticity of digital identities and the impact of online engagement on mental well-being. Against this backdrop, this research paper delves into the exploration of these themes through the lens of the fictional TikTok character, Kryx. Through an immersive installation and accompanying project, this paper aims to unpack the layers of Kryx's digital persona, examine the portrayal of mental health issues on social media, and investigate the role of branding and consumerism in shaping online identities. By exploring Kryx's world, we seek to uncover insights into the complexities of digital identity construction, challenge societal norms surrounding mental health discourse, and prompt critical reflection on the implications of online engagement for individuals and society as a whole.

I created the character of Kryx as a 20-year-old TikTok influencer whose online persona revolves around a tumultuous mix of provocative content and unfiltered emotions. Kryx's personality contains elements of my own, as well as traits that I created based on my

observations of other TikTok users. Kryx lacks formal education, having dropped out of school in the tenth grade due to ongoing mental health challenges. Her interests tend towards the controversial and the sensational, with a focus on drugs, sex, violence, and the relentless pursuit of fame. Behind the facade of her online presence, Kryx struggles with an array of mental health issues, including an eating disorder, drug abuse, bipolar disorder, ADHD, and suicidal manic depression. Her life is a constant battle against the inner demons that threaten to consume her. In short, she is a “hot mess.”

Transitioning into a broader discussion, Kryx serves as a stark example of the impact of social media on young people. Through her curated online persona, she both reflects and perpetuates the normalization of risky behaviors and mental health struggles common among her impressionable audience. The constant pressure to maintain an image of perfection and to garner likes and followers on social media platforms exacerbates Kryx's already fragile mental state, highlighting the harmful effects of digital culture on vulnerable individuals like herself.

The landscape of social media has witnessed a profound transformation, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Global lockdowns and the consequent isolation of youth from traditional social structures, such as schools, have placed unprecedented social significance on the digital realm and platforms like TikTok.

For many in this population, the virtual world of social media has become a reality. This shift in societal dynamics has led to an increased reliance on online spaces as shared platforms for expression and connection among the youth. For many, this manufactured online community has become their social life. In that context, TikTok has emerged as a unique space where individuals, particularly young females, navigate discussions on mental health against the backdrop of their altered daily lives. In addition, corporations have seized upon this online environment as a marketing opportunity, adding a layer of complexity to these narratives. Thus, this thesis is rooted in the understanding that the confluence of mental health representation, capitalist influences, and attention-seeking behaviors on TikTok has become more pronounced in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting the evolving nature of youth engagement in shared virtual spaces.

To delve deeper into the correlation between social media and mental health, it's crucial to first establish clear definitions for both terms. According to Abderrahman M. Khalaf, the lead author of "The Impact of Social Media on the Mental Health of Adolescents and Young Adults: A Systematic Review," social media refers to "websites and applications that allow users to create and share content or participate in social networking."

Mental health, on the other hand, is a complex and intangible concept that's challenging to gauge or quantify. Paraphrasing Khalaf, a mentally healthy individual acknowledges their potential, competently handles daily obstacles, excels at work, and makes a positive impact on others' lives. (Khalaf 2023)

Khalaf brings valuable expertise to the discourse surrounding the effects of digital platforms on mental well-being. With a systematic approach, Khalaf and his team have rigorously examined the existing literature to provide insights into how social media usage affects the mental health of the younger demographic. Their work underscores the importance of understanding and addressing the potential risks associated with online engagement, shedding light on an increasingly relevant issue in contemporary society.

In the evolving landscape of social media, particularly accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, there exists a complex and pressing problem concerning the representation of mental health on platforms like TikTok. As youth increasingly turn to these digital spaces as shared havens during their pandemic-induced isolation, discussions surrounding mental health have become more prevalent. At the same time, these discussions are often co-opted by capitalist mechanisms and branding strategies by which “influencers,” generally young people who portray themselves as peers of TikTok users, promote products, services and images, blurring the lines between factual information and advertising. Additionally, TikTok's algorithm is designed to prioritize content that generates engagement in the form of likes, shares, and views, reinforcing

consumerist behavior and values. This fosters a competitive environment in which creators feel pressure to produce similar content.

TikTok, as a diverse platform for self-expression, becomes a canvas where individuals share their mental health experiences in ways that can be more fully grasped through experiential engagement. Kryx's typical method of sharing her mental health experiences is through dark humor, which is not always interpreted as such by other users.

Melanie Kennedy, in her article "'If the Rise of the TikTok Dance and e-Girl Aesthetic Has Taught Us Anything, It's That Teenage Girls Rule the Internet Right Now': TikTok Celebrity, Girls and the Coronavirus Crisis," explores the profound impact of TikTok during the global lockdowns prompted by the Coronavirus crisis.

Kennedy observes that the TikTok app originated in China in 2016, providing users with a platform to create and share short videos ranging from 3 to 60 seconds in duration, accompanied by music and audio-visual effects (Kennedy 1070). With 800 million users globally at the time of writing, TikTok has rapidly gained widespread popularity, transcending geographical boundaries to become a cultural phenomenon. Its intuitive interface and extensive library of creative tools have empowered users to express themselves in innovative ways, driving engagement and reshaping digital content consumption patterns. As TikTok continues to evolve and expand its reach, it remains at the forefront of the social media landscape, influencing trends and shaping cultural discourse on a global scale. However, despite its popularity, TikTok has faced scrutiny

from governments around the world, including the United States. Concerns about data privacy and national security have prompted discussions of a potential ban on TikTok in the US, which could have significant consequences for its users and the broader digital ecosystem. Such a ban could limit access to the platform, disrupt the livelihoods of content creators, and further strain diplomatic relations between countries. And inevitably, a TikTok ban would force the creation of a similar application to take its place.

According to Kennedy, TikTok has been dubbed as the "antidote to the Coronavirus" (Kennedy 1069), characterizing its lighthearted and often humorous content as a welcome distraction from the anxieties of the outside world, offering moments of levity and joy amidst the chaos. By positioning TikTok as an "antidote," Kennedy highlights its transformative potential in providing solace and solidarity to users. Among the positive aspects of TikTok noted by Kennedy are the tips offered for enhancing productivity and creativity to combat the boredom of social isolation. This observation underscores the dual nature of social media, as both harmful and helpful.

Kennedy observes that the iconography, rituals, spaces, and lifestyles of youth culture are prominently reflected in TikTok's trends, particularly evident in its dance and stunt challenges (Kennedy 1070). These challenges serve as a platform for users to express themselves creatively and participate in communal activities that resonate with their peers. Moreover, Kennedy notes that these challenges are often filmed in the intimate and relatable setting of messy teenage bedrooms (Kennedy 1070). This choice of location adds an authentic and personal touch to the content, allowing users to showcase

their individuality within the familiar confines of their own space. The prevalence of such imagery underscores TikTok's role as a platform for authentic self-expression and communal bonding within youth culture, bridging the gap between digital and offline experiences.

Using that as a template, Kryx's TikTok videos are staged in a virtual space meant to replicate a typical young woman's bedroom. In that space, Kryx reflects many of the current TikTok trends. She dances, addresses her eating disorder and struggles with drug abuse and manic depression, and does it all non-verbally using the tools provided by the app.

Natasha Preskey, a writer for the blog "Stylist," explores the phenomenon of TikTok videos offering comfort and joy during the Coronavirus pandemic. In her article, she discusses how TikTok videos, including dances, songs, and challenges, have gained popularity on social media platforms as people seek entertainment and connection during the pandemic. This sentiment underscores the therapeutic and communal aspects of TikTok's content, offering a sense of connection and levity amidst social distancing measures. Furthermore, these videos are not merely expressions of youthful exuberance but also signify TikTok's status as a capitalist success story amid a global economic crisis (Kennedy 1070). By blending the celebration of youth culture with capitalist undertones, TikTok's popularity during times of adversity highlights its ability to monetize societal trends and consumer behaviors. This dual narrative underscores the platform's resilience



and adaptability in navigating both cultural and economic landscapes, cementing its position as a dominant force in contemporary digital culture.

Refinery29.com, a website known for its focus on women's perspectives and trends, asserts that the meteoric rise of TikTok dance and the “e-girl aesthetic” signifies the dominance of teenage girls in shaping internet culture (Kennedy 1071). This observation underscores the significant influence wielded by young women in driving trends and shaping digital discourse, challenging traditional notions of online authority and power dynamics. This perspective posits girlhood visibility in mainstream digital media as a transformative phenomenon, highlighting the empowerment and resilience of young women in navigating and redefining societal narratives during times of crisis. By celebrating the agency and visibility of teenage girls on platforms like TikTok, Refinery29's coverage underscores the transformative potential of digital media in amplifying once-marginalized voices and challenging dominant cultural norms. Refinery29's insights add depth to the understanding of how TikTok has become a platform for young women to express themselves and shape digital culture, aligning with its mission to provide diverse and inclusive perspectives in media.

Kennedy suggests that the rise of female TikTok stars such as Charlie D'Amelio should be interpreted through two lenses (Kennedy 1071). First, it represents a continuation and amplification of girl culture and the ideals of young female celebrities that have evolved over the past two decades. This perspective acknowledges the enduring appeal and influence of young female figures in shaping cultural norms and trends.

Secondly, Kennedy argues that the prominence of stars like D'Amelio obscures the dangers and challenges faced by girls worldwide who do not fit the mold of idealized TikTok celebrities (Kennedy 1071). This observation highlights the disparities and inequalities inherent in digital media representation, emphasizing the need for a more nuanced understanding of girlhood and its complexities. By examining TikTok's impact through these dual perspectives, Kennedy invites critical reflection on the broader societal implications of digital celebrity culture and its effects on marginalized communities.

Kennedy highlights a significant departure from the traditional conceptualization of the girl's bedroom in the context of TikTok, emphasizing that girls' bedroom culture is no longer perceived as "private" or "safe" from gendered surveillance (Kennedy 1071). This observation underscores the pervasive influence of surveillance mechanisms within digital spaces, where personal expressions and interactions are subject to heightened scrutiny and commodification. Moreover, Kennedy suggests that this shift reflects the intersection of surveillance capitalism, where user data is monetized for profit, and gendered surveillance, which reinforces societal norms and power structures (Kennedy 1071). By acknowledging the erosion of privacy and safety within digital environments like TikTok, Kennedy prompts critical inquiry into the broader implications of surveillance and capitalism on youth culture and identity formation.

Because of this potential for surveillance, I took great pains to conceal my online identity while performing as Kryx, including disguising myself with a wig and makeup and creating a simulated bedroom unidentifiable as my actual living space.

Recently, The Sunday Times wrote, "Where Instagram is glossy and filtered, TikTok is goofy and relatable." Within this context, the teenage girl's bedroom emerges as a potent symbol of TikTok's discursively constructed "normality," characterized by mirrors, scattered shoes, piles of clothes, and dressing tables adorned with makeup and hair styling tools (Kennedy 1072). Such spaces epitomize TikTok's unique aesthetic of relatability and goofiness, fostering a sense of authenticity and inclusivity where individuals can freely express themselves and forge connections with others.

But while many users can relate to such an environment, others can be harshly critical of it, and still others can see an opportunity for marketing, social connection, and even malicious online stalking.

Tom Lamont, a journalist for The Guardian, provides insights into the world of TikTok through his article "'It's hard to put the brakes on it: We doubled down': Charli D'Amelio and the first family of TikTok." In his piece, Lamont explores the rise of Charli D'Amelio and her family as prominent figures on TikTok, shedding light on their experiences and impact within the platform's community.

This exploration extends to the insidious political and ideological work inherent in the construction of girlhood, as articulated by Lamont's assertion that TikTok serves as

"a place for teens and tweens to come to be silly, unashamed, unfiltered – a tonic to the earnestness of Instagram, the stress of Snapchat, the verbal warfare of Twitter". These observations underscore the complex interplay between digital platforms, societal expectations, and individual identity formation, prompting critical reflection on the underlying power dynamics and discursive practices at play within online spaces like TikTok.

But while Lamont appears only to see the positives of TikTok, Kennedy critically examines how these narratives obscure the platform's toxic undercurrent of judgment and harassment, both within the platform and in broader discourse (Kennedy 1072). Despite its portrayal as a haven for unfiltered expression, TikTok remains embedded within what Alison Harvey terms the "aggressive architecture" of the wider Internet, perpetuating harmful dynamics of scrutiny and exclusion.

Kennedy highlights a significant revelation from The Intercept in March 2020, where leaked internal documents from TikTok's makers surfaced, revealing instructions to algorithmically suppress posts by users deemed to appear 'abnormal,' 'ugly' (indicating factors such as wrinkles and obesity), and 'slummy,' while also censoring politically 'defamatory' and ideologically 'vulgar' content (Kennedy 1072). This revelation sheds light on the platform's discriminatory practices and the inherent biases embedded within its moderation algorithms, raising concerns about the impact on user expression and the perpetuation of harmful beauty standards and ideological censorship.

It's possible that the character of Kryx failed to achieve widespread engagement because her makeup and clothing were highly stylized and perhaps outside the parameters of TikTok's algorithms. Even with limited engagement, some users who did interact with Kryx commented that she was "weird" and "cringe." One user asserted that "Nobody likes you."

Kennedy's exploration of TikTok's discriminatory practices underscores the platform's complex role in shaping online discourse and user experiences. Beyond concerns of censorship and bias, TikTok's influence extends to its impact on mental health among users. Many individuals turn to TikTok as a means of coping with mental health issues, seeking solace and support through interactions with fellow users. However, this reliance on online communities can sometimes exacerbate existing issues, as users are confronted with unrealistic beauty standards, harmful comparisons, and triggering content. Thus, while TikTok may offer moments of connection and validation, it also poses risks to mental well-being, highlighting the need for critical examination of its broader implications on user health and digital culture.

In truth, since Kryx was a fictional character, I couldn't take such negative comments personally. But it was easy to see how a TikTok user presenting themselves to a sometimes merciless and unfeeling online world could be adversely affected by such comments.

Predictably, this environment has spawned a new industry, the online therapist. Just as capitalism shapes market dynamics, TikTok's algorithmic framework influences

how users engage with the now readily available therapeutic content. Online “therapists” – who claim to be licensed but like all internet claims, these should be viewed skeptically – adeptly utilize the platform's memetic language to connect with users, while the algorithm guides content curation. This interaction mirrors the capitalist dynamic where supply and demand are influenced by market forces. Ultimately, TikTok's algorithm emerges as a central player, akin to a dominant market force, in shaping how mental health and therapy are perceived and accessed online (Avella, 2023).

As a result, many TikTok users seem to find it easier to access mental health treatment through the online platform than in the real world, once again raising the problem of knowing what is real and what is not on the internet, and of who to trust and who to avoid. Additionally, sexism and racism influence the types of mental health content that gain visibility and recognition, as marginalized groups may face barriers in accessing and sharing their experiences. Structural inequities further exacerbate these issues by limiting access to quality mental health care and resources for underserved communities. Ultimately, the commodification of mental health on social media reflects larger systemic issues that perpetuate inequality and hinder the equitable distribution of mental health support. These dynamics highlight the need for a critical examination of the role of social media in mental health discourse and the importance of addressing systemic inequalities in mental health care provision.

The phenomenon of self-diagnosis based on TikTok represents a potentially concerning trend, particularly among adolescents and young adults. For instance, individuals may watch videos on TikTok that discuss symptoms of certain mental health disorders and then apply those symptoms to themselves, leading them to self-diagnose without consulting a mental health professional. This can result in misinterpretation of symptoms, incorrect diagnoses, and inappropriate treatment choices, ultimately exacerbating mental health issues rather than addressing them effectively.

Clinicians may need more clarification about this trend due to their unfamiliarity with new technology and the large quantity of content on TikTok, coupled with the platform's adaptive algorithm that tailors videos to the individual. This can create a perception among users that certain diagnoses are more prevalent than they are. Moreover, the condensed visual format of TikTok captivates teens as they develop their identity, making them more susceptible to engaging with popular and performative content. Despite its flaws, TikTok presents an unprecedented opportunity for mental health engagement among adolescents, highlighting the need for the field to harness this engagement effectively (Chochol et al., 2023). The platform's accessibility and popularity make it a valuable tool for reaching young people who may not otherwise seek out mental health information or support. However, it's crucial to approach this engagement with caution, ensuring that the content provided is accurate, supportive, and sensitive to the diverse needs of users. Mental health professionals and content creators must

work collaboratively to leverage TikTok's potential while addressing its limitations and risks. By doing so, we can create a more inclusive and effective digital space for mental health education and support, ultimately improving outcomes for adolescents navigating mental health challenges in the digital age.

Youth and young adults appreciate shared experiences within online discussion forums, citing accessibility, anonymity, inclusivity, sense of control, and mitigation of stigma as valued resource characteristics. Preference for seeking health information online or through peer-to-peer sharing can reflect individuals' concerns or experiences with non-affirming or discriminatory healthcare providers. Furthermore, peer-to-peer health information sharing may fill the gaps in social support from health systems, provide health-specific information, and offer insight into "how to live" with chronic diseases, including mental health. Select TikTok videos may serve as relevant educational resources for healthcare professionals' education and training. However, research exploring mental health content on TikTok is essentially absent from published research literature. This appears to be an untapped resource.

The absence of research exploring mental health content on TikTok has both a positive and a negative aspect. On one hand, the lack of published research indicates a gap in our understanding of how TikTok influences mental health behaviors and attitudes. Without empirical evidence, it's challenging to assess the impact of TikTok on users' mental well-being accurately. This could potentially lead to misconceptions or oversights in addressing mental health issues within the platform.



On the other hand, the absence of research also presents an opportunity for exploration and innovation. By acknowledging this gap, researchers and mental health professionals can direct their efforts toward studying TikTok's role in mental health communication and intervention. This could lead to the development of new strategies and interventions tailored to the unique dynamics of the platform, ultimately improving mental health outcomes for TikTok users.

In summary, while the lack of research on mental health content on TikTok is concerning in terms of understanding its potential risks and benefits, it also opens up avenues for further investigation and intervention that could ultimately enhance mental health support within the platform.

Social media platforms play a crucial role in facilitating conversations about health and wellness, including mental health. Adolescents, in particular, rely heavily on these platforms to connect with others, share experiences, and seek support. With the prevalence of mental health issues among adolescents being so high—according to the World Health Organization, one in seven 10-19-year-olds worldwide experiences a mental disorder—there is a pressing need to understand how social media platforms like TikTok address these concerns. TikTok, in particular, has gained immense popularity among adolescents, making it a significant platform for mental health discourse. In light of these

factors, the study by Basch et al. (2022) aims to examine the content of the hashtag #mentalhealth on TikTok. By analyzing this content, the study seeks to shed light on the types of mental health-related discussions taking place on TikTok and their potential impact on adolescent users. This research is included here to provide insights into how

TikTok serves as a platform for mental health communication and to highlight the importance of understanding its role in shaping adolescent perceptions and behaviors related to mental health.

This cross-sectional, descriptive content analysis study focused on videos with the hashtag #mentalhealth on TikTok, utilizing established methodology and prior research. A sample of the first 100 videos was collected using the "discover" function on the TikTok platform and a hashtag search of #mentalhealth, which had 25.3 billion views at the time of the study (January 2022). Only English-language videos were considered for the sample, and for each video, the date of posting and the number of views, comments, and likes were documented. The videos were analyzed and coded for various content categories, including general mental health, anxiety, depression, stress, suicide, self-harm, interpersonal relationships, physical health conditions, mental health stigma, statistics, personal experiences, and coping techniques or treatment. Additionally, the comments associated with each video were viewed and coded for content related to offering support, suicidal ideation, self-harm, hospitalization for mental health issues, other mental health struggles, and coping strategies. The data were meticulously collected, categorized, and

organized by a single reviewer, and interrater reliability was confirmed through analysis by a second reviewer to ensure the accuracy and validity of the findings (Basch et al., 2022).

The TikTok algorithm has significantly impacted adolescents by exposing them to mental health information through its For You suggestion page. Many adolescents encounter these mental health videos on their feeds, even when they're not actively seeking such content. These short videos not only provide adolescents with the language to discuss mental health but also offer insights into behaviors within their families, among friends, and especially within themselves. Additionally, TikTok serves as a platform where individuals from diverse backgrounds present unique perspectives on coping with mental health problems, making these concepts more accessible to those who feel marginalized in their current environment. (Florell, 2021, p. 34).

As TikTok continues to evolve, its potential as a tool for mental health education and destigmatization remains significant, providing an opportunity for further exploration and research in this domain. It could be that TikTok is getting a bad rap from the mental health community, which seems to view it only as an outlet for adolescent performance art. Rather, it could emerge as a useful tool for mental health clinicians to better understand the mindset of contemporary teenagers and young adults.

The installation and character creation for this project will serve as a tangible manifestation of the themes explored in the thesis. By embodying a fictional character, Kryx, who navigates mental health issues and societal pressures within the realm of

TikTok, the project will provide a concrete representation of the complex interplay between social media, mental health, and identity formation. The installation, designed to resemble Kryx's bedroom and recording studio, will immerse viewers in the digital landscape where these narratives unfold. Through projections and screens displaying TikTok videos overlaid on kitschy household items and makeshift furniture, the installation will highlight the pervasive influence of social media on contemporary youth culture. By engaging with Kryx's character and the curated content within the installation, viewers will be prompted to critically examine their own interactions with social media platforms and consider the implications for mental health and self-perception in the digital age. Thus, the installation and character creation will serve as both a reflection of the research findings and a catalyst for dialogue surrounding these pressing issues.

Kryx, my fictional TikTok character, embodies a mysterious feminine figure idolizing trending topics on TikTok related to mental health issues such as eating disorders, sexuality, and drug abuse. In the videos I created with her, Kryx consistently wore the same outfit: all pink attire, tattoos covered, a blonde wig, and heavy makeup, enhancing her enigmatic persona. Her voice was always concealed, either by overlapping music audio or with voice distortion, adding to the mystique surrounding her character. Throughout her videos, Kryx reflected as much of herself as she could online while concealing her true identity and acting under this false persona.

In one video, Kryx shared her struggles with an eating disorder, creating a visually distorted montage of herself consuming copious amounts of food followed by captions encouraging her to vomit. The video garnered mixed reactions, with some viewers praising her bravery for speaking out about her struggles, while others criticized her for glamorizing eating disorders. Another video depicted Kryx engaging in risky behavior, such as drug use and self-harm, which elicited concern from some viewers who urged her to seek help. However, others praised her for being authentic and relatable, expressing their own experiences with similar issues.

The online reactions to Kryx's videos highlight the complex interplay between self-expression, mental health, and social media. While some viewers may find solace and solidarity in Kryx's candid portrayal of her struggles, others may be negatively influenced by her behaviors or perceive them as glorification. Surprisingly few users chose to ridicule Kryx for her behaviors. This underscores the importance of responsible content creation and the need for platforms like TikTok to provide resources and support for users navigating mental health challenges.

Ultimately, Kryx's character serves as a cautionary tale about the potential dangers of seeking validation and connection through social media, especially when it comes to sensitive topics like mental health. While social media can be a powerful tool for self-expression and community building, it also has the potential to perpetuate harmful narratives and behaviors if not used responsibly. As creators and consumers of online

content, it's crucial to recognize the impact that our actions and words can have on others, particularly young people who may be more vulnerable to the influences of social media.

In reflecting on my senior thesis installation, *Vanity*, I am struck by the immersive experience it provided, both for myself and for the audience. The setup of the installation aimed to replicate Kryx's bedroom, a space filled with her personal objects and reflections of her online persona. The physical vanity, cluttered with items like pills, candy, garbage, sex toys, condoms, tampons, cigarettes, vapes, makeup, and lingerie, served as a focal point, representing Kryx's complex and often contradictory identity.

One of the most impactful elements of the installation was the looping videos displayed on the walls. On one side, a 3D Sims model of Kryx in her virtual bedroom created a surreal atmosphere, blurring the lines between reality and digital fantasy. On the other side, footage of Kryx was projected onto a mesh canopy, creating layers of images and light refraction that mirrored the complexity of her online presence.

The foundation of *Vanity* was to explore and critique the pervasive influence of social media on self-identity, particularly among young people. Kryx, my TikTok persona, embodied the extremes of this influence. She was designed to be a hyperbolic representation of the pressures and contradictions faced by adolescents in the digital age. Kryx's interests in drugs, sex, violence, and fame were not chosen arbitrarily but were deliberate reflections of the sensationalized content that often garners attention on platforms like TikTok.

Kryx's struggles with an eating disorder, drug abuse, bipolar disorder, ADHD, and suicidal manic depression were integral to her character. These elements were intended to highlight the dark side of online fame and the mental health issues exacerbated by social media. The installation sought to provoke a conversation about how these platforms can simultaneously offer a sense of community and support while also contributing to the deterioration of mental health.

The physical setup of the installation was meticulously planned to immerse the audience in Kryx's world. The vanity was the centerpiece, symbolizing the constant gaze and scrutiny that social media influencers are subjected to. The clutter of personal items, from pills and tampons to sex toys and vapes, was meant to reflect the chaotic and often messy reality behind the curated images seen online.

Each object on the vanity was carefully selected to represent different aspects of Kryx's life and struggles. The pills and vapes pointed to her substance abuse issues, while the makeup and lingerie highlighted her attempts to conform to and exploit societal standards of beauty and sexuality. The juxtaposition of these items was intended to evoke a sense of discomfort and provoke the audience to question the realities behind the persona.

The digital elements of the installation were crucial in bridging the gap between the real and virtual worlds. The looping video of the 3D Sims model of Kryx's virtual bedroom was displayed on the wall with the vanity. This digital representation was

designed to be both familiar and unsettling, highlighting the ways in which online personas can feel more real than reality itself.

On the perpendicular wall, the footage of Kryx was projected onto a mesh canopy. This created a layered, almost dreamlike effect, where the audience could see through the images and experience multiple perspectives simultaneously. The light refraction and overlapping visuals were intended to mirror the fragmented nature of self-identity in the digital age.

Performing as Kryx was both challenging and enlightening. As I dressed up and engaged with the audience, I fully immersed myself in the character. The act of putting on Kryx's persona was a transformative experience, allowing me to explore aspects of myself that I had previously kept hidden. It was also an opportunity to confront my own discomfort with the character and the themes she represented.

During the performance, I made a conscious effort to interact with the audience in ways that would push boundaries and provoke thought. I wanted to make people uncomfortable, to force them to confront the darker aspects of social media culture. This often involved direct, sometimes confrontational, interactions that challenged the audience's preconceived notions and personal boundaries.

The reaction from the audience was a crucial component of the installation's success. Despite minimal online engagement leading up to the event, the in-person response was overwhelming. Many visitors were visibly uncomfortable, yet intrigued, by



the intimate and chaotic environment of Kryx's bedroom. The layered projections and immersive setup prompted deep reflection and discussion among attendees.

This strong reaction underscored the impact of Kryx's persona and the themes explored in *Vanity*. It suggested that while online engagement is important, the physical and emotional experience of the installation had a profound effect on the audience. The performance and installation served as a powerful reminder of the potential for art to provoke and challenge societal norms.

Reflecting on the process of creating and performing *Vanity*, I am struck by the complexity and depth of the project. The installation was not just an exploration of social media and mental health but also a personal journey of self-discovery and expression. It forced me to confront my own discomforts and biases and to engage with difficult themes in a deeply personal way.

One of the key takeaways from this experience is the importance of authenticity and vulnerability in art. By fully immersing myself in Kryx's persona, I was able to create a more compelling and impactful installation. The strong reaction from the audience reinforced the value of pushing boundaries and challenging norms, both in art and in society.

Looking forward, the experience of creating *Vanity* has opened up new avenues for exploration and expression. The potential for using social media personas and digital elements in art is vast, and I am excited to continue exploring these themes in future

projects. The installation also highlighted the need for ongoing conversations about the impact of social media on mental health and self-identity.

In conclusion, *Vanity* was a deeply transformative project that pushed the boundaries of traditional art installations. By immersing myself and the audience in Kryx's chaotic world, I was able to provoke thought and discussion about the complexities of social media culture. The strong audience reaction and the personal growth I experienced through the project underscore the power of art to challenge, provoke, and inspire.

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