



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

# **More Than a Love Story: Portrayals of Mental Health in Contemporary New Adult Romance: A Content Analysis of American and Canadian Novels**

Rijk, Nina De

## **Citation**

Rijk, N. D. (2025). *More Than a Love Story: Portrayals of Mental Health in Contemporary New Adult Romance: A Content Analysis of American and Canadian Novels*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master Thesis, 2023](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4257043>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

More Than a Love Story: Portrayals of Mental Health in Contemporary  
New Adult Romance  
A Content Analysis of American and Canadian Novels

Student name: Nina de Rijk

Student number: s3391957

Supervisor: Dr. Angus Mol

Second reader: Dr. Matt Voigts

Book and Digital Media Studies

Leiden University

Master Thesis

Date of completion: 06-06-2025

Word count: 14.076

## Abstract

There is a high number of students that struggle with mental health issues, often afraid to seek help because of negative social stigmas. Previous research indicates that identifying with a fictional character can guide readers with mental health issues in living a fulfilling life with their mental health, but it could also educate readers that do not have mental health issues themselves. New adult (NA) is a category of fiction focused on this same demographic: students. Even though studying representation of people within this demographic is important, research on new adult literature is greatly underrepresented. This thesis examines the representation of mental health issues in contemporary NA romance novels written by American and Canadian authors by completing a directed content analysis informed by prior research on young adult literature. The analysis was performed on six novels: *Say You Swear* by Maegan Brandy, *Powerless* by Elsie Silver, *Meet Me at the Lake* by Carley Fortune, *The Graham Effect* by Elle Kennedy, *Love Redesigned* by Lauren Asher, and *Deep End* by Ali Hazelwood. Following the analysis, it was found that characters with mental health issues were represented as suffering a lot and keeping loved ones at a distance, but the characters also decided to try to manage their symptoms. However, they needed someone else to be the driving force behind this decision. It is recommended that authors represent characters who are embracing their issues because they want to be the best version of themselves, not because another person drives them to. This ensures better accuracy of representation, helps minimise current stigmas and provides a helping hand for people that are struggling with their mental health.



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Declaration of originality

*By submitting this thesis, you certify that:*

- this work has been drafted by you;
  
- you have clearly referenced all sources (either from a printed source, internet or any other source) used in the work in accordance with the course requirements and the indications of the course instructors;
  
- this work has not been previously used for other courses in the program or for course of another program or university, unless explicitly allowed by the instructors;
  
- you understand that any false claim in respect of this work will result in disciplinary action in accordance with university regulations and the program regulations, and that any false claim will be reported to the Board of Examiners and that disciplinary measures can result in exclusion from the course and/or the program;
  
- you understand that your work may be checked for plagiarism, by the use of plagiarism detection software as well as through other measures taken by the university to prevent and check on fraud and plagiarism;
  
- you understand and endorse the significance of the prevention of fraud and that you acknowledge that in case of (gross) fraud the program could declare the thesis invalid.

Name: Nina de Rijk

Date: 06-06-2025

## Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis has been a fun but challenging process, marking the end of my student years. Being a student myself, where I had to move to a big city away from friends and family, I have witnessed first-hand what a difficult time this may be. I feel it is extremely important for society to acknowledge that mental health is not something that should be taken lightly, and that accurate representation of people that struggle with their mental health should be taken seriously. Especially in this fragile state when people are stepping out of their comfort zones, they should not have to worry about what other people think, on top of everything else. I would like to thank my supervisor, dr. Angus Mol, for giving me free reign in discovering everything I wanted to know about the topic, while giving support and encouragement. I would then also like to thank my friends and family, for believing I could do this even when I did not always do so myself, and offering me distractions when they knew I needed them. Finally, for anyone that is struggling, know that that is okay.

# Index

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Declaration of originality.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. Theoretical framework .....</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1 <i>Defining new adult.....</i>	<i>10</i>
2.2 <i>Representation in literature .....</i>	<i>13</i>
2.3 <i>Mental health representation .....</i>	<i>13</i>
<b>3. Methodology.....</b>	<b>17</b>
3.1 <i>Research design .....</i>	<i>17</i>
3.2 <i>Sample.....</i>	<i>19</i>
3.3 <i>Operationalisation .....</i>	<i>19</i>
3.4 <i>Data analysis .....</i>	<i>20</i>
3.5 <i>Ethics .....</i>	<i>21</i>
<b>4. Results.....</b>	<b>23</b>
4.1 <i>Overview of the books.....</i>	<i>24</i>
4.1.1 <i>Say You Swear – Maegan Brandy .....</i>	<i>24</i>
4.1.2 <i>Powerless – Elsie Silver.....</i>	<i>24</i>
4.1.3 <i>Meet Me at the Lake – Carley Fortune .....</i>	<i>25</i>
4.1.4 <i>The Graham Effect – Elle Kennedy.....</i>	<i>25</i>
4.1.5 <i>Love Redesigned – Lauren Asher.....</i>	<i>26</i>
4.1.6 <i>Deep End – Ali Hazelwood .....</i>	<i>26</i>
4.2 <i>Establishing the code network.....</i>	<i>26</i>
4.3 <i>Theme 1 – Chaos: suffering from symptoms.....</i>	<i>27</i>
4.3.1 <i>Suffer .....</i>	<i>27</i>
4.3.2 <i>Undeserving .....</i>	<i>28</i>
4.3.3 <i>Distract and deflect.....</i>	<i>29</i>
4.4 <i>Theme 2 - Isolation: pushing others away.....</i>	<i>30</i>
4.4.1 <i>Blame .....</i>	<i>30</i>
4.4.2 <i>Burden .....</i>	<i>31</i>
4.4.3 <i>Doubt.....</i>	<i>31</i>
4.5 <i>Theme 3 - Find your way: through help from others.....</i>	<i>32</i>
4.5.1 <i>Be present.....</i>	<i>33</i>
4.5.2 <i>Talk.....</i>	<i>34</i>
4.5.3 <i>Try .....</i>	<i>34</i>
<b>5. Discussion and conclusion.....</b>	<b>36</b>
5.1 <i>Discussion.....</i>	<i>36</i>
5.2 <i>Limitations and future studies.....</i>	<i>38</i>
5.3 <i>Conclusion .....</i>	<i>39</i>

<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Appendix A – Overview of the dataset .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Appendix B – Code book .....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Appendix C – Code network.....</b>	<b>51</b>

## 1. Introduction

"I'm afraid of the unpredictability of existing. I'm afraid of not being able to control the direction of my life. I'm afraid that no matter how much I plan, I won't be able to avoid hurtful and sad things. But above all... [...] Mostly, I'm afraid of attempting something and not being perfect at it."<sup>1</sup>

- Ali Hazelwood, *Deep End*

Narratives containing characters with mental health issues in contemporary fiction have recently had an increase in popularity.<sup>2</sup> It was already a popular topic to write about in the nineteenth century – think about Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* depicting a woman named Bertha suffering from madness – but nowadays people have been more open to acknowledge mental health, resulting in more literature representing mental health issues.<sup>3</sup> This thesis explores how exactly these mental health issues are represented in literature. Specifically, the focus is on mental illnesses in new adult fiction, a genre in which these themes of mental health have been particularly prevalent, which will be discussed in the following chapters. New adult (hereafter NA) literature can be placed in between young adult (hereafter YA) and adult literature, and is mainly focusing on people in their twenties, who are entering higher education, stopped living at home, and are getting into serious relationships.<sup>4</sup> This stage of life can be very exciting, but it can also bring challenges. By entering this stage, one might lose their support system from, for example, their family or school, and they need to figure out their own role in society.<sup>5</sup>

With these new students having to find their way through their newly acquired independence, it can be hard for them to adjust to this life. In 2024, a report about mental health was compiled including data from surveys with 3649 students in the United States. This report by U.S. News/Generation Lab shows that 70% of students that participated in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Ali Hazelwood, *Deep End* (Berkley, 2025), p. 245 [All other references to this edition are given in the text]

<sup>2</sup> Ally Caroline Peters, 'The Effect of Social Media on Mental Health', (undergraduate thesis, Suffolk University, 2020) <<https://dc.suffolk.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=undergrad>> [accessed 17 March 2025]

<sup>3</sup> Abby, 'Mental Health & Wellbeing Literature', *English Faculty Library*, 25 May 2023 <<https://blogs.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/english/2023/05/25/mental-health-wellbeing-literature/>> [accessed 17 March 2025]

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Tyler Timson, 'A Later Me Problem: A New Adult Literature Novel', (master's thesis, Truman State University, 2023) <<https://www.proquest.com/openview/82a1caecd3adab7f1a3234183bc38fc4/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>> [accessed 26 January 2025]

<sup>5</sup> David Wood et al., 'Emerging Adulthood as a Critical Stage in the Life Course', in *Handbook of Life Course Health Development [Internet]*, ed. by Halfon, Forrest and Lerner (Springer, 2018), pp. 123-143, doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-47143-3\_7

survey have said that since starting college, they have grappled with mental health issues. Nevertheless, even though these students struggle with their mental health, only 37% of the participants have tried looking for help. Some of the reasons for students not looking for help are negative experiences in the past, prices of resources, and being afraid of social stigmas.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the numbers of students in Canada that are struggling with their mental health is high as well: 75% of students say that they are struggling with their mental health and 32% of students would rate their mental health as being poor or even very poor.<sup>7</sup> These numbers portray the fact that the volume of students that struggle with their mental health is extremely high, something that needs to be given particular attention, since many of these issues are diagnosed amongst people in the ages of 16-24; right around the time they are entering higher education. By paying attention to mental health amongst students, they can receive the help they need as soon as possible, which gives them the best long-term results.<sup>8</sup> This high number of students that struggle with mental health issues shows that NA literature specifically is an important lens through which to research this topic, since that is exactly the age group that the characters in these novels portray.

Even though it seems that studying media portrayal of mental health issues amongst people in this stage of life is important, research on NA literature is underrepresented. A significant amount of attention, not only in scholarly works but in society as well, has gone to research on YA literature, a genre that focuses on the transition to adulthood, including themes such as friendship and first loves.<sup>9</sup> While this is an important genre to research as well, characters in YA books are typically somewhere between the ages of 12 and 18.<sup>10</sup> The typical NA reader, usually between the ages of 18 and 25, will be too old to read these books, and would rather opt for books that contain characters that are closer to their own age groups in order to be able to identify or relate to the character.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Wood, 'Mental Health on College Campuses: Challenges and Solutions', *U.S. News & World Report*, 6 June 2023 <<https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/mental-health-on-college-campuses-challenges-and-solutions>> [accessed 17 March 2025]

<sup>7</sup> 'Promoting mental health', Universities Canada., n.d. <<https://univcan.ca/priority/promoting-mental-health/>> [accessed 16 April 2025]

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Wayne Harrison & Bec Ehlers, 'What is Young Adult Literature?', *Oregon State University*, 5 February 2024 <<https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/wlf/what-young-adult-literature-definition-and-examples>> [accessed 01 February 2025]

<sup>10</sup> Jenna Moreci, 'What's the Difference Between Young Adult and Adult Books?', *Jenna Moreci*, 12 September 2022 <<https://www.jennamoreci.com/post/what-s-the-difference-between-young-adult-and-adult-books>> [accessed 17 March 2025]

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Being able to relate to the character is important, because identifying with a character in a book can cause a person to think like that character, not only while reading the book but even after they have closed it. When identifying with a particular character, a person could take that character's knowledge and make it their own.<sup>12</sup> This might enhance the way media platforms, including literature, are an important factor in influencing people's perception and understanding of mental health. On the one hand, it can challenge the current stigmas surrounding mental health, but it could also lead to even more biases around the topic.<sup>13</sup> A fictional character that struggles with mental health could either help a reader cope with their own problems, or it could make the person feel even worse. If a character is written in such a way that it is easy to identify with the character, and their mental health issues are discussed realistically, a reader can use this character as inspiration or guideline on how to process their own mental health issues. On the other hand, if a character is stereotypically portrayed – for example as violent and unpredictable – this can not only cause a reader struggling with mental health to feel worse, it also causes a reader that is not yet familiar with mental health issues to be misinformed.<sup>14</sup> Correct representation is especially important for young people going through this transitional stage. They need to see characters like themselves being able to live fulfilling lives, so they can use this as inspiration. Furthermore, it can eliminate misconceptions for readers without mental health issues, so they too can know what it means to live with mental health issues. Together, these matters make it important to comprehend to what extent mental health issues are realistically portrayed in popular media, resulting in the following research question:

“How do new adult romance novels written by American and Canadian authors represent mental health issues?”

This thesis will answer the research question by performing a directed content analysis. The unit of analysis consists of six new adult novels in the romance genre: *Say you swear* by Maegan Brandy, *Powerless* by Elsie Silver, *Meet Me at the Lake* by Carley Fortune, *The Graham Effect* by Elle Kennedy, *Love Redesigned* by Lauren Asher, and *Deep End* by Ali Hazelwood. They are all written by American and Canadian authors, and each book contains

---

<sup>12</sup> Hal McDonald, 'Mind-Melding With Our Favorite Fictional Characters', *Psychology Today*, 19 April 2021 <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/time-travelling-apollo/202104/mind-melding-our-favorite-fictional-characters>> [accessed 17 March 2025]

<sup>13</sup> Hao Zhang & Amira Firdaus, 'What Does Media Say about Mental Health: A Literature Review of Media Coverage on Mental Health', *Journalism and Media*, 5.3, pp. 967-979, doi: 10.3390/journalmedia5030061

<sup>14</sup> Scott Parrott, 'Media Stereotypes About Mental Illness: The Role of the Media in Nurturing and Mitigating Stigma', *ResearchGate*, 2020, pp. 247-249 <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346772973\\_Media\\_stereotypes\\_about\\_mental\\_illness\\_The\\_role\\_of\\_the\\_media\\_in\\_nurturing\\_and\\_mitigating\\_stigma](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346772973_Media_stereotypes_about_mental_illness_The_role_of_the_media_in_nurturing_and_mitigating_stigma)>

at least one character with a mental illness. The novels are analysed in correspondence with the three phases of a directed content analysis. This is combined with the six steps of a thematic analysis, developing further on contributions by Frank<sup>15</sup> and Thaller.<sup>16</sup>

The following chapter provides an exhaustive description of what NA as a genre entails, as well as an overview of theories regarding representation in literature in general, and mental health representation more specifically. The third chapter provides the research design and explains the chosen methodology and operationalisation. The results obtained from the directed content analysis and thematic analysis are presented in chapter four. Finally, in chapter five, the results of the analysis are discussed in relation to the theory and the research question answered.

---

<sup>15</sup> Arthur W. Frank, 'The wounded storyteller: body, illness, and ethics' (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) <<https://philpapers.org/rec/FRATWS>> [accessed 26 March 2025]

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Katherine Thaller, 'Crazy Stories and Unhinged Tropes: Portrayals of Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature' (dissertation, Washington State University, 2015) <<https://hdl.handle.net/2376/111729>> [accessed 26 March 2025]

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 *Defining new adult*

The term new adult was first coined in a submissions contest in 2009 by St Martin's Press. They noticed that people in their twenties were reading a lot of YA fiction, and wanted to play into that by looking for fiction written for a slightly older demographic. St Martin's Press was looking for fiction that was comparable to young adult fiction, but which could be marketed towards adults, "a sort of 'older YA' or 'new adult'".<sup>17</sup> In 2012, 55% of YA literature was bought by adult readers. A lot of slightly older young adults have not fully outgrown the YA category, but they do not feel fully represented either: they are stuck in the middle. Even though they are still figuring out their own identity, they are not in high school anymore, which makes it difficult to fully relate to the protagonists in YA novels. So, what better than a genre that contains YA's themes of self-discovery, but is specifically written towards this generation, with issues and settings that are more appropriate for, and applicable to, their age.<sup>18</sup>

It is argued that the genre YA is not actually a genre, but more of a category in which every possible genre could occur.<sup>19</sup> Thus, NA could also be described as more of a category than a genre. The term is more of a label for its intended audience, than a description of what is in the books: "twenty-somethings, Gen Yers, and older young adult readers".<sup>20</sup> The term gained popularity a couple of years later, with a noticeable boom from 2011 onwards. Where only 46 NA books were published in 2010, more than a thousand NA books were published in 2013. When the term was first coined, NA was mostly a general category, whereas during this "new adult boom" a particular genre was found exceptionally popular. Most books published under the new adult term belonged to the contemporary romance genre.<sup>21</sup>

The biggest difference between YA, NA, and adult fiction is thus the intended demographic of the reader. YA readers are in high school. They are typically aged between 12 and 18, with the protagonists in the book being around the same age. NA books are written for

---

<sup>17</sup> Jodi McAlister, *New Adult Fiction*, Elements in Publishing and Book Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 11, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108900737>

<sup>18</sup> Author of Confusion, 'The Terrifying In-Between: What Are New Adult Books and Why Should the Publishing Community Care?', *Medium*, 28 November 2017 <<https://medium.com/@authorofconfusion/the-terrifying-in-between-what-are-new-adult-books-and-why-should-the-publishing-community-care-ab727ebc6c5>> [accessed 17 March 2025]

<sup>19</sup> Jodi McAlister, pp. 2-3

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-39

a slightly older reader, with their audience being college-aged. These readers are typically aged between 18 and 25, and so are the protagonists in the books. Lastly, there is the adult category. This category is very broad, with it being marketed for every adult. The protagonists in adult books are usually 20 years or older, but in this category, any age could be given to the characters. For adult books, the definition is more in the content than the age of the characters.<sup>22</sup> The intended demographic can be spotted in the setting of these books. The setting of a YA book is often a high school, while the setting for NA books is usually at college, graduate school, or internship places. YA books are typically about self-discovery, first relationships, and teenagers finding their place in the world. Alternatively, the focus of NA books is on college students leaving home, getting their first jobs, and finding their sexuality. Maegan Brandy's *Say You Swear* for example, starts with a group of friends who are around 18 years old, and begins in the summer before they leave for university, covering their experiences such as living in dorms, going to parties, and the changing dynamics in their friendship and relationships.<sup>23</sup>

Besides the intended demographic of both the readers and the characters, the difference between these genres – or categories – also lie in the themes and the heat level of these books. That being said, there is especially a big difference between YA and NA in terms of its heat level. YA literature is intended for teenagers, which results in a low heat level. These books focus on the emotional experience of the characters, without any physical descriptions. At most, YA literature contains fade-to-black scenes.<sup>24</sup> On the contrary, a big aspect in NA literature is characters finding their sexuality, which leaves room for a higher level of heat. NA books often – but not always – tend to include open-door sex scenes, with detailed descriptions of the characters physical and emotional experiences.<sup>25</sup> These heat levels in NA literature result in more intimacy between partners, both physical and emotional, and can make relationships more intense.<sup>26</sup> This could in turn have an effect on the portrayal of mental health in NA romance novels in the sense that it could enhance the depiction of people with mental health issues being loved enough by another person that they overcome their

---

<sup>22</sup> Jenna Moreci, 'What's the Difference Between Young Adult and Adult Books?', *Jenna Moreci*, 12 September 2022 <<https://www.jennamoreci.com/post/what-s-the-difference-between-young-adult-and-adult-books>> [accessed 17 March 2025]

<sup>23</sup> Maegan Brandy, *Say You Swear* (Orion Publishing Co, 2023) [All other references to this edition are given]

<sup>24</sup> Kasia Lasinka, 'New Adult vs. Young Adult: Key Genre Differences', *Indie Author Magazine*, 1 August 2022 <<https://indieauthormagazine.com/breaking-down-the-difference-between-new-adult-and-young-adult-fiction/>> [accessed 17 March 2025]

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Luna, 'Young Adult vs. New Adult: Main Differences', *Galatea*, 19 November 2024 <<https://galatea.com/h/blog/young-adult-vs-new-adult-main-differences/>> [accessed 16 May 2025]

symptoms,<sup>27</sup> which will be discussed in section 2.3, because of the intense emotional relationship between them. Adult literature is not as strict with its themes and settings as NA or YA literature. Adult literature does not exactly have any limitations on the content of the stories, but is just generally focused towards an adult audience. They contain characters from every age, but if the protagonists are younger, then it is generally written as if an adult is looking back at their younger lives, which makes the narrative completely different. The heat level in adult literature could be high, but could just as well be very low, depending on the context.<sup>28</sup>

Apart from the potential benefits discussed above, there is some critique on the emergence of NA as a genre. Writer and entertainment journalist Lauren Sarner, for example, finds new adult “condescending to readers and authors alike”.<sup>29</sup> She thinks giving books the label NA is a situation in which everyone loses: YA books are insulted by being a step below NA books, and books regarded as NA are implied not to be good enough to be regarded as adult literature. According to Sarner, NA fiction is just YA “with sex and cursing thrown in”.<sup>30</sup> As mentioned before, many NA books do have a high heat level, resulting in the characterisation of NA fiction as “thinly veiled erotica”.<sup>31</sup> However, NA as a category entails a lot more than just that.

Yes, a lot of characters in NA fiction are dealing with their own sexuality, whether that is by being very openminded about it, or, on the contrary, by being very inexperienced or uninterested. Be that as it may, readers of NA fiction are at an age where more serious topics can be introduced as well. It is common for authors to include social matters into their books, such as diversity, feminism, and political issues.<sup>32</sup> Not to mention difficult topics such as abuse. For example, in Ali Hazelwood’s *Deep End*, the female protagonist talks about having been emotionally abused by her father in the past, and having to overcome issues that resulted from this abuse.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, mental health is a common topic in NA as well. The

---

<sup>27</sup> Sarah Katherine Thaller, ‘Crazy Stories and Unhinged Tropes: Portrayals of Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature’ (dissertation, Washington State University, 2015) p. 186 <<https://hdl.handle.net/2376/111729>> [accessed 26 March 2025]

<sup>28</sup> Terrell, 'The Difference Between... YA & Adult Fiction', *How to Write a Book Now*, n.d. <<https://www.how-to-write-a-book-now.com/difference-betweenya-adult-fiction.html>> [accessed 17 March 2025]

<sup>29</sup> Lauren Sarner, 'The Problem with New Adult Fiction', *HuffPost*, 14 August 2013 <[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-problem-with-new-adul\\_b\\_3755165](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-problem-with-new-adul_b_3755165)> [accessed 17 March 2025]

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Polly Peraza-Brown, 'What is New Adult Fiction? All You Need To Know', *Jericho Writers*, n.d. <<https://jerichowriters.com/what-is-new-adult-fiction/>> [accessed 17 March 2025]

<sup>32</sup> 'Wat is New Adult?', *So Many Pages*, 30 May 2022 <<https://somanypages.nl/blog/wat-is-new-adult/>> [accessed 17 March 2025]

<sup>33</sup> Ali Hazelwood, 2025

characters' mental health is often discussed in relevance to their abuse, but even without any presence of abuse, mental health could be a frequent topic in NA literature.<sup>34</sup> For this reason, NA fiction is particularly suited for exploring mental health issues in literature.

## *2.2 Representation in literature*

Literature is an important medium in composing people's identities. Through representation of cultures, experiences, and developments, literature is able to reflect human identity. In turn, it can expand a reader's knowledge and attitudes.<sup>35</sup> When discussing representation in literature or other forms of media, we are referring to the inclusion of characters that are not part of the majority, but instead belong to marginalised groups, such as people with disabilities or people with mental health disorders.<sup>36</sup>

In this way, books can play an important role in expanding a reader's perceptions on the world. Reading about cultures or experiences a person is not yet acquainted with can help them be aware of complex human identities. Representation in literature can be used as a tool to eliminate misconceptions about different cultures, it can inspire readers to think about their own identities and expectations, and it can help them better understand other people.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, representation in literature can help people with their own self-esteem as well. When people recognise themselves or their experiences in a character, it can make them feel like they belong within society.<sup>38</sup> Especially when people do not have many people like them in their environment, being able to see people like themselves represented in the books that they read can be very helpful.<sup>39</sup>

## *2.3 Mental health representation*

Numerous studies have addressed disability or mental health representation. For instance, Arthur Frank has written about narratives of illness. He found that the stories of people with illnesses including cancer, disabilities and more, are not just about these people's personal struggles. These stories are full of moral dilemmas and emphasise societal values. The

---

<sup>34</sup> 'Wat is New Adult?', 2022

<sup>35</sup> M. Altun, 'Literature and Identity: Examine the Role of Literature in Shaping Individual and Cultural Identities', *International Journal of Social Sciences and Educational Studies*, 10.3 (2023), pp. 381-385

<sup>36</sup> Molly Tyler, 'Representation in Literature', Molly Christian Tyler, 20 April 2024

<<https://mollychristiantyler.com/representation-in-literature/>> [accessed 26 March 2025]

<sup>37</sup> Altun, 2023 pp. 382-383

<sup>38</sup> Angela Ackerman, 'Representation in Literature: Why It's Important & How To Handle It', Writers Helping Writers, 10 October 2018 <<https://writershelpingwriters.net/2018/10/representation-in-literature-why-its-important-and-how-to-handle-it/>> [accessed 26 March 2025]

<sup>39</sup> Molly Tyler, 2024

narratives he discovered are those of restitution, chaos, and quest. According to Frank, the narrative of restitution includes characters finding a way to get better, and focusing on getting a cure. The chaos narrative includes characters with an illness that seems to last forever, without any relief. Finally, his quest narrative includes characters that embrace their illness and use it to become a different person.<sup>40</sup>

While Frank's research was performed on memoirs from people with physical disabilities, Diane Scrofano<sup>41</sup> has used Frank's three narratives to study mental illness in YA literature. In her study, Scrofano analysed fifty YA novels published between 1998 and 2017, depicting mental illness. In the sample, she found that all three of Frank's narratives were represented. Where 26 of the novels fell within the chaos narrative, 13 fell within the restitution narrative, and only 11 fell within the quest narrative. Furthermore, 12 of the 13 novels in the restitution narrative could be placed in the chaos narrative as well, since the characters are often represented as trying to gain restitution, but in denying or hiding from their illness they are often failing. This results in a total of 38 out of 50 YA novels that are portraying people with mental illness with a narrative that focuses on chaos. This research showed us that while finding novels with characters that are struggling with their mental health is easy, that is not the case for novels with characters that are embracing their illness and living fulfilling lives.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, Robert McRuer has discussed four categories that encompass frequent portrayals of people with disabilities across all media platforms. These categories are: the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic, and the realistic. The wondrous entails that someone with a disability is represented as being an inspiration or a hero. In the sentimental, someone with a disability is represented as being weak or pitiful. The exotic portrays someone with a disability as strange objects. Lastly, the realistic completely ignores the disability.<sup>43</sup>

Sarah Thaller<sup>44</sup> has rewritten McRuer's categories to apply to mental illness specifically, because mental illnesses deal with particular tropes and issues of representation that are different than those for disabilities in general. These categories are the learning opportunity, the victim, the non-human or the beast, and the invisible. In the category of the learning opportunity, someone with a mental illness is depicted as needing to overcome their illness, in order to become normal. It is often portrayed as if another person can help them overcome

---

<sup>40</sup> Arthur W. Frank, 'The wounded storyteller: body, illness, and ethics' (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) <<https://philpapers.org/rec/FRATWS>> [accessed 26 March 2025]

<sup>41</sup> Diane Scrofano, 'Disability Narrative Theory and Young Adult Fiction of Mental Illness', *The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, 10.1 (2019), pp. 1-27

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26

<sup>43</sup> Sarah Thaller, 2015, pp. 183-185

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 183-187

their illness by loving them enough. Another recurring representation within this category is that when someone cannot overcome their mental illness, at least the people that knew them can grow from the experience of having met the person with the mental illness. The next category is that of the victim. Here, the mental illness is often caused by trauma. They are haunted by this trauma, and need someone in their environment to save them. The third category Thaller mentioned is the non-human or the beast. Someone with a mental illness is seen as a spectacle, and they are often depicted as being violent, fearsome, or comical. They are considered unpredictable and troubling, and are often compared to animals. The last category is the invisible. The symptoms of mental illnesses are brushed off as being a typical phase of adulthood and will not actually last. The mental illness is not actually acknowledged as important in this category.

Looking at both Frank's categories and Thaller's categories, there are quite some similarities. Frank's restitution category has similar matters as Thaller's learning opportunity and victim categories, in the sense that in all three of these categories, there is a quest to overcome the mental illness, either by finding a cure or needing someone else to be that cure for them. A big similarity is the one between Frank's chaos and Thaller's non-human or the beast category. In these categories, the person with the mental illness is unstable, and struggling with their symptoms. However, Thaller's category of the victim could be compared to the chaos category as well, in the sense that the person with the illness is represented as being weak and in need of saving. Frank's quest and Thaller's the invisible category, however, are quite different. Where the illness is completely ignored in Thaller's final category, making it seem as if people should ignore it in real life as well, it is actually embraced as part of someone's identity in Frank's final category, which is a much healthier way to look at mental illnesses.

In order for readers to be able to embrace their own mental illness, and not live in a constant state of chaos, it is important that they see characters with the same illnesses as themselves represented in a way that shows them that it is possible to manage their symptoms and live a fulfilling life, even with their mental illnesses. This is especially important for the young people who are going through important steps in their lives and who are becoming more independent as they manage this transitional stage. This is why it is necessary to study the representation of mental health in NA fiction, in order to see whether characters with mental illnesses are depicted in a quest narrative where the illness is embraced, or if they are rather depicted as a victim or a spectacle. Not only is this representation important for readers with mental health issues, but for readers without mental health issues as well. Representation

in literature can eliminate misconceptions about mental health, and help people better understand what it is like living with mental health issues.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Altun, 2023, pp. 382-383

### 3. Methodology

This research analyses how mental health issues are represented in new adult romance novels that were written by American and Canadian authors. Using a qualitative directed content analysis and thematic analysis, it will be analysed how these different authors have chosen to represent their characters' mental health issues, and how this relates to existing categories of representation.

In this chapter, the methodology and implementation of this research are discussed. The research design for this thesis will be discussed and substantiated in section 3.1, before moving on to the description of the unit of analysis in section 3.2. In section 3.3, the operationalisation of the research is clarified on the basis of definitive concepts, followed by an explanation of the data analysis in section 3.4. Finally, section 3.5 goes into the ethical guidelines regarding this research.

#### *3.1 Research design*

Considering the fact that there is relatively little research on NA literature available, a qualitative approach was chosen here. Even when limited information is available on a topic or situation, a qualitative approach can be used, since there is no need for clear expectations prior to the research.<sup>46</sup> This research is not just analysing NA literature, it is focusing on mental health representation. However, mental health representation is a very complex concept. The meaning of mental health representation will not be the same for everyone, and will need interpretation in order to be understood fully, hence the reason why a qualitative approach is appropriate for this study, since a quantitative approach does not have room for interpretation.<sup>47</sup>

As mentioned, there is little research on NA literature. There is, however, a substantial number of studies on (mental health) representation in literature. Since there is existing literature available, a directed content analysis and thematic analysis were chosen as the data analysis methods. This called for a deductive approach to the study, since a directed content analysis aims to extend already existing literature.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Nigel Simister, San James & Letisha Lunin, 'Qualitative Analysis', INTRAC, 2017 <<https://www.intrac.org/app/uploads/2017/01/Qualitative-analysis.pdf>> [accessed 16 April 2025]

<sup>47</sup> Margrit Schreier, 'Introduction: What is Qualitative Content Analysis', in *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2012), pp. 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529682571.n1>

<sup>48</sup> Hsiu-Fang Hsieh & Sarah E. Shannon, 'Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis', *Qualitative Health Research*, 15.9 (2005), pp. 1277-1288 (p. 1281), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>

By using the existing works by Frank and Thaller as a framework for this study, it was possible to formulate a set of definitive concepts that encompass the initial code book, which are explained in more detail in section 3.3. Definitive concepts are predetermined and supported by distinct indicators, giving the researcher a lens through which to look at the data.<sup>49</sup> In this study, these concepts are used as a starting point for the research, but if there were parts of the data that did not fit within these definitive concepts, new concepts were created in order to encompass these parts of the data as well. This ensures that the data is not looked at exclusively with this lens, but that there is room for variety and flexibility.<sup>50</sup>

By starting the research off with these definitive concepts, but creating new ones in the process, a deductive approach was combined with an inductive approach. Where deductive analysis implies that existing research was necessary to define initial codes or concepts, inductive analysis implies that these codes or concepts actually derive from the data itself.<sup>51</sup> This process is appropriate for the present study, since the definitive concepts are based on research that was not specifically concerned with mental health representation in NA literature. Part of the concepts, like Frank's narratives, are based on research on disability in general, and are thus not created specifically for mental illnesses. This means that there was a possibility that these concepts did not properly cover the specifics of mental illnesses, which made it important to leave room for new concepts to emerge from the data.

Where this study aims to investigate how characters with mental health issues are represented in new adult romance novels, it seems a naturalistic approach was appropriate for this study. The portrayal of mental illnesses is analysed through observing the texts, and any regularities, or irregularities, between the representations in different texts will be uncovered.<sup>52</sup> However, the study also aims to look deeper into these representations, in order to explore whether they contribute to stigmas surrounding mental illnesses, which demands a more constructivist approach. The study realises that the findings can be influenced by the researcher's viewpoint, and that the results might be seen differently by other researchers.<sup>53</sup> Hence the choice to take a naturalistic approach with constructivist elements to this research.

---

<sup>49</sup> 'Analyzing Blumer's Distinction: Definitive vs. Sensitizing Concepts in Qualitative Research', Medium, 28 October 2023 <<https://medium.com/p/22fa7f5bc0b6>> [accessed 16 April 2025]

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Glenn A. Bowen, 'Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concepts', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5.3 (2006), p. 13

<sup>52</sup> Morgan Klaus Scheuerman, 'Ways of Knowing: Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research', 2020, <<https://www.morgan-klaus.com/readings/ways-of-knowing.html>> [accessed 16 April 2025]

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

### 3.2 Sample

The unit of analysis for this thesis consists of NA novels. This sample was retrieved by using a criterion sample design. Sampling based on criteria ensures that the sample will have useful contributions to the study, because the researcher knows that the topic will be present in the sample preceding the research.<sup>54</sup> In this thesis, the criterion that was most substantial was that there needed to be at least one character with a mental illness in every book in the dataset. The other criterion is that all books needed to be written by either American or Canadian authors, as a high number of students in both the United States and Canada struggle with their mental health. Since these countries are geographically close to each other as well, it made sense to group them together. The criteria discussed above have narrowed the scope of the research and ensured that the data was equipped to provide insights into the topic of research.

Based on the abovementioned sample criteria, a total of six NA novels written by different authors has been identified to be used for this research. In Appendix A, an overview can be found containing information on these novels, including book titles, author names, author's nationality, page numbers, and year of publication.

### 3.3 Operationalisation

The analysis for this study is based on both Arthur Frank's three illness narratives, and Sarah Thaller's four categories on mental illness representation. These seven categories were used as a guideline to analyse the portrayal of mental health representation in NA novels, while still keeping in mind that other concepts may be present in these novels. In case other concepts were discovered, these were considered in this research as well. Since the concepts are quite broad, it is important to clarify what, exactly, they entail. The categories by Frank and Thaller have been clarified in the theoretical framework, but outlined below is an overview of the concepts, with a number of codes that circumscribe these concepts. These codes formed the initial code book:

---

<sup>54</sup> L.A. Palinkas, S.M. Horwitz, C.A. Green, J.P. Wisdom, N. Duan & K. Hoagwood, 'Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research', *Administration and Policy in Mental Health*, 42.5 (2015), pp. 533-544, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Codes</b>
Restitution	Cure / nostalgia / escaping symptoms / secrecy
Chaos	Worsening symptoms / denial / deflecting / crisis / suffering
Quest	Embracing the illness / empowered / acknowledgement / therapy / managing symptoms / recovery
The learning opportunity	Praise / learning experience / immaturity / overcoming the problem / temporary / love as fix
The victim	Haunted / needs saving / trauma / sad / outsider as fix
The non-human or the beast	Violence / fear / unpredictable / unstable / mocking / trouble / anger
The invisible	Belittling the problem / just a phase / everyone has issues / part of life

### 3.4 Data analysis

To analyse the data, a directed content analysis and a thematic analysis were held. There are three phases in a directed content analysis: the preparation phase, the data analysis phase, and the reporting phase. This type of analysis aims to identify themes in existing literature, which will be used to guide the analysis. However, additional codes are formed during the analysis phase as well.<sup>55</sup>

First, the unit of analysis was determined during the preparation phase. The books were read, and where necessary, ePub files were converted into PDF files in order to put the material into ATLAS.ti. This preparation phase is also in line with the first step of the thematic analysis.

The analysis phase began with step two of the thematic analysis; generating initial codes. First, every part of the data that was of significance for the research was highlighted. When all of the data had gone through this process, each highlighted part was checked again, and everything that was important was given a code, which was documented in a code book (see Appendix B). These codes were then clustered with similar codes, in order to identify overarching themes, consistent with step three: searching for themes. To ensure highest relevancy, codes that appeared less than five times in the entire dataset were left out of the rest

---

<sup>55</sup> Naupess Kibiswa, 'Directed Qualitative Content Analysis (DQICA): A Tool for Conflict Analysis', *The Qualitative Report*, 24.8 (2019), pp. 2059-2079, DOI: 10.46743/2160-3715/2019.3778

of the study. Using the initial guide (the seven categories by Frank and Thaller) and developing new themes where needed, three themes emerged that encompassed the parts of the data that were of most significance. All themes were organised into a code network in order to visualise their relevance towards each other, but also towards the dataset as a whole (step four). In step five, the most important parts of the themes were considered, in order to identify the essence of the themes, and an accurate name was assigned to them. The last step of the thematic analysis was also the final stage of the directed content analysis: producing the report. Examples from the different themes were selected to accompany the argument that would help answer the research question “How do new adult romance novels written by American and Canadian authors represent mental health issues?”

### 3.5 Ethics

Since this study did not involve any human participants, but instead involved only literary texts, it did not require formal ethical approval. However, the theme of this study deals with the sensitive topic mental health. This study’s researcher has taken care to avoid reinforcing stigma or harmful generalisations about mental health, by using person-first language.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, this thesis includes excerpts from six copyrighted literary works. The excerpts are included in accordance with the Dutch copyright law, since they are used to support the research.<sup>57</sup> This is ensured by making sure that all excerpts are only documented when necessary, relevant to the research, and properly cited using MHRA referencing in order to be fully attributed to the original author.<sup>58</sup>

The researcher positionality is something that should be considered as well.<sup>59</sup> The researcher has been studying Book and Digital Media Studies for two years, and has studied Arts and Culture for four years before that. This means that besides being familiar with book studies, the researcher also has prior knowledge in regards to representation. In addition to education, the researcher works at a company that publishes NA fiction, which has impacted their knowledge on NA as a genre. Although the researcher has not done any research on NA fiction before, they have previously read some of the books that are in the dataset for this

---

<sup>56</sup> ‘Person-first and Destigmatizing Language’, National Institutes of Health, n.d. <<https://www.nih.gov/nih-style-guide/person-first-destigmatizing-language>> [accessed 14 May]

<sup>57</sup> ‘Auteursrecht voor onderzoekers’, Universiteit van Amsterdam, n.d. <<https://uba.uva.nl/ondersteuning/auteursrecht/onderzoekers/onderzoekers.html>> [accessed 14 May]

<sup>58</sup> ‘Auteurswet’, Overheid.nl, n.d. <<https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0001886/2025-02-04#HoofdstukI>> [accessed 14 May]

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Gary Darwin Holmes, ‘Researcher Positionality - A Consideration of Its Influence and Place in Qualitative Research - A New Researcher Guide’, *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 8.4 (2020), pp. 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v8i4.3232>

study. Recognising their background in the field of this study, the researcher has done their best to preserve the objectivity of this study by making use of peer review. Besides the entire research process having been reviewed by peers and a supervisor, the initial code book has also been reviewed and modified where necessary in order to enhance the accuracy of the definitive concepts.

## 4. Results

In this chapter, the results derived from the analysis of six new adult romance novels are presented. The novels are *Say you Swear* by Maegan Brandy, *Powerless* by Elsie Silver, *Meet Me at the Lake* by Carley Fortune, *The Graham Effect* by Elle Kennedy, *Love Redesigned* by Lauren Asher, and *Deep End* by Ali Hazelwood. By using earlier research by Frank and Thaller, a directed content analysis and thematic analysis were performed on the dataset, which resulted in the following themes: ‘Chaos’, ‘Isolation’, and ‘Find your way’. Together, these themes signify the manner in which mental health is portrayed in new adult romance novels.

This chapter is divided into five segments. The first segment includes an overview of the different types of mental health issues that were found in each of the books and the second segment will discuss how the code network, which can be found in Appendix C, was established. The concluding segments are about the aforementioned themes and will finally lead to answering the research question “How do new adult romance novels written by American and Canadian authors represent mental health issues?”. To clarify the themes, quotes from the different books will be used as examples.

In segment 4.3, the theme ‘Chaos: suffering from symptoms’ will be discussed. This theme portrays people with mental health issues as if they are living in a state of chaos, and is built from the codes ‘Acting okay’, ‘Crisis’, ‘Deflect’, ‘Nightmares’, ‘Not allowed’, ‘Suffering’, ‘Undeserving’, and ‘Using alcohol’.

Segment 4.4 will discuss the theme ‘Isolation: pushing others away’. This theme is related to the first, but is more specific towards people with mental health issues isolating themselves. The codes this theme emerged from are ‘Blame’, ‘Burden’, ‘Closed off’, ‘Cynical’, and ‘Loveless’.

The final segment is on ‘Find your way: through help from others’. This theme was formed as a combination of Frank and Thaller’s original themes quest, restitution, and a small part of the learning opportunity. It is focused on people with mental health issues getting better because they want to, while receiving help from others. This theme emerged from the codes ‘Getting help’, ‘Ignoring the voice’, ‘Need to talk’, ‘Recognition’, ‘Understanding’, ‘Want to try’, ‘Wonder’, and ‘Worry’.

#### *4.1 Overview of the books*

The six books that were used as a dataset for this study each contained characters with their own mental health issues. The characters had some overlap in their mental health issues, but differences as well. In this segment, each book will be described shortly, including what type of mental health issues were present.

##### *4.1.1 Say You Swear – Maegan Brandy*

In *Say You Swear*, Arianna is struggling with depression after a tough breakup. She is refusing to meet with her friends and family and using excuses in order to exclude them from what is going on in her life. At one point she meets Noah, who is having struggles of his own. His mother is living in a rehabilitation centre after suffering a stroke. She was a single mother and always took care of Noah, and now he feels like he needs to return the favour. Arianna and Noah become friends, and gradually fall in love while Arianna is slowly getting better. After an accident, Arianna ends up in hospital and she loses the last year of her memories, which means she loses her memory of Noah. Arianna struggles with not knowing what the last year in her life looked like, only getting back small glimpses of her memories, and Noah struggles with losing Arianna. During this time, Noah's mom passes away, leaving him with a lot of grief, but he has his friends to help him through this. At the end of the book, Arianna regains her memories and she and Noah are happy and together again.<sup>60</sup>

##### *4.1.2 Powerless – Elsie Silver*

In *Powerless*, there are two characters that struggle with mental health issues, Sloane and Jasper. Jasper experienced a traumatic event when he was younger which ended in him losing his little sister. His parents could not handle the grief. His mother turned to drinking, and his father left him and found a new family. Jasper was taken in by the Eaton family, but has never stopped blaming himself for what happened. With this family, he meets Sloane. She is always there for him when he needs her, talking to him and distracting him on bad nights, and they become good friends. Sloane herself is struggling with not being in control. She is being controlled by her own father, and then by her fiancé. After cancelling the wedding, Sloane and Jasper find out that one of Jasper's brothers is missing, which sends Jasper into a spiral again. Sloane and Jasper go on a road trip to one of Sloane's cousins, while distracting each other from their pain. They end up growing closer together, but they keep pushing each other away

---

<sup>60</sup> Maegan Brandy, *Say You Swear* (Orion Publishing Co, 2023)

because of their past. Sloane tells Jasper to work on himself before they can be together, because she cannot be the person to keep saving him. At the same time, Sloane works on getting control over her own life back. Jasper is there for her during a difficult conversation with her father, and they end up together.<sup>61</sup>

#### 4.1.3 *Meet Me at the Lake* – Carley Fortune

The characters in *Meet Me at the Lake* that struggle with mental health issues are Fern and Will. They met ten years ago and decided to meet up again a year later, but Will never shows up. When they eventually see each other again nine years later, Fern is grieving the loss of her mother. She is trying to get better by doing things that make her happy. Will and Fern start growing closer together, but at some point, Will disappears. He pushes Fern away because he feels like he needs to, in order to protect his sister and her daughter. Will's sister then shows up at Fern's doorstep to tell her what is going on with Will, since he never told her himself. Will struggles with symptoms that are associated with postpartum depression, like postpartum obsessive-compulsive disorder, being the caregiver of his sister's child. He has had help to overcome these symptoms, but still struggles with anxiety. Fern and Will have a long talk about his anxieties, and Fern makes clear that she wants to be there for him during everything.<sup>62</sup>

#### 4.1.4 *The Graham Effect* – Elle Kennedy

*The Graham Effect* is about Gigi and Ryder, both hockey players. Gigi is the daughter of a famous hockey player, and struggles with stepping out of her father's shadow. She gets help perfecting hockey skills from Ryder, who in turn needs Gigi to put in a good word for him with her father. Gigi and Ryder are getting close, but Ryder has trouble opening himself up and forming relationships with people. His issues originate from a traumatic event where he saw his father murder his mother, which he tries hard to ignore. Gigi helps him open up about what is troubling him, so he does not have to deal with everything alone and can finally heal.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Elsie Silver, *Powerless* (Little, Brown Book Group, 2023) [All other references to this edition are given in the text]

<sup>62</sup> Carley Fortune, *Meet Me at the Lake* (Berkley, 2023) [All other references to this edition are given in the text]

<sup>63</sup> Elle Kennedy, *The Graham Effect* (Little, Brown Book Group, 2023) [All other references to this edition are given in the text]

#### *4.1.5 Love Redesigned – Lauren Asher*

The main characters in *Love Redesigned* are Dahlia and Julian. Dahlia is in a depression, for which she is undergoing therapy sessions. She struggles with her depression throughout the book, by not wanting to see people and pushing Julian away because of her own problems. She eventually chooses to do things she is not feeling nonetheless. Julian tries to help her by giving her distractions, but is struggling himself as well. His struggles are less in the open, because he is not dealing with them. He pushed Dahlia away in the past because he was grieving his father, and only now realises that he should have dealt with his grief in a different way. He works on getting back Dahlia's trust, while also finally dealing with his feelings about his father's death.<sup>64</sup>

#### *4.1.6 Deep End – Ali Hazelwood*

*Deep End* is about a competitive diver named Scarlett. She is in therapy because of a mental block after an injury she had a year before. She tries to work on this block in her therapy sessions, but is struggling with the fact that she does not seem to get better. She also has mental health issues from traumatic events in her childhood, for which she went to therapy sessions as well. This trauma is mostly resolved, but she still has certain triggers that make her anxious. At some point she meets a swimmer on her team, Lukas. Lukas recognises when Scarlett is feeling anxious, and he tries to help her through her mental block by sharing what he experienced when in a similar situation. He also tries to make sure she is not in any uncomfortable situations regarding her past trauma. He is also struggling a bit with not being there when his mother passed, which results in him always wanting to know where Scarlett is and how she is doing. Scarlett is actively trying to feel better, and Lukas helps her in the process.<sup>65</sup>

#### *4.2 Establishing the code network*

As mentioned, the data was analysed using a directed content analysis and thematic analysis. Before the analysis, the initial code book was put into ATLAS.ti, and given colours to reflect the initial categories by Frank and Thaller. During the analysis, every significant part of the data was given a code. When the initial code book was not able to properly cover a part of the data, new codes were created. When every section that was of significance to the analysis was

---

<sup>64</sup> Lauren Asher, *Love Redesigned* (Little, Brown Book Group, 2023) [All other references to this edition are given in the text]

<sup>65</sup> Ali Hazelwood, *Deep End* (Berkley, 2025)

covered, the codes which appeared a minimum of five times were put into a preliminary code network.

By visualising these codes, it was immediately clear that the categories ‘the non-human or the beast’ and ‘the invisible’ did not have any relevance to the study and consequently were removed from the network. The provided connections between the different codes made it clear that some of the categories were not found frequently enough to form a unique theme. However, these were left in the network to show their relation to the definitive themes. For example, ‘the victim’ is connected to the code ‘trauma’, which is connected to codes in both ‘Chaos’ and ‘Find your way’. Eventually, by creating these connections, ‘Chaos’, ‘Find your way’, and ‘Isolation’ were the only three categories that were relevant enough to be considered a unique theme. The definitive code network can be found in Appendix C.

In the next paragraphs, these themes will be presented and supported by relevant quotes from the dataset.

#### *4.3 Theme 1 – Chaos: suffering from symptoms*

The first theme that came out of this study is ‘Chaos: suffering from symptoms’. This theme entails that people with mental health issues are living in a state of chaos, where they are suffering while often pretending that they are doing okay. Characters in the books are often having nightmares, using alcohol as a way to distract themselves, and feeling undeserving of good things. The theme is present in all six books, with the highest recurrence in Maegan Brandy’s *Say You Swear* (46 times), Elsie Silver’s *Powerless* (47 times) and Ali Hazelwood’s *Deep End* (48 times).

##### *4.3.1 Suffer*

In *Say You Swear*, both Arianna and Noah are suffering quite a lot in the book. Noah’s suffering can be recognised in the following examples: “I sit around watching the clock tick round with no end. The hand turns and turns, tightening my chest like a wrench, stripping me of my threads and leaving me a gutted mess that can’t be repaired.”<sup>66</sup>, “Every time I think things are turning around, that I’m finally getting past the heavy, a rockslide comes tumbling down and I have to fight my way through it. But this time, I can’t do it.”<sup>67</sup>, “It’s a never-ending high rope with no bell to be rung, shredding my limbs with each attempt to scale.”<sup>68</sup>.

---

<sup>66</sup> Maegan Brandy, p. 444

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 523

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 591

Arianna's suffering is evident as well: "The loss eating me away day by day is like nothing I've ever felt."<sup>69</sup>, "I want to scream, to cry. I want to run away."<sup>70</sup>, "Alone in the corner of the shower, I cry for all the things I've tried to force from my mind, but ache within me every day, nonetheless."<sup>71</sup>, "Panic flares behind my chest, and it swells, locking off my airway, and I start to sweat."<sup>72</sup>.

Furthermore, in *Love Redesigned*, when Dahlia first arrives back to Lake Wisteria after living in San Francisco for a long time, she is having a panic attack in the car: "An invisible hand wraps itself around my throat and squeezes until I'm breathless. I struggle against the heaviness trying to consume me [...]"<sup>73</sup>. This is not the only time in the book Dahlia is having panic attacks, in chapter six, for example, Dahlia says "My throat tightens until I'm gasping for air."<sup>74</sup>. Julian is suffering as well: "Soon enough, I find myself pacing the long halls of my house while my thoughts spiral."<sup>75</sup>, "The dull ache in my chest intensifies, and I grip the counter with a chokehold. My itchy eyes have nothing to do with allergies or any lingering sawdust in the air. Neither does the tightness in my throat nor the pounding of my heart."<sup>76</sup>.

#### 4.3.2 *Undeserving*

In every book, there has been at least one occasion where a character felt like they did not deserve something or someone because of their mental health issues. In *Powerless*, Jasper mentions multiple times that he felt like he did not deserve Sloane: "I've spent a long time thinking I don't deserve you. [...] That you're too good for someone like me."<sup>77</sup>. In *Meet Me at the Lake*, it is Will who feels like he does not deserve to do things just for himself, because he feels like he needs to be there for his sister and her daughter: "He was so mad at himself that he wasn't home when Sofia got sick, and I'm sure he sees it as evidence that he isn't allowed to have all the things."<sup>78</sup>. After Noah sees Arianna with someone else on campus in *Say You Swear*, he thinks that she deserves better than him: "Maybe I'm not the man of her dreams, but the understudy who did the noble work. Who befriended a broken girl. Who showed her what it meant to matter to a man, how it felt to be loved. She knows now that

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 449

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 559

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 574

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 576

<sup>73</sup> Lauren Asher, p. 25

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 53

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 302

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 303

<sup>77</sup> Elsie Silver, p. 252

<sup>78</sup> Carley Fortune, p. 251

she's worth the world and deserves even more."<sup>79</sup>. In *Deep End*, Scarlett feels like she does not deserve to eat because she did not manage to overcome her mental block at her diving meet: "I haven't eaten anything since well before the meet. After, I just wasn't sure I deserved food."<sup>80</sup>. Ryder thinks that his brother deserves better than him in *The Graham Effect*, because it was his father that was at fault for both of their mothers' death: "Better brother than I deserve, [...]"<sup>81</sup>. Lastly, in *Love Redesigned*, Dahlia thinks that she does not deserve to be with Julian, because she feels like by being with her, he would need to give up too much: "[...] by being with me, you'd be giving up the chance at having your own family."<sup>82</sup>

#### 4.3.3 Distract and deflect

In four of the books in the dataset, the characters use alcohol to distract them from their mental health issues. In *Love Redesigned*, Dahlia loses a work deal, which makes her anxiety and depression spike, resulting in her going to a bar to numb her feelings: "I will once you pour me a shot of tequila."<sup>83</sup>. Scarlett also tries to numb her feelings after not overcoming her mental block in *Deep End*: "What I need is more alcohol. Once I'm drunk, my neurons will be too drenched in ethanol to process their own firing. The ouroboros of defeat that is my life will fade into the great unknown."<sup>84</sup>. After running out of her own wedding in *Powerless*, Sloane uses alcohol to distract herself: "I strap myself in, crack a cheap-ass beer, and take a deep swig in an incredibly sad attempt to drink my problems away [...]"<sup>85</sup>. Finally, in *Say You Swear*, Noah distracts himself with alcohol after finding out Arianna does not remember him, even though he knows it is not the solution: "That's the thing about alcohol. It's a temporary fix, [...]"<sup>86</sup>.

Alcohol is not the only thing used as a distraction. The characters in the books often deflect from their situation, either by acting like nothing is wrong or by actively avoiding reality. For example, in *Powerless*, both Sloane and Jasper hide from the reality by going on a road trip together: "I'd like to keep my head in the sand for at least one more day."<sup>87</sup>, "We both know she's hiding from the realities of her life, but so am I."<sup>88</sup>, "I don't even want to think about it.

---

<sup>79</sup> Maegan Brandy, p. 635

<sup>80</sup> Ali Hazelwood, p. 207

<sup>81</sup> Elle Kennedy, p. 419

<sup>82</sup> Lauren Asher, p. 293

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 189

<sup>84</sup> Ali Hazelwood, p. 189

<sup>85</sup> Elsie Silver, p. 50

<sup>86</sup> Maegan Brandy, p. 505

<sup>87</sup> Elsie Silver, p. 69

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 82

I want to push it into the same corner where I keep my sister Jenny.”<sup>89</sup>. “I could do that. I could be honest. But if I went that route, I’d have to admit to [...] how under I’ve been achieving, to my inability to exert control over anything.”<sup>90</sup>. The previous example shows how in *Deep End*, Scarlett is avoiding admitting that she is struggling. It happens quite a number of times when someone asks her how she is doing, and she quickly responds by saying that she is fine even if she is not. In *Say You Swear*, Arianna tries really hard to get back her memories from the past year, but in the process, she was actually blocking out the things she knew would be too painful: “So I pushed it all away, the good, the bad, and the sad.”<sup>91</sup>.

#### 4.4 Theme 2 - Isolation: pushing others away

The theme ‘Isolation: pushing others away’ involves people with mental health issues deliberately keeping others, including the people that they love, at a distance. This theme is in close proximity to the chaos theme, but is focusing more on the effect of their suffering and how they respond to that. This theme is present in all six new adult novels in the dataset, but most of all in Elsie Silver’s *Powerless* (39 times) and Lauren Asher’s *Love Redesigned* (27 times).

##### 4.4.1 Blame

One of the reasons people push others away in these books is that they blame themselves for past trauma, even if this is not their fault at all. For example, Will says in *Meet Me at the Lake* that he feels “like a selfish asshole for moving away and leaving my sister to deal with Dad by herself.”<sup>92</sup>. Furthermore, there is a moment in *Powerless* where Jasper is talking about what happened in the past, and he says “I’ve been told repeatedly I’m not responsible for what happened on that highway, but it doesn’t change the way I feel. I feel responsible.”<sup>93</sup>. And Sloane mentions that “Jasper feels his decision that day lost him everyone he loved.”<sup>94</sup>. In *The Graham Effect*, Ryder feels like his brother should blame him for the death of his mother, since it was Ryder’s father that killed her: “All I’m saying is, I wouldn’t blame him if he blamed me.”<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 94

<sup>90</sup> Ali Hazelwood, p. 83

<sup>91</sup> Maegan Brandy, p. 573

<sup>92</sup> Carley Fortune, p. 59

<sup>93</sup> Elsie Silver, p. 127

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 327

<sup>95</sup> Elle Kennedy, p. 419

#### 4.4.2 Burden

Moreover, people do not want to burden others with their problems, but decide to rather keep it to themselves. In *Say You Swear*, Arianna is in the hospital after an accident that led to her losing her memories, and she is feeling relieved when visiting hours are over and her friends and family are leaving “but if they knew the way my stomach turns at the thought of nightfall, they’d worry themselves to death.”<sup>96</sup> Arianna is not the only person in the book struggling with mental health, as Noah is grieving his mother’s death and Arianna not remembering him, but is keeping it all to himself: “My mom’s not here to talk me through this, and I won’t bother my friends with problems they can’t find a way to fix.”<sup>97</sup> In *Meet Me at the Lake*, Will does not talk to Fern about his situation with his sister: “It’s not something I want to trouble you with.”<sup>98</sup>.

#### 4.4.3 Doubt

Something that occurs a lot in these books is people doubting themselves, or others, leading them to push the other person away. In *Deep End*, Scarlett is on the verge of starting a relationship with Lukas, but is having doubts about whether to go through with it: “But I can’t. It’s the same brand of bloodcurdling, muscle-freezing paralysis that seizes me when I attempt an inward dive. [...] *What if I’m not good enough.*”<sup>99</sup> Later in the book, she does not want Lukas to tell her he loves her because “What if he says it, and then I lose him. What if I fail at this, too?”<sup>100</sup>. At some point in *Love Redesigned*, Lily asks Dahlia why she is doubting Julian, and Dahlia answers her with “Because I’m afraid he will come to regret them in the long run, once the honeymoon phase ends and reality comes knocking.”<sup>101</sup>. Dahlia also does not want to go to the Harvest Festival in town, afraid of what people will say about her: “*Everyone so far has been nothing but welcoming. Doesn’t mean all the visitors from neighboring towns will be.*”<sup>102</sup>.

Closely related to people with mental health issues pushing people away because they are doubting themselves, is them pushing the person they love away because they are doubting them. They think that the other person would not want to be with them because of their past or

---

<sup>96</sup> Maegan Brandy, p. 528

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 633

<sup>98</sup> Carley Fortune, p. 190

<sup>99</sup> Ali Hazelwood, p. 126

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 342

<sup>101</sup> Lauren Asher, p. 308

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 98

because of their mental health issues. Ryder is in a relationship with Gigi in *The Graham Effect*, but after explaining everything about his past and his traumas to her, he says “I totally understand if you want to go and, ah, I don’t know, be with Case.”<sup>103</sup>, expecting her to leave him because of everything he told her. Nine years ago, in *Meet Me at the Lake*, Will did not show up when he was supposed to meet Fern. When he talks to her about it, he says “You wouldn’t have liked who I was back then anyway.”<sup>104</sup>, assuming that Fern would not like the person he was when he was at his lowest. At the start of their relationship in *Love Redesigned*, Julian’s dad passed, which led to him pushing Dahlia away instead of talking about his grief: “Pushing her away because I didn’t have the skills to process my fear of losing someone else I loved after my father’s death.”<sup>105</sup>.

Pushing loved ones away does not only apply to romantic relationships, but to friends and family as well. When Dahlia started being depressed in *Love Redesigned*, she started to avoid her friends, because “it was easier for me to get a grip on my depression by cutting myself off from the life I had.”<sup>106</sup>. In *Powerless*, Jasper has closed himself off from other people, like his colleagues, saying that “Work and family never cross over. And it’s not... personal. I’ve ensured that it’s not. Because getting attached *hurts*, and finding someone to get attached to that I can trust at this point in my career seems downright impossible.”<sup>107</sup>.

#### 4.5 Theme 3 - Find your way: through help from others

The final theme is that of ‘Find your way: through help from others’. This theme entails that people with mental health issues may start out having a rough time, but throughout the books they are getting better. This is often through the people in their environment encouraging them to talk about what they are going through, resulting in them wanting to try harder to get through their problems. The people in their environment understand or recognise what they are going through, and want to help them become the happiest version of themselves. This theme thus involves people with mental health issues finding their own way out of their problems, while receiving help from the people they love along the way. Once again, this theme is present in all books from the dataset. The books where this theme is recurring the most, are Elsie Silver’s *Powerless* (72 times), Lauren Asher’s *Love Redesigned* (62 times) and Ali Hazelwood’s *Deep End* (55 times).

---

<sup>103</sup> Elle Kennedy, p. 377

<sup>104</sup> Carley Fortune, p. 53

<sup>105</sup> Lauren Asher, p. 62

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 334

<sup>107</sup> Elsie Silver, p. 97

#### 4.5.1 *Be present*

In some of the books, helping someone through their mental health issues translated into just being there for them or offering them a distraction when needed. In *Say You Swear* for example, Arianna is struggling with the fact that she is not getting back her memories as quickly as she would have liked, and feels like her family is trying to hide their worries from her, while “Noah doesn’t do that. He’s simply here with me, and that’s it. I don’t feel like I have to smile and that alone is invigorating.”<sup>108</sup>. And Noah also helped Arianna get through it by offering her distractions when she was in the hospital: “Warmth washes over me and I look to him. ‘You brought me music?’ His eyes hold mine. ‘Thought you might need to get lost for a little while’.”<sup>109</sup>. Julian tried helping Dahlia in *Love Redesigned* by being there for her and distracting her when he thought necessary. During a moment where Dahlia is having a bit of a breakdown after hearing bad news, he thinks “Whatever it is, I’ll fix it. Whoever hurt her, I’ll ruin them. And whenever she needs someone to lean on, I will be there.”<sup>110</sup>. After, he says to her “How do you feel about getting out of here? [...] To do something fun.”<sup>111</sup>. In *Powerless* Sloane helps Jasper through his bad nights by talking “so much that even my demons can’t compete. Tonight and every summer night after, she sits with me. I don’t invite her. She’s just there.”<sup>112</sup>. When she recognises that he is spinning, she tries to distract him and “the only way I know how to do that is to entertain and engage him. Make him laugh.”<sup>113</sup>. Sloane and Jasper are both helping each other through their problems. Jasper mentions “I’m so at peace in her presence. I always have been.”<sup>114</sup>. While Sloane mentions “He’s like a warm blanket that I want to wrap myself up in.”<sup>115</sup> and “He makes me believe in myself.”<sup>116</sup>. This is also present in *Deep End*. When Scarlett is having a hard time, Lukas tells her “In the meantime... just cry it out. [...] I’m here, okay?”<sup>117</sup>. He also knows what triggers her and makes sure to help her be more comfortable: “He conspicuously left the door open, and he made sure I was aware that he could see me through the glass doors.”<sup>118</sup>.

---

<sup>108</sup> Maegan Brandy, p. 600

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 530

<sup>110</sup> Lauren Asher, p. 195

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 199

<sup>112</sup> Elsie Silver, p. 37

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 119

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 135

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 147

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ali Hazelwood., p. 227

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 94

#### 4.5.2 Talk

Characters in the books were also getting help by having someone else try and get them to talk about their feelings, or make them see that they were not to blame for anything. When Ryder felt guilty for what his father did to his and his brother's mother in *The Graham Effect*, Gigi tried to help him feel better: "Then stop taking ownership of his actions. Let yourself have a good relationship with your brother. You don't need to feel guilty."<sup>119</sup> She also wanted him to confide in her when he was feeling low "And whenever you're reminded of it, instead of shutting down, burying it deep, pushing everyone away... all you have to do is this. [...] Just be open and honest with me, and I'll do my best to help."<sup>120</sup> When Will, in *Meet Me at the Lake*, is finally telling Fern what is going on with him, she lets him know that he does not need to share until he is ready to do so, while letting him know that she is there when he needs her "You can tell me when you're ready. I won't judge, but you don't have to rush."<sup>121</sup> After he tells her, she responds with "I need you to tell me what's going on in your life. When something is making you anxious or upsetting you, I want to know. [...] You can't lock me away from the two most important people in your life. [...] Let me help. I want to be part of the drama. I want to be part of all of it."<sup>122</sup> Lukas often tries to get Scarlett to talk about what is going on in *Deep End*, even if she does not want to: "'I don't want to talk about it.' 'Too bad, because I want to know.'"<sup>123</sup>

#### 4.5.3 Try

Another big part of this theme is that people with mental health issues actually want to try harder to feel better. Especially in *Love Redesigned*, this is a big recurring element. Dahlia is in a depression, but tries her best to get better. "I don't want to leave the house, but I choose to do it anyway"<sup>124</sup> and "from now on, I'm going to start living again"<sup>125</sup> are examples of Dahlia choosing to try and get better. It is not only just wanting to get better, but following through on it as well. "I miss the person I was. I miss her so damn much that I'm willing to put in the work to bring her back, even if it means attending extra therapy sessions and following

---

<sup>119</sup> Elle Kennedy, p. 420

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 376

<sup>121</sup> Carley Fortune, p. 261

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 261

<sup>123</sup> Ali Hazelwood, p. 222

<sup>124</sup> Lauren Asher, p. 69

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 38

through on difficult homework I'd rather avoid."<sup>126</sup> "I'll be damned if I let myself sink into deep sadness today, no matter how tempted I am. So instead, I reluctantly slide out of bed, throw on some workout clothes, and head out for a run like my therapist suggested once."<sup>127</sup>. These examples show that the character actually tries to get better by attending therapy sessions, and doing what her therapist says. Not only Dahlia wants to get better, but Julian as well. "But first, I need to finish the fight against my past. I have been battling my insecurities for years, and it's time to face what I've put off for far too long..."<sup>128</sup>.

In *Deep End*, Scarlett is struggling with a mental block and fear of not being perfect. To overcome these issues, she is going to regular therapy sessions. "I may not look forward to the agony that comes with exposing the squishy bits of my soul [...]. Therapy is a privilege. I'm lucky to have it. Above all, I need it."<sup>129</sup>. Besides going to therapy, she actively tries to be better, not only at her sports but her mindset towards imperfections as well "It's not about what others think. What's important is how I feel about my own mistakes, and that's where I sense something new. [...] Ready to be over this."<sup>130</sup>.

When Arianna is in a depression at the beginning of *Say You Swear*, she eventually wants to get better. Cam tries to help, but Arianna will not let her "I know. [...] But this is on me, and I have to work through it on my own. It's the only way."<sup>131</sup>. While she struggles at first, she does follow through with it: "So I'm going to suck it up, get up and go out."<sup>132</sup>.

---

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 56

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 302

<sup>129</sup> Ali Hazelwood., p. 16

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 242

<sup>131</sup> Maegan Brandy, p. 140

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 149

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The intention of this study was to research the representation of characters with mental health issues in literature, to find an answer to the research question “How do new adult romance novels written by American and Canadian authors represent mental health issues?”. In this chapter, the findings of this study will be discussed and linked to existing theoretical perspectives. Then, limitations of the study will be acknowledged and suggestions for future studies will be made. Finally, a conclusion regarding the research question will be made.

### *5.1 Discussion*

This study started off with seven definitive concepts, derived from existing theoretical frameworks by Frank and Thaller. Keeping these concepts in mind, it can be seen that only a small number of these concepts are recurring in NA novels. Some of the concepts were barely found in any of the episodes, or even not at all. After the analysis, a number of the existing concepts were combined to form a new concept that fit the findings in a more applicable way.

There are three definitive concepts retrieved from the studies done by Frank and Thaller that were left out of the findings of this study, since they did not recur enough to be considered. These concepts are the non-human or the beast, the invisible, and the victim. Furthermore, some of the concepts recurred, but in a different manner, so they were combined to form a new theme; ‘Find your way’. This theme was formed by combining the concepts quest, chaos, and a small part of the learning opportunity. Finally, the original concept chaos was divided into two new themes; ‘Chaos’ and ‘Isolation’.

It is a positive development that the two most negative concepts were barely found in the dataset. Since readers’ attitudes are shaped by the media,<sup>133</sup> it is beneficial that these negative portrayals of mental health are not present in contemporary NA romance. This way, readers’ negative impressions about mental health might be minimised. However, mental health was not portrayed in an overwhelmingly positive manner either. The themes ‘Chaos’ and ‘Isolation’ still have a negative aspect to them.

The theme ‘Chaos: suffering through symptoms’ includes characters that are suffering from their mental health issues, such as having vivid nightmares, intense panic attacks, and being

---

<sup>133</sup> Hao Zhang & Amira Firdaus, ‘What Does Media Say about Mental Health: A Literature Review of Media Coverage on Mental Health’, *Journalism and Media*, 5.3 (2024), pp. 967-979, <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia5030061>

extremely sad. While it is important to portray the struggles of mental health,<sup>134</sup> since a lot of people with mental health issues suffer from various symptoms, it should not be overdone. Not every person with mental health issues feels the same sense of dread, and if someone only reads about people that are suffering this severely, it can make them feel as if their issues are not as important.<sup>135</sup> Only two out of six of the books in the dataset did not include characters that were severely suffering throughout the book, namely *The Graham Effect* and *Meet Me at the Lake*. These two books still include some symptoms of mental health issues, but by not putting the characters through too much trouble, the authors of these books have made sure that people that have less severe symptoms can still relate to these characters. McDonald<sup>136</sup> argues that being able to relate to the characters is important, since it can make the reader think like these characters and take their knowledge with them. Reading about characters that are not struggling their entire lives, like in *The Graham Effect* and *Meet Me at the Lake*, can thus make people feel better about their own struggles. It can also help readers that do not have mental health issues themselves see that not every mental health problem is the same, and make sure that they are not misinformed about what it entails to live and struggle with such issues.<sup>137</sup>

Another big theme in NA romance novels that was discovered is ‘Isolation: pushing others away’. Characters in the books would push the people that they love away, often because they were afraid of rejection, or they thought that the other person should not be burdened by their problems. Prizeman, Weinstein and McCabe<sup>138</sup> argue that stigmas surrounding mental health decrease someone’s confidence and self-respect, which makes people reluctant to confess their mental health to others. In five out of six books in the dataset, only excluding *Say You Swear*, at least one character with a mental health issue would be portrayed by being closed off about their issues. Especially in *Powerless*, the character Jasper is portrayed as being very

---

<sup>134</sup> Diane Scrofano, 2019, p. 1

<sup>135</sup> Sarah Williams, ‘How TV and Film Romanticise Poor Mental Health’, Her Campus, 22 June 2021 <<https://www.hercampus.com/school/uct/how-tv-and-film-romanticise-poor-mental-health/>> [accessed 10 May 2025]

<sup>136</sup> Hal McDonald, ‘Mind-Melding With Our Favorite Fictional Characters’, *Psychology Today*, 19 April 2021 <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/time-travelling-apollo/202104/mind-melding-our-favorite-fictional-characters>> [accessed 17 March 2025]

<sup>137</sup> Scott Parrott, ‘Media Stereotypes About Mental Illness: The Role of the Media in Nurturing and Mitigating Stigma’, *ResearchGate*, 2020, pp. 247-249 <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346772973\\_Media\\_stereotypes\\_about\\_mental\\_illness\\_The\\_role\\_of\\_the\\_media\\_in\\_nurturing\\_and\\_mitigating\\_stigma](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346772973_Media_stereotypes_about_mental_illness_The_role_of_the_media_in_nurturing_and_mitigating_stigma)>

<sup>138</sup> Katie Prizeman, Netta Weinstein & Ciara McCabe, ‘Effects of mental health stigma on loneliness, social isolation, and relationships in young people with depression symptoms’, *BMC Psychiatry*, 23.527 (2023), pp. 1-15 (p. 1) <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-023-04991-7>

closed-off, not talking about the things that are going on in his life, and being a mystery to other people.

However, in all books, the characters with mental health issues are being prompted to talk about it by their loved ones. They try and help these characters to be more open about what they are going through, in order to make them feel better. In general, this is a positive portrayal of mental health, because it is important to talk about your traumas in order to take away the power of that trauma, even though it can be hard for people to talk about because of the current stigmas regarding mental health.<sup>139</sup> Often, the characters ended up wanting to try and feel better themselves as well. This happens in a high recurrence in *Powerless*, *Love Redesigned*, and *Deep End*. In the other three books, it is in a smaller recurrence, but it is still prevalent. Seeing characters in a book receive support from others could be very helpful for young people with mental health issues. If the characters are trying to rebuild their own lives while getting the support they need, this could highly encourage readers to try and do the same. Especially if stories include characters that are actively going to therapy sessions, such as in *Love Redesigned* and in *Deep End*, readers could read about how this support could help them live with their mental health issues.<sup>140</sup> Especially since these characters did not receive an immediate and permanent cure just by going to therapy sessions, but they needed ongoing treatment in order to gradually feel a bit better, which is a realistic depiction of what it means to get professional help.<sup>141</sup>

However, almost all of the characters did need to be prompted by other people to talk about it and get the help they need. It would be beneficial to read about characters that do not need to be prompted by others, but get there completely by themselves. This way, readers with mental health issues can see that they too, could live fulfilling lives without necessarily needing loved ones to help them through it. They can do it by themselves as well.

## 5.2 Limitations and future studies

This study has its limitations as well. For one, the study focused only on the romance genre within the NA category, which could have serious influence on the portrayal of mental health issues in NA literature. Especially the themes ‘Isolation’ and ‘Find your way’ could have been

---

<sup>139</sup> Sarah Katherine Thaller, ‘Crazy Stories and Unhinged Tropes: Portrayals of Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature’ (dissertation, Washington State University, 2015) pp. 188-189 <<https://hdl.handle.net/2376/111729>> [accessed 26 March 2025]

<sup>140</sup> ‘Media guidelines: Mental health on screen’, Mind, n.d. <<https://www.mind.org.uk/media/iqchihtr/mind-media-guidelines.pdf>> [accessed 10 May 2025]

<sup>141</sup> Sarah Thaller, 2015, p. 211

influenced by only having romance novels in the dataset, since these themes do have to do with being in romantic relationships. Helping each other through difficult times is a big part of being in a relationship, and a common trope in romance books.<sup>142</sup> Another common trope in romance books is that a character does not think they are good enough for the other person,<sup>143</sup> which could thus have had an effect on the theme 'Isolation'.

Another limitation could be that the researcher does not have any mental health issues of their own. Thus, while they have tried their best to be objective, it is important to note that their interpretation of what a realistic or positive portrayal of mental health issues is, may differ from the interpretation of a person that does have mental health issues of their own.

Suggestions for further research would thus be, to include a comparison between different genres within NA literature, to examine whether this would have any impact on the representation of mental health issues. It would also be beneficial to have a person with a mental health issue to peer review the work in order to obtain even more objectivity.

### 5.3 Conclusion

NA literature is written for an audience that is at an age where they can read about serious topics, including mental health.<sup>144</sup> At the same time, this audience is prone to getting mental health issues themselves, since they are in a transitional stage in their lives, going to college and losing their support systems.<sup>145</sup> Recent studies have shown that amongst American and Canadian college students, 70-75% of participants struggle with their mental health.<sup>146</sup> Studying mental health representation among this demographic is thus of importance, hence why this research set out to examine how new adult romance novels written by American and Canadian authors represent mental health issues.

---

<sup>142</sup> Nisha Tuli, 'Romance Tropes: The Heartbeat of a Genre', Dabble, 22 April 2022

<<https://www.dabblewriter.com/articles/romance-tropes-the-heartbeat-of-a-genre>> [accessed 14 May 2025]

<sup>143</sup> 'Insecure Love Interest', tv tropes, n.d. <<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/InsecureLoveInterest>> [accessed 14 May 2025]

<sup>144</sup> 'Wat is New Adult?', So Many Pages, 30 May 2022 <<https://somanypages.nl/blog/wat-is-new-adult/>> [accessed 17 March 2025]

<sup>145</sup> Catherine Tyler Timson, '*A Later Me Problem*: A New Adult Literature Novel', (master's thesis, Truman State University, 2023) <<https://www.proquest.com/openview/82a1caecd3adab7f1a3234183bc38fc4/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>> [accessed 26 January 2025]; David Wood et al., 'Emerging Adulthood as a Critical Stage in the Life Course', in *Handbook of Life Course Health Development [Internet]*, ed. by Halfon, Forrest and Lerner (Springer, 2018), pp. 123-143, doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-47143-3\_7

<sup>146</sup> Sarah Wood, 'Mental Health on College Campuses: Challenges and Solutions', *U.S. News & World Report*, 6 June 2023 <<https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/mental-health-on-college-campuses-challenges-and-solutions>> [accessed 17 March 2025]; 'Promoting mental health', Universities Canada., n.d. <<https://univcan.ca/priority/promoting-mental-health/>> [accessed 16 April 2025]

Reading about characters with realistically represented mental health issues is important for readers that face such issues themselves, as well as for those that are not struggling with their mental health. Being able to identify with a character can be a huge help for some, as these characters can be used as a source of inspiration on how to live and deal with their own mental health issues.<sup>147</sup> For people that are not struggling themselves, reading about these characters could minimise current stigma and shame surrounding mental health.<sup>148</sup>

However, there are still a lot of negative representations of mental health in NA literature. A big aspect found in NA literature was of characters with mental health issues isolating themselves, pushing other people away, and suffering a lot throughout the books. This is partly in coherence with Frank's<sup>149</sup> chaos narrative, where people are living in a state of chaos instead of embracing their mental illness. On the other hand, the data revealed an additional aspect of mental health representation. The characters receive a lot of support from others and are being motivated to want to get the help they need in order to live with their mental health issues. It is a good development that these positive portrayals were prevalent in the entire dataset, showing the NA reader that with the right support system, they too can live fulfilling lives with their mental health issues.

Be that as it may, there is not enough literature out there where a character that is dealing with mental health issues embraces this on their own, without necessarily needing others to drive them into wanting to get better. Authors should write more NA literature where characters with mental health issues want to embrace their issues for themselves, and not because someone they love makes them realise that they want to get help. These results could, however, have been impacted by the genre of fiction that was used in the analysis. The dataset was limited to romance novels, which uses common tropes such as happy endings, tending for people, and insecure love interests.<sup>150</sup> Therefore, future researchers should include more genres within the NA category in order to see whether this would have an effect on the representation of mental health issues.

Going forward, may this thesis and future research continue to prove the importance of reading about mental health struggles, not merely to minimise existing concerns amongst today's youth, but most importantly, to inspire healing journeys.

---

<sup>147</sup> Scott Parrott, 2020

<sup>148</sup> Sarah Thaller, 2015

<sup>149</sup> Arthur W. Frank, 'The wounded storyteller: body, illness, and ethics' (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) <<https://philpapers.org/rec/FRATWS>> [accessed 26 March 2025]

<sup>150</sup> Nisha Tuli, 2022; 'Insecure Love Interest', n.d.

## Bibliography

- Abby, 'Mental Health & Wellbeing Literature', *English Faculty Library*, 25 May 2023  
<<https://blogs.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/english/2023/05/25/mental-health-wellbeing-literature/>>  
[accessed 17 March 2025]
- Ackerman, Angela, 'Representation in Literature: Why It's Important & How To Handle It',  
Writers Helping Writers, 10 October 2018  
<<https://writershelpingwriters.net/2018/10/representation-in-literature-why-its-important-and-how-to-handle-it/>> [accessed 26 March 2025]
- Altun, M., 'Literature and Identity: Examine the Role of Literature in Shaping Individual and Cultural Identities', *International Journal of Social Sciences and Educational Studies*, 10.3 (2023), pp. 381-385
- 'Analyzing Blumer's Distinction: Definitive vs. Sensitizing Concepts in Qualitative Research', Medium, 28 October 2023 <<https://medium.com/p/22fa7f5bc0b6>> [accessed 16 April 2025]
- Angelina, Valentina Tasya, 'The Representation of Domestic Violence in Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us*', (undergraduate thesis, University of Jember, 2023)  
<<https://repository.unej.ac.id/xmlui/handle/123456789/118885>> [accessed 26 March 2025]
- Arslan, Ildeniz, Marjolijn Distelbrink, and Donya Yassine, *Mentale gezondheid van jongeren en studenten in Nederland: Een overzicht van trends en verklarende factoren* (Utrecht: Verwey-Jonker Instituut, 2024), pp. 8-12
- Asher, Lauren, *Love Redesigned* (Little, Brown Book Group, 2023)  
'Auteursrecht voor onderzoekers', Universiteit van Amsterdam, n.d.  
<<https://uba.uva.nl/ondersteuning/auteursrecht/onderzoekers/onderzoekers.html>> [accessed 14 May 2025]
- 'Auteurswet', Overheid.nl, n.d.  
<<https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0001886/2025-02-04#HoofdstukI>> [accessed 14 May 2025]
- Author of Confusion, 'The Terrifying In-Between: What Are New Adult Books and Why Should the Publishing Community Care?', *Medium*, 28 November 2017  
<<https://medium.com/@authorofconfusion/the-terrifying-in-between-what-are-new-adult-books-and-why-should-the-publishing-community-care-ab727ebc6c5>> [accessed 17 March 2025]
- Beyond Mimesis and Convention: Representation in Art and Science*, ed. by Roman Frigg &

- Matthew C. Hunter, 262, (Springer Science & Business Media, 2010), p. xv
- Bowen, Glenn A., 'Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concepts', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5.3 (2006), pp. 12-23
- Brandy, Maegan, *Say You Swear* (Orion Publishing Co, 2023)
- Brown, David G., 'The Two Pillars of Storytelling', *The Darling Axe*, 25 March 2023  
<<https://darlingaxe.com/blogs/news/two-pillars-of-storytelling>> [accessed 26 March 2025]
- Darwin Holmes, Andrew Gary, 'Researcher Positionality - A Consideration of Its Influence and Place in Qualitative Research - A New Researcher Guide', *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 8.4 (2020), pp. 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v8i4.3232>
- Fleisher Feldman, Carol, 'Mimesis: Where play and narrative meet', *Cognitive Development*, 20.4 (2005), pp. 503-513 (p. 503), doi: 10.1016/j.cogdev.2005.08.006
- Fortune, Carley, *Meet Me at the Lake* (Berkley, 2023)
- Frank, Arthur W., 'The wounded storyteller: body, illness, and ethics' (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) <<https://philpapers.org/rec/FRATWS>> [accessed 26 March 2025]
- Hall, Stuart, 'The work of representation', in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. by Stuart Hall, (The Open University, 1997), pp. 13-74 (p. 15)
- Harrison, Wayne & Ehlers, Bec, 'What is Young Adult Literature?', *Oregon State University*, 5 February 2024 <<https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/wlf/what-young-adult-literature-definition-and-examples>> [accessed 01 February 2025]
- Hazelwood, Ali, *Deep End* (Berkley, 2025), p. 245
- Hsieh, Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, Sarah E., 'Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis', *Qualitative Health Research*, 15.9 (2005), pp. 1277-1288 (p. 1281),  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- 'Insecure Love Interest', tv tropes, n.d.  
<<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/InsecureLoveInterest>> [accessed 14 May 2025]
- Kennedy, Elle, *The Graham Effect* (Little, Brown Book Group, 2023)
- Kibiswa, Naupess, 'Directed Qualitative Content Analysis (DQICA): A Tool for Conflict Analysis', *The Qualitative Report*, 24.8 (2019), pp. 2059-2079, DOI: 10.46743/2160-3715/2019.3778
- Lasinka, Kasia, 'New Adult vs. Young Adult: Key Genre Differences', *Indie Author Magazine*, 1 August 2022 <<https://indieauthormagazine.com/breaking-down-the-difference-between-new-adult-and-young-adult-fiction/>> [accessed 17 March 2025]
- Luna, 'Young Adult vs. New Adult: Main Differences', *Galatea*, 19 November 2024

- <<https://galatea.com/h/blog/young-adult-vs-new-adult-main-differences/>>
- McAlister, Jodi, *New Adult Fiction*, Elements in Publishing and Book Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 11, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108900737>
- McDonald, Hal, 'Mind-Melding With Our Favorite Fictional Characters', *Psychology Today*, 19 April 2021 <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/time-travelling-apollo/202104/mind-melding-our-favorite-fictional-characters>> [accessed 17 March 2025]
- 'Media guidelines: Mental health on screen', Mind, n.d.  
<<https://www.mind.org.uk/media/iqchihr/mind-media-guidelines.pdf>> [accessed 10 May 2025]
- Moreci, Jenna, 'What's the Difference Between Young Adult and Adult Books?', *Jenna Moreci*, 12 September 2022 <<https://www.jennamoreci.com/post/what-s-the-difference-between-young-adult-and-adult-books>> [accessed 17 March 2025]
- Palinkas, L.A., Horwitz, S.M., Green, C.A., Wisdom, J.P., Duan, N. & Hoagwood, K., 'Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research', *Administration and Policy in Mental Health*, 42.5 (2015), pp. 533-544, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Parrott, Scott, 'Media Stereotypes About Mental Illness: The Role of the Media in Nurturing and Mitigating Stigma', *ResearchGate*, 2020, pp. 247-249  
<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346772973\\_Media\\_stereotypes\\_about\\_mental\\_illness\\_The\\_role\\_of\\_the\\_media\\_in\\_nurturing\\_and\\_mitigating\\_stigma](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346772973_Media_stereotypes_about_mental_illness_The_role_of_the_media_in_nurturing_and_mitigating_stigma)>
- Peraza-Brown, Polly, 'What is New Adult Fiction? All You Need To Know', *Jericho Writers*, n.d. <<https://jerichowriters.com/what-is-new-adult-fiction/>> [accessed 17 March 2025]
- 'Person-first and Destigmatizing Language', National Institutes of Health, n.d.  
<<https://www.nih.gov/nih-style-guide/person-first-destigmatizing-language>> [accessed 14 May 2025]
- Peters, Ally Caroline, 'The Effect of Social Media on Mental Health', (undergraduate thesis, Suffolk University, 2020)  
<<https://dc.suffolk.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=undergrad>> [accessed 17 March 2025]
- Preston, John, 'Book Review: It Ends With Us by Colleen Hoover', Medium, 7 November 2024 <<https://medium.com/p/572756c1cc10>> [accessed 26 March 2025]
- Prizeman, Katie, Weinstein, Netta & McCabe, Ciara, 'Effects of mental health stigma on

- loneliness, social isolation, and relationships in young people with depression symptoms’, *BMC Psychiatry*, 23.527 (2023), pp. 1-15 (p. 1) <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-023-04991-7>
- ‘Promoting mental health’, Universities Canada., n.d.  
<<https://univcan.ca/priority/promoting-mental-health/>> [accessed 16 April 2025]
- Reynoso, Sofia, ‘It Ends With Us Review: A heart wrenching story about love and bravery’, Albany Student Press, 19 February 2023 <<https://www.albanystudentpress.online/post/it-ends-with-us-review-a-heart-wrenching-story-about-love-and-bravery>> [accessed 26 March 2025]
- Rodriguez Sandoval, Mano T., Bernal Oviedo, Gianni M. & Rodriguez-Torres, Maria I., ‘From preconceptions to concept: The basis of a didactic model designed to promote the development of critical thinking’, *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 3 (2022), pp. 1-10 (p. 1), doi: 10.1016/j.ijedro.2022.100207
- Sarner, Lauren, 'The Problem with New Adult Fiction', *HuffPost*, 14 August 2013  
<[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-problem-with-new-adul\\_b\\_3755165](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-problem-with-new-adul_b_3755165)> [accessed 17 March 2025]
- Scheuerman, Morgan Klaus, ‘Ways of Knowing: Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research’, 2020, <<https://www.morgan-klaus.com/readings/ways-of-knowing.html>> [accessed 16 April 2025]
- Schreier, Margrit, ‘Introduction: What is Qualitative Content Analysis’, in *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2012), pp. 1-19,  
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529682571.n1>
- Scrofano, Diane, 'Disability Narrative Theory and Young Adult Fiction of Mental Illness', *The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, 10.1 (2019), pp. 1-27
- Silver, Elsie, *Powerless* (Little, Brown Book Group, 2023)
- Simister, Nigel, San James & Letisha Lunin, ‘Qualitative Analysis’, INTRAC, 2017  
<<https://www.intrac.org/app/uploads/2017/01/Qualitative-analysis.pdf>> [accessed 16 April 2025]
- Terrell, 'The Difference Between... YA & Adult Fiction', *How to Write a Book Now*, n.d.  
<<https://www.how-to-write-a-book-now.com/difference-betweenya-adult-fiction.html>>  
[accessed 17 March 2025]
- Thaller, Sarah Katherine, ‘Crazy Stories and Unhinged Tropes: Portrayals of Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature’ (dissertation, Washington State University, 2015)  
<<https://hdl.handle.net/2376/111729>> [accessed 26 March 2025]

- Timson, Catherine Tyler, '*A Later Me Problem: A New Adult Literature Novel*', (master's thesis, Truman State University, 2023)  
<<https://www.proquest.com/openview/82a1caecd3adab7f1a3234183bc38fc4/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>> [accessed 26 January 2025]
- Tuli, Nisha, 'Romance Tropes: The Heartbeat of a Genre', Dabble, 22 April 2022  
<<https://www.dabblewriter.com/articles/romance-tropes-the-heartbeat-of-a-genre>> [accessed 14 May 2025]
- Tyler, Molly, 'Representation in Literature', Molly Christian Tyler, 20 April 2024  
<<https://mollychristiantyler.com/representation-in-literature/>> [accessed 26 March 2025]
- 'Wat is New Adult?', So Many Pages, 30 May 2022  
<<https://somanypages.nl/blog/wat-is-new-adult/>> [accessed 17 March 2025]
- Williams, Sarah, 'How TV and Film Romanticise Poor Mental Health', Her Campus, 22 June 2021 <<https://www.hercampus.com/school/uct/how-tv-and-film-romanticise-poor-mental-health/>> [accessed 10 May 2025]
- Wood, David et al., 'Emerging Adulthood as a Critical Stage in the Life Course', in *Handbook of Life Course Health Development [Internet]*, ed. by Halfon, Forrest and Lerner (Springer, 2018), pp. 123-143, doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-47143-3\_7
- Wood, Sarah, 'Mental Health on College Campuses: Challenges and Solutions', *U.S. News & World Report*, 6 June 2023 <<https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/mental-health-on-college-campuses-challenges-and-solutions>> [accessed 17 March 2025]
- Zhang, Hao & Firdaus, Amira, 'What Does Media Say about Mental Health: A Literature Review of Media Coverage on Mental Health', *Journalism and Media*, 5.3 (2024), pp. 967-979, <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia5030061>

## Appendix A – Overview of the dataset

	Book title	Author's name	Author's nationality	Year of publication	Page numbers <sup>151</sup>
Book A	Say You Swear	Maegan Brandy	American	2023	666
Book B	Powerless	Elsie Silver	Canadian	2023	367
Book C	Meet Me at the Lake	Carley Fortune	Canadian	2023	274
Book D	The Graham Effect	Elle Kennedy	Canadian	2023	479
Book E	Love Redesigned	Lauren Asher	American	2023	348
Book F	Deep End	Ali Hazelwood	American	2025	363

---

<sup>151</sup> The page numbers are text only. They are excluding title page, colophon, contents, dedication, and acknowledgements, but including prologue and epilogue.

## Appendix B – Code book

<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>
Acknowledgement	Acknowledging the situation
Acting okay	Acting as if you're doing okay, even if it's fake
Anger	Being angry or having anger issues
Belittling	Belittling the situation, belittling someone's symptoms
Blame	Blaming yourself for things
Burden	Not wanting to burden someone else with your problems / feeling like you let them down
Casual talk	Talking about bad parts of life
Closed off	Having a closed off personality
Crisis	Having a crisis or breakdown
Cure	Mentioning a cure for the illness
Cynical	Expecting the worst from people so you don't get disappointed / doubting yourself
Deflect	Acting as if nothing is wrong
Denial	Being in denial about having an illness
Distraction	Distracting the person with the problems
Do it yourself	Someone recognizing that you need to fix yourself
Doctor's explanation	A clinical explanation fo what's happening
Embrace	Embracing the situation
Empowered	Feeling empowered

Escaping symptoms	Escaping the symptoms of an illness, for example by having many hobbies, doing a lot of things
Everyone has issues	Someone saying that someone with a mental illness is not the only one who has problems
Exhaustion	Being exhausted because of your problems
Explaining	Explaining where certain traits come from
Fear	Causing people to be afraid of you
Feeling good	Feeling good even in tough times
Fidgeting	Little things people do when feeling stressed / hints into how they're feeling
Getting help	Someone else helping you get through your feelings
Haunted	Being haunted by your symptoms or trauma
Hope	Feeling hopeful
Ignoring the voice	Ignoring the negative voice in your head
Immaturity	Being regarded as immature
In the past	It's in the past, so no need to talk about it.
Learning experience	You can learn and grow just by knowing someone with a mental illness
Love as fix	Love is the cure for a mental illness
Loveless	Thinking people don't want to be with you because of your problems / pushing people away because of your past
Managing symptoms	Managing the symptoms of a mental illness
Mocking	Mocking someone with a mental illness
Need to talk	Someone mentioning the need to talk about things

Needs saving	Someone with a mental illness needs to be saved by others
Negativity towards therapy	Having a negative stance towards therapy
Nightmare	Having nightmares about past trauma
Nostalgia	Feeling nostalgic towards the days where one might not have had any issues
Not allowed	Not allowing yourself to feel bad
Outsider as fix	Someone needs to be fixed or cured by other people
Overcoming the problem	Being the bigger person, overcoming your symptoms
Overprotective	Being overprotective of people around you
Pain	Wanting to feel the (physical) pain
Part of life	Having issues is just a part of everyday life
Phase	It is just a phase; you will grow out of it
Praise	Being praised for things you do right
Pressure	Having a lot of pressure, from yourself or outside
Recognition	Recognizing someone is struggling
Recovery	Being in recovery
Reproach	A reproach
Sad	Being sad
Secrecy	Keeping your problems as a secret
Shame	Feeling ashamed of your issues
Stress management	Things someone does when feeling stressed
Stuck	Getting stuck in your head
Subject change	Changing the subject
Suffering	Suffering from symptoms
Temporary	Everything is just temporary

Therapy	Mentioning therapy
Trauma	Mentioning a trauma
Trigger	Something being a trigger for remembering what happened
Trouble	Causing trouble
Understanding	Other people understanding your situation
Undeserving	Thinking you don't deserve things / people
Unpredictable	Having unpredictable behaviour
Unstable	Being unstable, a lot of emotions
Using alcohol	Using alcohol to feel less
Violence	Being violent
Want to try	Wanting to try to be better
Wonder	Wondering how someone else feels without having a judgement
Worry	Worrying about someone else's state
Worsening symptoms	Symptoms are getting worse

# Appendix C – Code network

