

THE TRAGIC STORY OF ELISA LAM? OR THE TERRIFYING STORY OF ELISA LAM?

by Lyddia Rozee-Johnson

Netflix's True Crime documentary series "The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel" is a new and popular Documentary on Netflix. Its reviews have seen the show as one which has left viewers disturbed and being unable to sleep at night. However, is this what the audience should be feeling from a documentary about mental health awareness? Is the portrayal of the documentary preventing or benefitting Elisa's tragic story?

It is still a controversy about the representation of mental health in the Entertainment media. Mass media represents the idea that criminality and mental illness is something which exists together, representing the stereotype that mental health equals insanity. 'Consequently, all forms of media [...] have been criticised for disseminating negative stereotypes and inaccurate descriptions of those with mental illness' (1). It is easy for society to stereotype those that appear abnormal to be a threat, but is this because we are not educated enough about mental health? Individuals that possess behaviour which is considered to be out of the norm are labelled the "crazy" (2) by the entertainment media, is it that society is literally scared of them individuals? Or is it the media's portrayal that has made society see it like this.



The Cecil Hotel in downtown LA where Elisa Lam was staying in 2013.

'[I]n reality, somebody with mental illness is much more likely to be a victim- rather than a perpetrator' (1), this contrasts the negative stigma yet it is still a shock to us as this understanding is undermined by the negative portrayal which overpowers. It is easy to stereotype those who don't appear "normal" to be dangerous, but what does it mean to be normal, after all, we all suffer with mental health to an extent.

According to Wikipedia, a news article discusses current or recent news of either general interest (i.e. daily newspapers) or of a specific topic (i.e. political or trade news magazines, club newsletters, or technology news websites).

Netflix's "The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel" is an example concerning the representation of mental health in the media. The docuseries was released February 2021 and is great watch if you are in the mood for something spooky and suspenseful, however, was this the right approach for a documentary about the reality of mental health? The series explores the disappearance of 21-year-old Elisa Lam who suffered from Bipolar Disorder, she went missing around the time she was staying at the Cecil Hotel in downtown LA. The Netflix show focuses predominantly on the hauntings of the hotel which although is intriguing, it does not have any involvement with Lam's tragic death. As the suspense continues throughout the prolonged 4-episode documentary, the audience is shown surveillance footage of Elisa in the hotel's elevator, her behaviour is publicised 'bizarre' by CBS News (3) And Web sleuths questioned if there was a paranormal presence to blame due to the hotel's reputation. The footage was the last that was seen of Lam and later they found her deceased body in the water tank on the roof top of the hotel. Her investigation underwent sexual assault and murder questioning, but it was only until a last resort that Lam's illness was considered and was in fact the cause. Until the final episode, the documentary spreads the awareness of mental health, but why is it this is considered at the end of the investigation we ask and how is this relevant to the initial suspense of horror presented in the hotel's past?

The Netflix documentary conforms to the 'overgeneralised' (1) stigma of mental health being seen as dangerous. 'Although there is often a stigma associated with all mental illnesses, bipolar disorder can be especially stigmatising' (2) and something which can be argued through the elevator footage. It was suggested that Lam could have been on hallucinogens because of her behaviour looked as though she was scared or hiding from someone. Lorraine Ali says the series 'fails to persuasively entwine the hotel's past with Lam's demise, relying instead on the salacious aspects of both storylines to drive the narrative' (3). Was this because it was more realistic? Again, is this because there is not enough education around Mental wellbeing?

Lam's death was a tragedy, suffering from her illness and mental isolation it caused her death. The show however abuses the reality of her case by centralising the piece around the hotel's reputation as a way to boost audience interest as a product of film in the media.



Memorial For The Canadian Mental Health Victim Elisa Lam.

