

How is mental health represented through photography?

Carys Banfield

2301988

Word count:5410

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA (Hons), University of

Wales Trinity Saint David, Swansea. 8th May 2026

Abstract

This thesis explores representations of mental health in photography and art across historical and contemporary contexts. Examining key periods from antiquity to the twenty-first century, it analyses how visual culture shapes understandings of mental illness through power and discourse, drawing on Foucault, Tagg, and Hall. Through artists including Laia Abril, Dana Sterling, and Katie Joy Crawford, alongside the author's practice, the study argues that visual representation fosters empathy, challenges stigma, and humanises diverse mental health experiences within society and culture.

Table of contents

Title page.....	1
Abstract.....	2
Table of contents.....	3
List of illustrations.....	4
AI declaration	5
Introduction	6
Chapter 1- How mental health has been represented through history.....	8
Chapter 2- Representation and artist that represent mental health.....	17
Chapter 3 -My autoethnographic work on representation.....	28
Conclusion.....	34
Bibliography	35

List of illustrations

Figure 1: Farreras, I.G.(2026)*Engravings from 1525*. Available at:

<https://nobaproject.com/modules/history-of-mental-illness> (Accessed: 23 March 2026).

Figure 2:Abvril, L.(2012) *Thinspiration*. Available at:

<https://www.laiaabril.com/project/thinspiration/>

(Accessed: 23 March 2026).

Figure 3: NHS England (2023) *Eating disorders percentages*. Available at:

[Download the data for this chart. Figure 5.1: Percentage of children and young people who screened positive for possible eating problems, by age and sex, 2017, 2021, 2022 and 2023](#)(Accessed: 23 March 2026).

Figure 4: Stirling, D.(2026). *Why am I sad?* Available

at :<https://nobaproject.com/modules/history-of-mental-illness>

<https://www.danastirling.com/books/why-am-i-sad-book> (Accessed:28 April2026].

Figure 5: Joy, K. (2015). *My Anxious Heart*. Available

at:[https://nobaproject.com/modules/history-of-mental-](https://nobaproject.com/modules/history-of-mental-illness)

[illness.https://katiejoycrawford.wordpress.com/2015/05/12/my-anxious-](https://katiejoycrawford.wordpress.com/2015/05/12/my-anxious-)

[heart/](#)(Accessed:28 April 2026).

Figure 6: Banfield, C. (2026). *My work*.[Photograph]

AI ACKNOWLEDGEMENT DECLARATION

I acknowledge the use of Copilot <https://copilot.microsoft.com/> on 18th March 2026 to structure my thesis. I used the Prompt: give me a structure for my 6000-word dissertation on how mental health is represented through photography, with the 1st chapter being about the representation of mental health and photography, the 2nd being about photographers who show mental health in their work and the 3rd about how my work relates.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI-generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before and after the use of AI tools, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Introduction

This thesis examines the representation of mental health across history and within contemporary discourse through photography and art. By exploring important and pivotal periods, including ancient times, the Renaissance, the late twentieth century, and the twenty-first century. It traces how visual culture has shaped, reflected, and challenged societal understandings of mental health. Examining key theorists such as Michel Foucault, John Tagg, and Stuart Hall, the study analyses how power, discourse, and representation influence the ways mental illness is perceived, categorised, and visualised.

The research considers a variety of artists, including Laia Abril, Dana Sterling, and Katie Joy Crawford, whose practices intentionally confront stigma, give visibility to lived experiences, and question dominant narratives surrounding mental health.

Their work often employs photography and conceptual strategies to reveal both overt and subtle representations of psychological distress, emphasising that mental health is not a singular or universal experience.

Alongside critical analysis, the thesis integrates the author's own artistic practice, which aims to raise awareness of mental health struggles and create empathetic

spaces for reflection. By foregrounding personal narratives and visual ambiguity, the work seeks to humanise mental illness and disrupt stereotypes. Ultimately, this thesis argues that visual representations of mental health are vital tools for understanding difference, fostering empathy, and breaking down enduring stigma surrounding mental health in society.

Mental health is a state of emotional well-being that can affect the way you think, feel and act. There are different disorders that one can develop over time after dealing with trauma. Representation means to describe or portray someone or something through images, symbols or statements.

As an artist, I have used my own personal experiences to inspire my work on the different struggles I have faced. The representation I want to explore for my own practice is to break the stereotypical views on mental health that are shown in today's media.

Chapter 1- How mental health has been represented through history.

Mental health is a timeless concept; recently, though, it has been highlighted and spoken about more frequently as the taboo around the subject has diminished, but there is a vast difference between how others acknowledged it historically and compared it to current times. Mental health diagnoses can include a combination of different disorders, some of which include anxiety, depression, PTSD or schizophrenia. Not everyone will suffer from these disorders, but many people will have the more common issues like anxiety or depression, as these are primarily emotions which everyone feels. Whereas diagnoses of depression or anxiety disorders come from doctors after you have experienced prolonged feelings of these emotions.

Representation is fundamental with disorders like these, as it can help others to understand what someone could be dealing with, and it can prove beneficial for people who suffer from mental health issues to feel that they are not alone with their problems. But it can also lead to negative effects, as it can build stigma around mental health,

A representation implicates the audience in creating its meaning. Power – through ideology or by stereotyping – tries to fix the meaning of a representation in a ‘preferred meaning (Guilsborough, 2019).

Representation gives meaning to an image or individual, for example, mental health is often represented in a negative way, which causes others to look at those with mental health issues unpleasantly because of the way mental health is shown.

Looking through history, we can examine how representation has changed over time. It can also reveal how the stigma and understanding of mental health have evolved due to it being contextualised through both study and social policy. The historical periods I have covered highlight the pivotal changes in perception from ancient times through to the contemporary. I will look at literature and visual art from these different periods to examine the changes in the representation of mental health.

Ancient history.

Mental health has been evident throughout history, and there have been many references to it. In ancient times, mental health was looked at relatively negatively “For millennia, society did not treat persons suffering from depression, autism, schizophrenia and other mental illnesses much better than slaves or criminals: they were imprisoned, tortured or killed.” (Rössler, 2016).

People did not understand mental health issues perhaps as we do now. They were thought of as different and had no way of knowing what exactly was wrong, so they were treated differently because they did not fit in with everyone else.

There were three theories around mental health, largely these included: supernatural, somatogenic and psychogenic. The first one, supernatural, suggests that a person who suffers from mental illness is possessed by evil, has upset the gods, is cursed or caused by sins. The second theory is somatogenic, which suggests abnormality in physical function comes from illness, genetics or brain damage. The third one is psychogenic; it states that traumatic or stressful experiences can cause them to experience maladaptive associations. (Farreras, 2025)

These theories around mental health would have estimated the level of care individuals would have received. There can be substantial differences between how some people with mental health issues will be treated depending on these theories, from pre-Enlightenment thinking.

The Renaissance

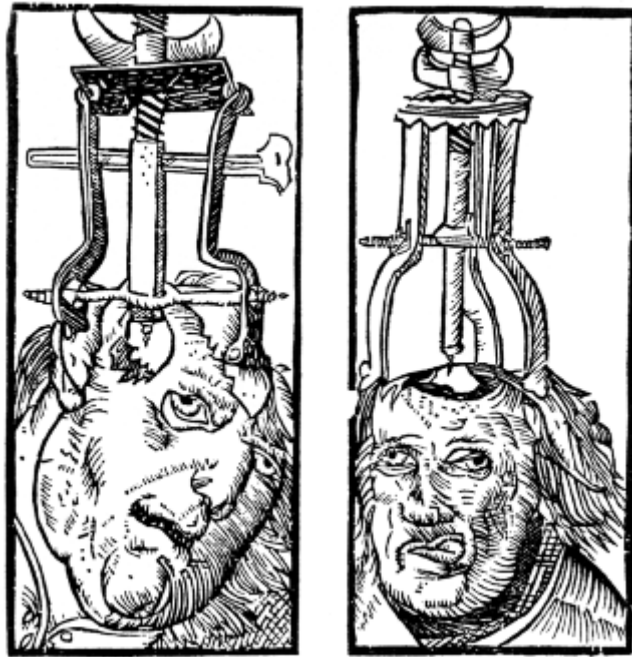


Fig.1: *Engravings from 1525*

This is an engraving from 1525. It shows a procedure of drilling holes into the skull and was believed to release evil spirits that cause mental illness. This procedure was called 'trephination'. Medical practitioners hopefully now treat patients more holistically and with more compassion. Although these barbaric and invasive practices are no longer used, mental health and the representation of it can still carry

stigma and negative connotations. Any new thinking or enlightenment did little to change the attitudes or representation of mental health from previous perceptions.

Humanism emerged in the 14th and 16th centuries when mental health was evolving. The emphasis on human well-being and individuality was beginning to spread throughout the world. The supernatural perspectives on mental health were rejected.

German physician Johann Weyer wrote a book titled "On the Deceits of Demons" in the 1500s. In opposition to the church's witch-hunting manual, this book made the case that they were mentally ill rather than demon-possessed. His book was prohibited from the church, and people protested because he thought that the mind could get sick just like the body.

The 16th century saw an increase in the number of asylums. As a result of the high number of individuals experiencing mental health problems, hospitals and monasteries were converted into asylums. At first, their intentions were good, but as they began to overflow, they began to treat patients like animals. The Bethlem Hospital was established in London in 1547 specifically to house people suffering from mental illnesses. (Daffin and Bridley, 2020)

An important era of medical history where medical and social regulation was changing was documented by John Tagg, a contemporary theorist in art history and

photography, through his series of essays titled. Burden of Representation.

(Tomanić, 2016)

His collection of essays, including The Burden of Representation (1988), discusses the ideas of reality and photography and the burden for the photographer through the representation shown in their work. He argues that photography is not a real reflection of reality but a manipulated reality.

The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation (Tagg, 1988).

Photography as a medium itself is a vehicle for distortions and manipulation that then over the course of time and record then acquire validity through the process of recording and archiving, then acquire validity. The past, then, through the existence of the photograph, acts as a reassurance but also legitimises the experience or event. Often, I think that as individuals, we associate personal memories that we believe are true with photographs that we have seen, expanding on the narrative that they create. Not necessarily remembering the actual event, but a facsimile of this that has been distorted or manipulated by our own memories or narrative that we have attached to it. "Optical and chemical devices are set to work to organise experience and desire" - (Tagg, 1988)

This type of evidence-based photography became prominent in the second half of the nineteenth century when institutions for those with mental health problems were housed or treated. This then promoted record keeping that became part of the evidence to inform. These institutions then informed practice, and patients were treated accordingly.

The concept of the medical gaze is associated with the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who had a profound effect and influence on the way patients were regarded and thus treated. The focus on the individual's problems rather than looking at the person more holistically led to the reliance on diagnosis, treatment and ultimately attention on the prevention of mental health. (O'Callaghan, 2021)

Photography shapes the way we see the world by what we get shown, recorded reality, but also an altered reality, and this reality can be viewed by so many that it, in turn, can change perceptions. Tagg discusses how photography has become evidence and a form of documentation in the 19th and 20th centuries. How this status of photography then influenced several institutions, particularly in medicine, and how this then shaped the way it was represented. Evidence does not necessarily always mean truth; the photographer can manipulate the image to tell a certain narrative that is subjective, so therefore an image is never truthful, as it is the photographer's own interest in the narrative. This can then become a burden to the photographer as they

are not always showing the right representation of what is actually happening in the image. (Tag, 1988)

In this way, the photographer is also in a role where they are participating in the governing of society by producing images of alternative places (prison poorhouses), they are by default showcasing normality and conversely giving other people labels.

The medical gaze enhanced social regulation, which in turn enforced the modern power struggles. Bodies could now be classified and regulated, and then, as such, controlled. This clinical authority separated the body from the mind, again objectifying the patient and making them reliant on or under the power of authority in whichever form that took. (Tagg, 1988)

Contemporary perspective of the last decade

Today, we are bombarded with pictures on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and others are showing us pictures of mental health, and we are absorbing them daily. What we are seeing no doubt influences how we perceive other people's ideas of mental health and how they want this to be perceived, or indeed their idea of what they would like to portray. We are being manipulated by the media in the representation of groups of individuals.

According to Nick Newman, the Reuters Institute reported in 2025 that the biased state of news and social media platforms, alongside personality and influencers. This is also a problem that can be generated by an increasingly populated AI with synthetic content and misinformation. (Newman, 2025)

Individuals who use social media like TikTok or Instagram are then fed with information on certain topics and then get sent down rabbit holes from algorithms personalised for them on these topics. News publishers want to use AI to personalise news content, but there are mixed opinions about this as people worry about not having the full story.

TikTok has a lot of users, and this can lead to information being spread, whether it be true or false, but there are accounts that spread real information in a summary, giving key information about what is going on in the world. A well-trusted user is Dylan Page. He has a huge following of 18.2 million, so what he shares online will influence his followers. He shares news facts, but he could also be biased in the way he words his sentences. (Manuel, 2026)

TikTok has a feature of personalising the algorithm to show you things you've searched, liked or shared and it can be so personalised that you could only see videos of certain topics which could then influence you to buy, change the way you think or even join in on the trends of looking a certain way because it has become popular or doing something dangerous as it might have a fun outcome but still risking

your life. There have been a few trends that have caused people to lose their lives or be put in the hospital, and then some trends that cause people to change the way they look to fit other people's opinions.

“Research suggests algorithms promote self-harm and eating disorder content within minutes of interest being shown” (Milmo and Hern, 2022). This will be further analysed in chapter 2 through the artist Laia Abril's work *Thinspiration*.

The algorithm will show videos of topics you show interest in. If a young person showed interest in these kinds of topics, then they could be influenced to follow the information being shown. This can then cause the individual to have low self-esteem and become depressed, which can then cause them to follow what the videos say with help when in reality it could be very harmful.

Chapter 2- Representation and artist that represent mental health

Through Stuart Hall's *Theory of representation* (1997), we become aware that language and indeed visual language, which includes photography, is not necessarily just a reflection of what is happening in society, but in fact a pre-decided section of reality that has been selected. This selected narrative may well be biased or show things in a certain way to obscure the real meaning or highlight a certain

message. These selected images then invite the viewer to make sense of what they are seeing, and their opinion is often formed from this.

Language is one of the media through which thoughts, ideas, and feelings are represented in a culture. In language, we use signs and symbols, whether they are sounds, written words, electronic images, musical notes, or even objects to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings. (Hall, 1997)

In photography, these interpretations can be manipulated by the photographer using a variety of different tactics. It could be the composition of the picture, the actual essence or subject of the photograph. Sometimes it may be actually what is missing from or not shown in the photo, by cropping certain things out, or the angle at which the photo is taken. Indeed, timing is all part of a scene, as minutes later, everything could change, so the viewer is always invited to see a snapshot that may, in fact, change the scene irrevocably. Representation through language is therefore central to the processes by which meaning is produced (Hall, 1997)

Alongside this, what we are observing will have certain coded messages. Some of these are based on cultural or stereotypes that are well defined in society. These visual conventions can be used to portray people in a certain way. This can often be narrow or stigmatising. Often, certain demographics or groups, particularly minorities, can have a visual narrative attached to them that is negative, leading to othering by the viewer.

The number of pictures now consumed daily may well have a desensitising effect on the viewer. It is estimated that 61,400 photographs are shot every second. (Khan, 2025)

There were an estimated 2.1 trillion photographs taken in 2025. Many of these will be viewed on social media platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, to name a few.

These images are then consumed and, in turn, become part of our visual narrative and cultural reference.

One artist who highlighted a particularly shocking campaign is Laia Abril. Laia Abril is a Catalan artist born in 1986 who has focused on a variety of topics that predominantly are experiences of women. Some of these photographic series explored themes such as misogyny, rape and abortion. In 2010, she exhibited an exhibition called *Thinspiration* showing a series of photos depicting female emancipated bodies. She uses her own experiences to highlight and bring attention to the dangers of and the potential glorification of eating disorders. (Hamilton, 2014)

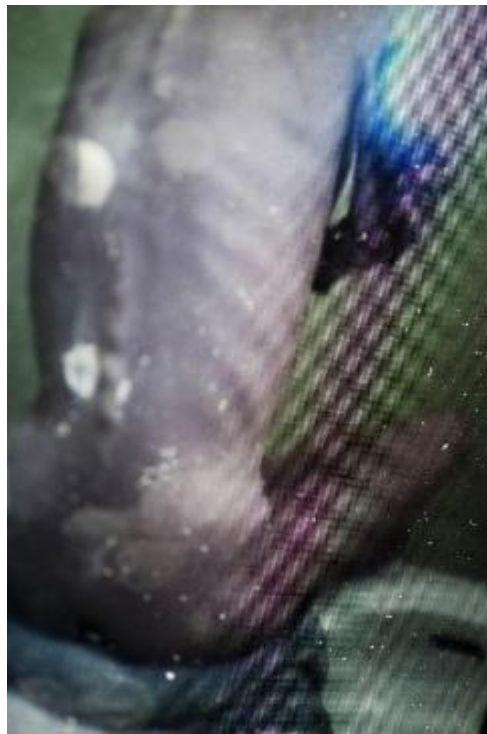


Fig.2: *Thinspiration*.

In 2010, when Laia Abril launched a project called thinspiration, which focuses on the glorification of eating disorders, it was as a comment on the unregulated content that was being shown on social media. Eating disorders have been encouraged by pro-ana since the 2000s as a lifestyle choice that inspires others to grow to resemble models. "Tricks and rules which were then called the Thin Commandments" were posted on these blogs. (Hamilton,2014)

Fig. 1 is an image that depicts a woman's back with her spine and ribs protruding. Although it is quite distressing to witness, it raises awareness of the graphic content that we are being shown, and in certain sites, celebrated.

Abril herself admits that the photographs themselves are shocking and deeply uncomfortable to look at. "I decided to photograph them because I wanted to talk about the use of photography. The project is about how I felt when I was looking at those images." (Hamilton,2014) The project is aimed at showing the dangerous side of promoting these **pro ana** (sites promoting the benefits of anorexia)sites through social media platforms.

Although Abril's interest in this particular subject was personal, these images were not autoethnographic. More so, her intent was more of an informative nature, as there was a surprising lack of clear information or counter images around this topic. The #proana sights were popping up everywhere on social media, showing a more positive, promoting light on the subject. Today, we are bombarded with images, and often these images promote eating disorders rather than show the very real side effects or dangers associated with them. In an interview, Laia remarks, "You sometimes need to shock and sometimes not to shock. With *Thinspiration*, I needed to shock because if you haven't seen those images, you can't picture how awful they are." (Hamilton,2014)

For young people aged 17 to 19 years, the rate was 77.5% in young women, compared with 42.3% in young men (NHS England, 2023)

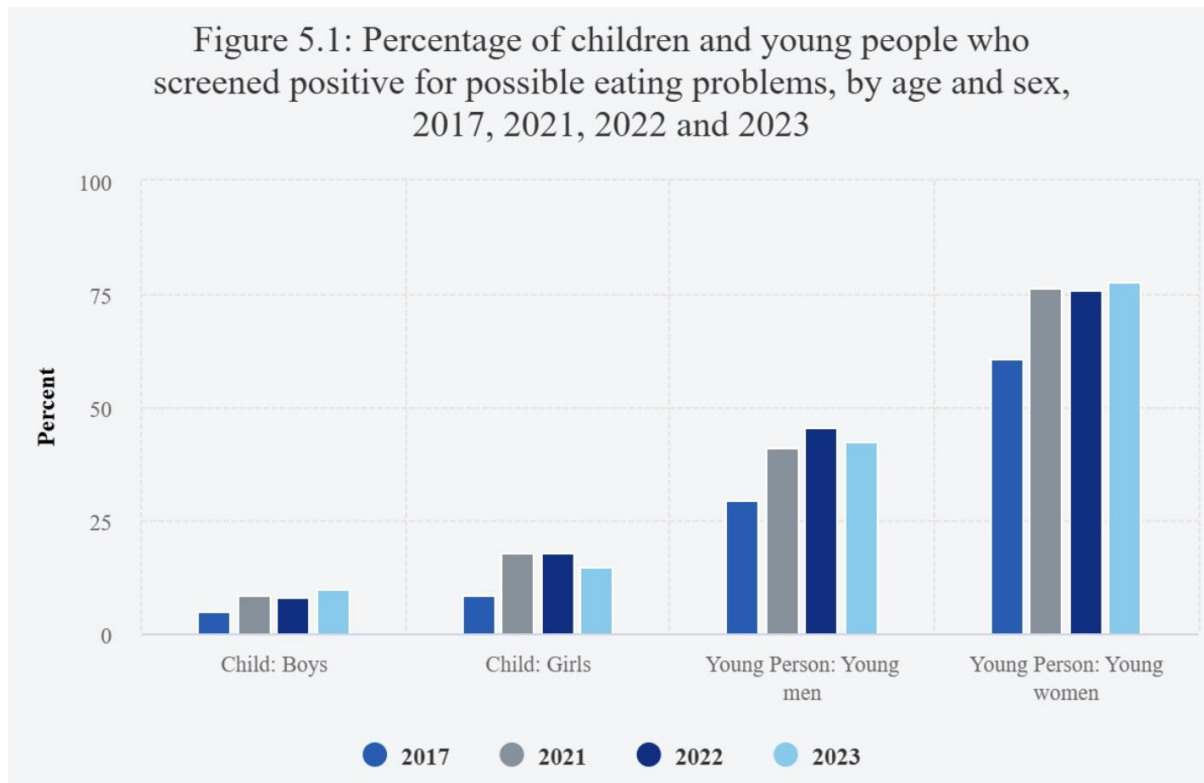


Fig.3: *Eating disorders percentages*

Figure 3 is a representation of 11 to 19-year-olds screened for eating disorders differentiated by sex from 2017 to 2023.

When analysing these graphs and statistics, we can see the enormity of the problem surrounding eating disorders. When we consider that the media as a whole represents and promotes the idea of thinness with little correlation to overall health. Even the terminology used alongside images often shows an unconscious bias to the promotion of weight loss. Indeed, it is very difficult to find any apps for those

individuals who would like help with weight gain, conversely there is a plethora of apps available for the latter.

My second artist, Dana Stirling, is an Israeli-born artist who currently lives in New York. Her work predominantly focuses on issues such as mental health, depression, identity and immigration. She explores her own mental health and depression through still life. Her work looks at feelings of not belonging and the weight of sadness that that brings. "Through the lens of my camera, I invite you to join me on this introspective odyssey, where every image is a step closer to understanding the enigma of sadness." (Stirling, 2024)

In this image is a tree with a balloon caught on a branch. The balloon is deflated and has a picture of a happy face.



Fig.4: *Why am I sad*

This image works well in this project and book, as it can be interpreted as no matter how down and exhausted you feel, you still put a smile on your face, like everything is fine. In a way, there is stigma around this, as everyone expects you to be fine.

This could be because of the representation around mental health, as no one would want to be around you if you are sad. "Even as my lens captured moments of beauty, the weight of sadness lingered" (Stirling, 2025)

This book shows sadness differently, like how everything looks normal with a touch of sadness in the image. This is different to other artists as some show sadness in very obvious ways, while Dana shows what she sees on the outside, but it still evokes emotions. Her narrative approach is, in her own words, a personal exploration into the legacy of mental health that she has inherited from her family. The narrative, however, is far from depressing; indeed, it is a testament to the endurance of the human spirit. In her work, she challenges the conventions around the depiction of mental health. These layered perceptions are used to evoke in the audience universal emotions, this particular one being sadness in a different, less obvious way. 'The brilliance of *Why Am I Sad* lies in its refusal to present sadness in predictable terms.' (Stirling, 2025)

My third artist, Katie Joy Crawford, was a young artist, 23, when she took these images back in 2015. Her project " My Anxious Heart " went viral in 2015.



Fig.5: *My Anxious Heart*

This project is about Katie dealing with general anxiety disorder. She decided to photograph it emotionally and physically through self-portraiture. This project is about her own experiences dealing with this issue. It shows how she sees the effects so that others can recognise it and understand anxiety.

They keep telling me to breathe. I can feel my chest moving up and down. Up and down. Up and down. But why does it feel like I'm suffocating? I hold my hand under my nose, making sure there is air. I still can't breathe (Crawford, 2015).

In this image is a woman, she is wrapped in clear plastic, and it covers her mouth.

The plastic looks like it is wrapped tightly, which could be constricting; it goes with the quote about how she feels like she can't breathe. The image gives a sense of familiarity and will connect to those who have dealt with this. (Gragert, 2015).

Her portrait is aimed at bringing both awareness and hope that it is possible to heal.

“When you make yourself vulnerable, people can start to relate. There’s power in numbers, and there’s healing in numbers.” (Alvarez, 2015).

Art is an expression of life, which means it expresses emotions. A creative artist is a person who uses their creativity to produce works of art, music, literature or other forms of expression that are intended to evoke emotion or thought in an audience.

Creative artists may work in a variety of fields, including visual arts (such as painting, sculpture, etc.), performing arts (such as music, dance, etc.) and literary arts (such as writing and poetry). They often draw upon their own experiences, emotions and imagination to create their work. (Anupama, 2024)

When analysing the work of the above artists, we can see similarities in their approaches and differences. Some may be in the execution of their work, its purpose, or indeed the audience that it is aimed at. Some of the work is auto-ethnographical, and other work is more educational or intended to promote awareness of the conditions. Some images may be difficult to view or, indeed, shocking. Maybe trigger warnings may be required due to the highly sensitive nature

of what is shown. The one common feature, however, is that they are all women.

Introspection and auto-ethnographic work are common themes amongst all artists as a way to draw upon experiences and realise them.

Gender is considered a crucial determinant of mental health. Ball (2013) in his research study on gender differences of mental health reported that women show 40% of high mental illness than men, and they are likely to have depression and anxiety. (Anupama, 2024).

However, art in turn can have a positive effect on mental health for artists as they expand areas such as self-acceptance and confidence. Indeed, while using their creativity, artists have a vehicle for translating their internal thoughts into visual materials in which they are represented. This sense of achievement and sense of purpose can be a positive experience. The process itself can be seen as a positive outlet for the artist to channel their emotions.

Chapter 3: My work

Reflecting on the topics and visual techniques covered in the earlier chapters, this chapter explores how my own photographic practice has evolved. I consider the conceptual goals, techniques, and aesthetic choices that have influenced my practice, building on the theoretical frameworks of mental health representation and the work of photographers who investigate psychological experience. By examining

a few of my photos, I think about how my work adds to the larger visual dialogue around mental health.

My work revolves around mental health as someone who suffers with issues such as depression, anxiety and an eating disorder. I use the research to influence my practice but also to bring awareness and break down some of the stigmatisation around mental health. Photography has been a tool that I have used in a cathartic way myself to escape problems, and this also helps me to visualise these issues differently. Like Crawford, she photographs her anxiety in the way she sees it. This is exactly how I photograph my images, as it also helps others to understand the physical and emotional side of dealing with these disorders.

With my work, I am trying to represent mental health in the right way by bringing awareness and helping others to understand the physical and emotional side of dealing with mental health. Also, to show others that they are not alone with these disorders. I want the viewers to feel the emotions and to imagine how it feels to live with mental health issues.

Mental health is represented in so many different ways, with some artists showing mental health in very stereotypical ways and others taking it a step further and showing how they see their own experience. By stereotypically showing mental health, like someone crying, then the audience will have a limited context behind the image, whereas if someone showed mental health in a different, more expressive

way that can give more context about the physical and emotional side, then their audience will be more informed. Both can be used, but it just needs the right context for the audience to understand them fully. It can also help to break the stigma and stereotypes that surround mental health.

I have looked at a variety of different artists with often differing approaches to find inspiration and consolidate my own practice. Some of those artists are: Erik Kessels, Laia Abril, on abortion, Cindy Sherman, Diane Arbus: woman on a park bench on a sunny day, Bettina von Zwehl. Each artist has presented mental health in their own unique perspective, which is what I also aim to do.

Kessel's' Empty Chair explores the idea of absence and the quiet stories that come from what is not there. The empty seat acts as a sign that someone has left the scene, making people think about who was meant to be there and why they are not present. This gentle prompt to imagine and think makes the audience take part in the experience, connecting with the work on both emotional and intellectual levels. His work made me consider how I can incorporate absence and uncertainty into my own artwork. I want people watching to feel like they need to look more carefully, think about what they're seeing, and try to find hidden messages instead of just getting a clear answer. (Kessels,2011)

Laia Abril's abortion research reveals the differences in reproductive rights around the world and exposes how restrictive laws compel many women to use risky,

potentially fatal ways to end a pregnancy. Abril confronts audiences with the true human cost of these policies through carefully constructed storytelling and eerie visual techniques (Abril, 2024). Her art challenges stigma and encourages introspection through the use of images, creating an opportunity for discussions that are frequently suppressed or ignored. This strategy motivates me to use similar visual impact in my own work, challenging viewers to face challenging topics and consider the social constraints and taboos that influence how we perceive them.

Through the use of constructed imagery that reveals how society shapes female identity, Cindy Sherman's work questions and dismantles stereotypical representations of women. She challenges the roles, expectations, and visual tropes placed on women through her creation of characters, exposing how manufactured these standards really are (Jones, 2012). My own method is inspired by this tactic of challenging traditional narratives through photography. I want to deconstruct the stereotypes, beliefs, and misconceptions around mental health by using a similar critical lens. I want to challenge viewers' preconceived notions about mental health by producing visuals that challenge well-known narratives.

The image of a presumably wealthy woman in Diane Arbus's *Woman on a Park Bench on a Sunny Day* contrasts with the mystery of her inner emotional state. Despite the scene's seemingly casual appearance, Arbus challenges viewers to consider what the woman might be feeling beneath her composed appearance

(Arbus, 1969). This conflict between internal experience and external presentation aligns with my personal goals. Her work motivated me to produce pictures that, similarly, compel viewers to consider the emotional reality in my shots, promoting a more in-depth understanding of the frequently concealed complexity of mental health.

In order to capture unguarded, genuine emotional reactions, Bettina von Zwehl photographs women sitting in a darkened room while listening to music at unexpected times. Zwehl produces intimate, vulnerable, and emotionally honest images by taking away control and letting the subjects wander into their own inner worlds (Zwehl, 2024). This approach of accessing pure emotion is very similar to my own intentions. In order for viewers to sense the emotional weight of each image, I want my art to convey a similar sense of authenticity. My goal is to produce images that inspire a more profound emotional connection by highlighting authentic expression.

I have looked at different artists, and they have impacted my work and helped me get to reflect on my own practice and what I wanted to achieve. By looking at how each artist's audience connects to the work, I have gained an understanding of how I want viewers to react to my own work.



Fig .6: My work

This image (fFig. 6) is from a project that I did, named *Beauty and Despair*. This project is about People who have trouble with their mental health can notice the beauty around them and recognise it, but they may not feel the good emotions or positive feelings that usually come with seeing such things. Because of mental health struggles, feelings of hopelessness, emptiness, and sadness can feel too strong. Even when around happy and beautiful things, these heavy emotions like depression can take over, making it hard to feel the usual joy or happiness.

In this image is a pink flower that has grown outside. The flower represents the beauty and positivity of life. The dark and dullness of the image is to show that the emotions are still there.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has examined research on mental health through the ages up to the current day. This has included some of the political, social and cultural issues of the time that have influenced mental health's representation and how it's preserved. Currently, social media is saturated with content about mental health being talked about more, some bias or harmful to others who have suffered from mental health issues. The way mental health is depicted is often stereotypical or biased. This may lead to further stigmatisation or indeed the promotion of unhealthy obsession. Artists who have explored mental health through their work may do so in a variety of different ways. Some may choose graphic imagery, whilst others tend to bring awareness and educate or also use photography as therapy to help understand their own emotions. The artist and theoretical research, alongside personal experiences, have led me to my own work. My project, *Beauty and Despair*, is a series of images about how individuals with mental health issues see the world differently from others who do not suffer from mental health issues.

Hopefully, the more awareness and positive work will enable others to further explore their own mental health through different lenses and gain an understanding. Mental health has changed through time, in some positive and negative ways. Representation on mental health still needs work, as it should bring awareness and understanding and not be harmful to others.

Bibliography

Anupama, S.R. (2024). Journal of technologies and innovative research. Sex differences in mental health among artists. Vol. 11, 5
[JETIR2405D55.pdf](#)[Accessed:28 April 2026].

Abril, L. (2012). *Thinspiration*. [online] Laia Abril. Available at:
<https://www.laiaabril.com/project/thinspiration/> [Accessed:28 April 2026].

Abril, L. (2024). On abortion. Available at [On Abortion – Laia Abril](#)[Accessed:28 April 2026].

Alvarez, J.T. (2015). *Putting her heart into it*. [online] [225]. Available at:
<https://www.225batonrouge.com/our-city/baton-rouge-artists-photo-series-anxiety-went-viral> [Accessed: 30 April 2026].

Arbus, D. (1969). Women on a park bench. Available at: [Diane Arbus. Woman on a park bench on a sunny day, N.Y.C., 1969. 1969 | MoMA](#)[Accessed :30April 2026].

Art Blart _ art and cultural memory archive. (2026). *John Tagg The Burden of Representation* Art Blart _ art and cultural memory archive. [online] Available at: <https://artblart.com/tag/john-tagg-the-burden-of-representation/> [Accessed:21 March 2026].

Artdoc. photo. (2021). *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* by John Tagg. [online] Available at: <https://www.artdoc.photo/books/the-burden-of-representation-essays-on-photographies-and-histories> [Accessed:28 April 2026].

Blakemore, E. (2024). *Do you have 'eyebrow blindness'? Here's what's behind the trend.* [online] Science. Available at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/why-do-we-follow-trends-even-when-theyre-bad-for-us> [Accessed: 20 April 2026].

Crawford, K.J. (2015). *my anxious heart.* [online] Katie Joy Crawford. Available at: <https://katiejoycrawford.wordpress.com/2015/05/12/my-anxious-heart/>. [Accessed:21 March 2026].

Farreras, I.G. (2025). *History of Mental Illness.* [online] Noba. Available at: <https://nobaproject.com/modules/history-of-mental-illness>. [Accessed:21 March 2026].

Gragert, A. (2015). *Photographer Explores Her Own Anxiety Disorder Through Haunting Self-Portraits*. [online] My Modern Met. Available at: <https://mymodernmet.com/katie-joy-crawford-my-anxious-heart-photo/>. [Accessed: 27 March 2026].

Hall, S. (1997) *Representation. Cultural representation and the signifying process*. London: Sage Publishing.

Hamilton R.S. (2014) [Laia Abril's Thinspiration Photos Are Unbearable](#) [Accessed: 27 March 2026].

Jain, L., Velez, L., Karlapati, S., Forand, M., Kannali, R., Yousaf, R.A., Ahmed, R., Sarfraz, Z., Sutter, P.A., Tallo, C.A. and Ahmed, S. (2025). Exploring Problematic TikTok Use and Mental Health Issues: A Systematic Review of Empirical Studies. *Journal of Primary Care & Community Health*, 16.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/21501319251327303>.

Jones, A. (2012). *In the kitchen with Cindy*. [online] IMAGE OBJECT TEXT. Available at: <https://imageobjecttext.com/2012/01/19/in-the-kitchen-with-cindy/> [Accessed 6 May 2026].

Kessels, E. (2011) *Empty chair*. Available at: [Empty Chair — ERIK KESSELS](#) [Accessed 6 May 2026].

Khan, N. (2025). *How Many Trillion Images Will We Capture in 2025?* [online] The Phoblographer. Available at: <https://www.thephoblographer.com/2025/06/30/how-many-images-will-we-create-in-2025/> [Accessed 29 Apr. 2026].

Laia Abril. (n.d.). *On Abortion*. [online] Available at: <https://www.laiaabril.com/project/on-abortion/#project> [Accessed 6 May 2026].

Manuel, J. (2026). *LinkedIn*. [online] LinkedIn.com. Available at: https://www.linkedin.com/posts/jillannmanuel_futureofnews-mediatransformation-creatoreconomy-activity-7368983611397558273-pK2f. [Accessed: 21 March 2026].

Milmo, D. and Hern, A. (2022). *TikTok self-harm study results ‘every parent’s nightmare’*. [online] The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/dec/15/tiktok-self-harm-study-results-every-parents-nightmare> [Accessed: 28 April 2026].

Newman, N. (2025). *Overview and key findings of the 2025 Digital News Report*. [online] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2025/dnr-executive-summary>. [Accessed: 21 March 2026].

NHS England (2023). *Part 5: Eating problems and disorders*. [online] NHS Digital. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in->

[england/2023-wave-4-follow-up/part-5-eating-problems-and-disorders](#) [Accessed:29 April 2026].

O'Callaghan, A.K. (2021). 'The medical gaze': Foucault, anthropology and contemporary psychiatry in Ireland. *Irish Journal of Medical Science (1971 -)*, [online] 191(4). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11845-021-02725-w>.

PhotoPedagogy. (2018). *John Tagg*. [online] Available at: <https://www.photopedagogy.com/john-tagg.html> [Accessed:28 April 2026].

Smith, M.-J. (2019). *Critical Analysis – Bettina Von-Zwehl – Alina 2004*. [online] Michael-Jay Smith, MA Photography Critical Research Journal. Available at: <https://michaeljayphotography.wordpress.com/2019/03/14/critical-analysis-bettina-von-zwehl-alina-2004/> [Accessed:6 May 2026].

Sr, Dr A. (2024). *SEX DIFFERENCES IN MENTAL HEALTH AMONG CREATIVE ARTISTS*. [online] Available at: <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR2405D55.pdf> [Accessed 29 Apr 2026].

Staff (2022). *Empty Chair by Erik Kessels — C41 Magazine*. [online] C41 Magazine. Available at: <https://www.c41magazine.com/empty-chair-by-erik-kessels/> [Accessed:6 May 2026].

Stirling, D. (2024). *Dana Stirling*. [online] Dana Stirling. Available at:
<https://www.danastirling.com/books/why-am-i-sad-book> [Accessed:28 April 2026].

Stirling, D. (2025). *Analogue Forever Magazine*. [online] Analogue Forever Magazine. Available at: <https://www.analogforevermagazine.com/features-interviews/why-am-i-sad-book-dana-stirling> [Accessed:22 March 2026].

Tagg, J. (2021). *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories by John Tagg*. [online] Artdoc. photo. Available at:
<https://www.artdoc.photo/books/the-burden-of-representation-essays-on-photographies-and-histories> [Accessed:29 April 2026].

Tomanić, Ilija (2016). *John Tagg*. [online] Membrana. Available at:
<https://www.membrana.org/contributor/john-taggg/> [Accessed:28 April 2026].

Vercillo, K. (2024). *In Woman on a Park Bench on a Sunny Day, did Diane Arbus capture the Essence of Depression in Another Woman?* [online] Substack.com. Available at: <https://createmefree.substack.com/p/in-woman-on-a-park-bench-on-a-sunny> [Accessed:6 May 2026].

VON, B. (2019). *BETTINA VON ZWEHL*. [online] BETTINA VON ZWEHL. Available at: <https://www.bettinavonzwehl.com/early-work-1> [Accessed:6 May 2026].

W. Daffin Jr, L.W.D.Jr. and Bridley, A. (2020). *1.5: The History of Mental Illness*.

[online] Social Sci LibreTexts. Available at:

[https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Psychology/Psychological_Disorders/Essentials_of_Abnormal_Psychology_\(Bridley_and_Daffin\)/01%3A_What_is_Abnormal_Psychology/1.05%3AThe_History_of_Mental_Illness](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Psychology/Psychological_Disorders/Essentials_of_Abnormal_Psychology_(Bridley_and_Daffin)/01%3A_What_is_Abnormal_Psychology/1.05%3AThe_History_of_Mental_Illness) [Accessed:6 May 2026].

World Health Organisation (2022). *Mental health*. [online] World Health Organisation.

Available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>. [Accessed:21 March 2026].

Zlata, A. (2022). *When the Body is Ill, The Mind Suffers: Shakespeare's Unravelling of Women's Hysteria and Madness in the Elizabethan Era* | Folger Shakespeare Library. [online] www.folger.edu. Available at:

<https://www.folger.edu/blogs/collation/when-the-body-is-ill-the-mind-suffers/>

[Accessed: 7 May 2026]

Zwehl, B. (2024) Blog Available at: [BETTINA VON ZWEHL](#) [Accessed: 28 March 2026].