

**ANIMATION AS COMMUNICATION: FINDING A MEANS TO ADDRESS
DIFFICULT THEMES WITH A BROAD AUDIENCE**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Animation as Communication: Finding a Means to Address Difficult Themes with a Broad Audience

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This thesis studies the use of animation as a means to communicate about difficult topics surrounding mental health and the challenges of living with chronic anxiety. The creative artifact that results from my study is a 2D short film about a young woman struggling to cope with her anxiety, particularly social anxiety, as she goes about the ordinary tasks of daily life. She has challenged herself to get out of the house and complete her work day in a coffee shop. But for someone with chronic anxiety, even something as simple as going up to the counter and ordering feels like battling a dragon.

Many people struggle to perform ordinary tasks due to their mental health challenges. I have always felt that the average self-help resource focuses on ways to help someone complete the big goals in their life and neglects the day-to-day. What seems menial and easy to some can be a mountain to someone with anxiety or depression. For example, brushing your hair in the morning only takes a few seconds if you maintain it, but matting is a common result of people with depression not even having the energy or motivation to brush their hair.

I want to show people who struggle that they are seen and heard, and I want to show people who don't struggle what it can be like for others in their lives. Animation has been used more recently as a means to bring awareness to difficult themes in an easy-to-swallow format. A short film is much easier for a wider audience to sit down and invest time in than a somber documentary. This is why I have chosen to use my creative background and abilities to address a topic I hold so near to my heart. Most of the people in my personal and professional life either personally struggle or know some close who struggles with their mental health, and it's an issue that no one is immune to. My research will mostly focus on how to effectively tell a story, what mental health looks like in numbers post-lockdown, and how to animate and create a 2D short film from Pre to Post-production.

DEDICATION

One could fill a book with all the names of people who I wish to dedicate this thesis to. So, I will simply say to all my loved ones and those who have loved me, thank you for taking this journey with me and supporting me when I could not do it alone. This project is every bit as much yours as it is mine.

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1. AESTHETIC MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

1.1 Content Warning and Resources

This thesis will cover topics such as anxiety, depression, allusion to suicidal ideation, and other mental health challenges in detail. Be advised that if any of this should emotionally disturb you, it is recommended that you discontinue reading. If the topics discussed are something you struggle with, please know you are not alone and that there are people who would love nothing more than to come alongside and support you.

- U.S. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988
- TAMU HelpLine: 979.845.2700
 - o M-F 4pm to 8am, 24 hr weekends
- My SSP: a mobile application with 24hr access to chat and phone call mental health support as well as articles, surveys, and other resources to help learn to manage daily life with mental health challenges.

1.2 Mental Health in the COVID-19 Era

Despite a recent boom in awareness of mental health and the detriment of psychological disorders, there is still a great stigma surrounding the subject and therefore a lack of support for those who struggle. There is also a continuously growing number of people struggling with some kind of disorder, whether it's an informal general struggle or a formally diagnosed and/or medicated disorder. According to the research conducted and recorded by Reuben Kindred and Glen Bates "The COVID-19 pandemic has led to acute changes in daily routines and lifestyles worldwide, with the social consequences being detrimental to mental health. For instance, there has been an estimated additional 76.2 million cases of anxiety disorders globally, an increase of

25.6%, and it is unlikely that mental health will recover to pre-pandemic levels for some time.” (Kindred, Bates, 1). One must understand that some of the inflated numbers have to do with more people feeling able to admit that they struggle and able to seek medical assistance, and this leads to more people being added to the tally. However, another big reason for the increase can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic; the lockdowns and resulting isolation, the fear of an unknown and deadly virus, financial stress, job loss, loss of loved ones. The list goes one for miles, and some people ended up with the entire list all to themselves.

I personally experienced a lot of heartache during the pandemic, and one of the ways I was able to escape was through art. When motivation to create ran dry, I turned to observing and I found so many beautiful expressions of the very emotions I found myself feeling. I watched so many short films and animatics, read webtoons and online comics, and observed several unique art pieces. I had always enjoyed watching short films, but I had never thought to use them to convey such mature and complicated themes as mental health struggles. It inspired me to start looking more into 2D animation and mature storytelling through the medium. I wouldn't have the motivation or opportunity to express this new-found inspiration till well after the lockdowns were over, but through this thesis project I finally get to do just that. Thus, I ask the question, how does one effectively communicate difficult themes to a broad audience? I hope to answer this through my research, through the relation of personal experience, and through the effective execution of a stylized short film.

1.3 Personal Experience and Motivation

My personal experience with the pandemic was extremely difficult in the first months. I remember being away on spring break when the announcements began rolling in for school. First it was a few extra days of spring break, then it was an extra week, then two, then it was no school

at all until further notice. My friends and I were celebrating and laughing and trying our best not to panic while looking up what this thing was that had everyone so scared. We barely left the little beach house after that day, wondering if we might end up locked in there. When I got home, it was determined we would move to online school and my job told everyone that only managers would be working socially distanced orders for the foreseeable future. I packed up as much of my little apartment as I'd need to get by for the rest of the semester and moved back with my family. While I was there with them, I found out through Instagram that my job was shutting down and I was now unemployed. I spiraled into a horrible depression, feeling like I had taken a million steps backward. I barely passed my classes, took horrible care of myself, hardly ate, slept for hours, stopped working out, stopped doing anything I enjoyed really. Everything felt so hopeless and I missed my friends, afraid that I could lose them or my family at any moment. Once things started to transition back to semi-normal, I had developed a terrible social anxiety. It was like I had forgotten how to talk to people and interact in person and it was terrifying. My short story is based on a few particular situations I experienced in the first year back to in-person school.

In the last year I was finally formally diagnosed with bipolar, something that had gone unnoticed until the stress and anxiety post-lockdown exacerbated it. The importance of this diagnosis and the treatment following was life changing, but the thing I found to be most helpful after being diagnosed was the support of people around me. In my short, I wanted to take my personal experiences and translate them into something a lot of people can relate to. So many people developed or worsened in a preexisting mental health struggle of some kind in the pandemic, and I want to express how important it is to have a support system around you and that there are people out there who understand. One of the things I've noticed most about people

who spiral into the deepest depressions is that they feel completely and totally alone. Before my diagnosis and subsequent treatment, I had so many conflicting feelings that would hit me out of the blue; loneliness in the presence of friends, sadness in a happy situation, exhaustion after a long night of rest. No matter how many books, podcasts, self-care treatments, workout routines, or healthy meal plans I used, I could never seem to fully overcome whatever it was that had me so up and down. Knowing there was something wrong but not knowing what it was became extremely frustrating for me, and I eventually broke down into a very dark place. This is the part of the thesis that my previous trigger warning alludes to. I didn't want to hurt myself, but I started to hope that I just wouldn't wake up. I didn't want to die, but I didn't want to be alive anymore either. I didn't want to live if my circumstances at that time were going to be it for me. I wanted to be free of the frustration and exhaustion, but I knew if my life ended that those feelings and more would only be transferred to my loved ones. The sadness wouldn't end with me, it would spread and grow. I did what I felt was impossible and told my husband about those feelings of not wanting to live, and it saved my life. I received an evaluation, my formal diagnosis, proper medication, and therapy. And it was after these experiences that I gained a passionate desire to show others that they are not alone in these feelings and struggles. I wanted to put my ability to create to good use helping others.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT, DISCIPLINARY PARADIGMS, AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS

2.1 Influences Growing Up

Some of my fondest memories are of my mother and I watching new movies. Going to the theater or buying a new DVD from the store was one of our favorite things to do together. She has always had a love for unique stories in cinema and she instilled the same passion in me. We can still talk for hours about our favorite movies, although if I tried listing them all I'm sure it would take up at least a page or two of this paper. However, there are a handful of movies I will never forget my first time seeing; *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*, *The Prince of Egypt*, *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, and *Treasure Planet*. These four animated films are what I believe to be some of the most unique and groundbreaking projects within the industry. *The Prince of Egypt* was released only a few months after I was born and just this year, I had the honor of meeting one of the amazing directors of the film, Brenda Chapman. To be able to look her in the eye and tell her just how much of an impact her film had on my life and now career was a memory I will treasure just as much as the first time I remember watching the film. There are two main aspects of all four films that influence me; emotionally complex themes and integration of technology that was new to their time.

The Prince of Egypt is a retelling of the story of *Exodus*, and it does not shy away from the darker aspects of this part of history. In fact, it starts by throwing them right in the viewers face with the first sequence showing the Jewish slaves working and allusions to the massacre of male Jewish babies. It shows the torment that the Egyptians inflicted upon them and others who they deem inferior. While not a part of the historical account, there is a scene in which the

Egyptian high priests gift Zipporah to a young Ramses who then passes her off to Moses. We later see Moses hesitantly enter his room where Zipporah is supposedly waiting on his bed. This is alluding to the grim practice of enslaving beautiful women for the pleasures of royalty and other elite members of Egyptian society. The film utilizes CGI effects for all of the weather events such as the sand storm, the tornado of fire, and the famous splitting of the Red Sea. Being 1998, the software used to create these effects was still fairly rudimentary and heavily code-based. *Spirit* is set in the American West of the 19th century, and it follows a young stallion's journey through the spreading world of humans. It sees the depiction of the conflict between U.S. Cavalry and Lakota natives, and the cruelty of those with the colonizer mindset against the natives, the land, and the creatures upon it. CGI was used in this film to create the large herds of horses faster than drawing them by hand, a 3D train, and a particle effect for the fire in the forest.

Atlantis was the first Disney film to feature a romance plot between the two main characters without including an on-screen kiss. Although we do see Milo's obvious physical attraction to Kida, the story focuses on their friendship and emotional bond as the main substance of their relationship. Two friends who fall in love, something unique from other princesses in Disney's then-catalogue. This film saw some of Disney's early 3D vehicle and creature work with the submarines, trucks, some environment pieces, and my personal favorite, the Leviathan. Finally, *Treasure Planet* depicts what is probably the most real and heart wrenching story, an angry young man abandoned by his father. The idea to put *Treasure Island* into space has never been matched in my opinion. But the decision to tell a story that is all too common for many young men and women alike was what really gives this film something special. Even with the use of CGI ships, solar surfers, black holes, and exploding planets, the most impressive thing

about this film is how deeply its characters touch the viewer's heart. We see Jim's pain and the rage that fuels his desire to find his fabled treasure.

2.2 Inspiration and Reference

I took heavy inspiration from the short films produced by Gobelins school of animation, specifically their short *Contretemps*. The film follows a young woman with OCD as she fights her condition in the form of wide-eyed, morphing monsters watching her every move, reminding her to repeat her patterns. While some of the reference I took was for the theming, I ended up using it mostly for my timing and pacing of each frame in the animating phase. Smooth, seamless animation was my original plan, but the slower pacing of the Gobelins shorts lent itself to this heavy emotional story. This then led me to reference the films of Studio Ghibli and Japanese animation as a whole. A lot of these films are animated similarly to the Gobelins films in that the frames are not seamless and perfectly smoothed out like a Disney film. They're focused more on relaying specific information than stylistic perfection or flawless movements. Miyazaki is known for being painstakingly intentional about the visual information communicated in each scene of his films.

Another piece of media I was heavily inspired by was the Netflix series *Love, Death, and Robots*. The series is a compilation of several independent short films, all of which are made specifically for mature audiences. The short that I took most reference from is *Zima Blue*, which follows an artist who only paints a single square in the same shade of blue, increasing the size to such a scale that we see him move into space. In the end, he turns out to have been a robotic creation of a young girl who made him to scrub her pool tiles, which are the same color blue he paints with. He was made to learn and improve himself, eventually modifying himself so far to be of the human likeness. The short ends with him jumping into a pool and all of his

modifications stripping away until he returns to his original state and simply cleans the pool again. ("Zima Blue" All) It relays the message that one can become so obsessed with improvement and growth that they forget the purpose of simple enjoyment in performing their chosen task. He goes back to his roots, and simply revels in the joys of a job well done. As an artist, I was able to relate to this on a deep level. I have been guilty of getting caught up in the perfection of a piece that I forgot I started it for the joy of creating something beautiful. The same can happen to anyone with whatever they love doing. Many of us can get caught up in such a situation in our social lives, getting laser-focused on appearing perfect and making everyone happy that we forget to just enjoy time with friends.

3. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT

3.1 Creating a short film

I have had a lot of experiencing fleshing out a story and key scenes with a team but doing so on my own posed an interesting challenge. I had to be far more intentional about seeking critique from my peers and mentors and about implementing their comments wisely. Stepping out of my artistic comfort zone and getting my hands on every element of a short film was both intimidating and exciting. A specific example of this is the sound design for this project. I utilized a lot of the same royalty free sound libraries that have been used in our vertical studios, but some of the more specific sounds I was looking for weren't going to be in any library. I ended up having to create some of my own sounds and I was the voice behind any special voice lines and my main characters little huffs and noises throughout the short. I left my male characters silent and used royalty free sounds for any male laughter or simple sounds.

One of the decisions I made early on was that I didn't want to spend time animating characters speaking. I knew that with all the time I'd have to spend animating the body and lining up those sounds of walking and small shifts in a chair, learning to animate speech was not in the scope of this project. Even animating a simply sigh or chuckle would be hard enough. I chose to give my character's thoughts a voiced script as well as some background lines. My thought was that by not seeing her speak, we get a stronger sense of her social anxiety and the lack of contact with others. By not seeing others speak, we see from her perspective of avoiding eye contact and interacting with others.

3.2 Creating an Environment from Scratch

Environments are far from my specialty. I have little practice in drawing them from scratch and none in animating them in 2D. In order to create the perfect set for my short, I created a 3D mockup of my coffee shop set using Maya, Unreal Engine 5, and, to my surprise, *The Sims 4* building mechanic. I then took screenshots of my desired camera shots and drew over those to accurately capture the perspective and some lighting. To add a personal feel to it, I designed my set based on several of my favorite locally owned coffee shops around College Station, TX.



Figure 1: Environment Shot Taken from Character's Perspective

I wanted my main character to come across as stiff and constantly uncomfortable, so I had her sitting alone at large round table and chair tucked in a smaller space next to a window. I also placed her closer to the door than any other seat and facing the door to imply her ever-

present desire to be back home and out of the stressful environment. In stark contrast, I wanted the group of friends to seem cozy and comfortable with each other, so they are placed in a plush, warmly lit couch circle in the side of the shop with no windows.

3.3 Sound Design

Out of everything I underestimated as something that would be easy, sound design was easily the one I underestimated the most. If it were as easy as just finding sounds you think might go well together in free sound libraries and mashing them together onto a video, everyone would do it. I now realize why not everyone does it. Mixing sounds and balancing them so that you can hear dialogue was a challenge I was not ready for and should have planned at least an extra week for. During my public presentation, the main critique across the board was that the volume of the dialogue was too close to that of the ambience and other sound effects. Since we as the audience are supposed to be hearing the main character's inner dialogue, it makes more sense to have it be a bit unnaturally loud compared to the surrounding noise. It doesn't need to blend as if someone is speaking over ambient noise.

3.4 Color and Lighting

The two visual aspects I used most heavily to tell this story were color and lighting. I wanted to add as much depth as possible to each emotional shift my main character experienced. One of the best examples of this is when the lighting goes totally dark and the spotlight shines on her coffee. The barista calls her order ready, and we transition to a dramatized visual version of what it feels like in her head to have to get up and get her coffee from the bar. The distance from the bar is exaggerated and a spotlight is all that illuminates her silhouette. The sounds convey an overwhelming din that builds until we snap back to reality and see that the bar is just a few steps away from where she sits. The motivation behind this shot was to represent how hard a

seemingly menial task such as walking up to pick up your food from a bar can be for someone with social anxiety. The stress of possibly having to interact with the people working the counter or bumping into someone on your way up. I use lighting and colors as my primary emotional compass. The darkening of the room as her thoughts and the sounds around her start to overwhelm her, casting a shadow over her world. The soft light and bright colors when the world is calm and still. The bright halo of light around our secondary character, the steam and blurry light around the coffee bar, the dark but vibrant neon of the club at the end. I had a difficult time deciding whether I wanted the characters and environment to all be colored realistically or if I wanted to go with a more on-the-nose theme of personality-based coloring. I played for a while with the idea of each character having their own color like the emotions in *Inside Out* with my main character being a kind of muted teal blue. Eventually I decided to compromise and give each character's costume its own personality-based color but stick with realistic coloring of the hair, skin and eyes. It was ultimately easier to work with once I started getting into the lighting phase.



Figure 2: I wasn't sure if I wanted to work with stylized or realistic coloring

3.5 Learning New Techniques

I heavily utilized YouTube as my primary source of learning 2D animation. I had already learned the principles of animation in school, but always applied in a 3D workspace. I practically created my own curriculum by the time I finished the project and am currently seriously considering teaching others what I've learned.

4. REFLECTION

4.1 Reflecting on the Creative Process

My short changed at least a dozen times before I even started my storyboard. I had to scale back several times to suit my abilities and the time frame in which I was working. I lost a lot of time in the Fall semester due to a family emergency and had to completely rethink my story and style. When I first applied to the ACC, the short I hoped to create involved developing and animating several art styles, heavy music and sound design, and an extremely complicated story. It followed the same basic character as the end product, but through many stages of life instead of just a single day. I originally wanted to tell my personal mental health story in a stylized manner, but it ended up being too great a challenge to take on in the limited time frame. I scaled back and changed the story several times until finally I came to the story seen in the short. When I shelved my original idea for a later day, I experienced the sadness that many creators in the industry have expressed dealing with when one of their creations doesn't make the cut. I had to work to find the same passion for what the short became in the end. I found myself sitting in a local coffee shop experiencing the very anxiety I wanted to convey in my short, and that was when it clicked for me. I jotted down my feelings and reactions and hit the ground running. Most of my short is based around that exact experience.

The part of the process I thought would be simple was learning how to animate with ToonBoom's software. I have never been more wrong about anything in my life. After working in 3D for my entire time in college, I thought 2D would be a breeze. While 2D uses many of the same principles, the application was totally different. I had to keep a written list of the 12 principles of animation in sight at all times and reviewed every single frame with them. The

concept and story boarding process was a dream compared to making things move and time everything perfectly. While perfecting the art of pacing was a challenge, it was so rewarding to come out on the other side having gained such a valuable skill.

4.2 Public Presentation

My public presentation was a public virtual live stream held over zoom. I had originally intended on using YouTube to stream my presentation but decided to use zoom as I was already familiar with the application's mechanics. I also preferred the ability to see my audience members' faces and hear them talk to me as I presented and held Q&A. I have always preferred a more conversational style of presentation, and it helps the words to flow more naturally for me. I presented my motivation and inspiration for the project, and explained the processes of 2D animation as they related to my short and how they are utilized in the industry. I recorded the presentation to be able to share with those who were unable to attend, and intend on hosting another one when the short is refined and finalized to the quality I would like.

4.3 Writing my First Thesis

I was extremely nervous about having to write a long thesis paper alongside the work of creating the artifact itself. Despite the hours of formal writing I have under my belt, I was afraid I would never be able to come up with 5,500 words about the project. I wish the workshop in January had been done during the Fall semester because it was an instant relief to my anxiety. The first time I opened the creative thesis template, my anxiety spiked and my eyes darted between the highlighter yellow and dark maroon. My first checkpoint was extremely stressful and I had this mindset that my paper needed to look and sound like a PhD dissertation. Strictly formal language, perfectly written grammatically, somewhat boring, little to no personal expression. I was so wrong, and although the second installment was still fairly nerve wracking

just due to length, it was so much easier to write in the sense that I felt able to express what I really wanted to in my tone. I think the second spring update falls at an odd time of the semester considering it asks about the February and March small groups, but the second thesis installment was perfectly timed for me. If I had been smarter about it, I would have written smaller portions over several more days instead of designating whole days to writing large chunks. I also would've had the mind to take more notes on my process as well as writing down any time I found anything relevant to my thesis. Another resource I would've utilized more would have been the A&M writing center and tutors as well as the UGR advisors.

4.4 What did I Enjoy?

The most enjoyable aspect during this process has easily been hearing and seeing others react to the story. It received overwhelming positive response during my public presentation and from anyone I have shown progress to throughout the program. Hearing other people say that they could relate to my character and that they felt seen brought me so much joy. Those kinds of words were the most important thing for me to hear about this story from the beginning. I have also quite enjoyed the learning and perfecting of 2D animation and my overall creative knowledge. Up until now, I could never find the time to work on 2D animation on top of school and work. It was the one thing I had always wanted to specialize in and focus my portfolio on, and I have enjoyed almost every moment of it. I was afraid I would get sick of it, but I could sit at a desk and animate for hours. I also enjoyed utilizing more of the on-campus resources such as equipment rental, speaking with the librarians, walking through the stacks at Evans Library to find the art books, printing posters to advertise my presentation. Another major positive experience was the connections I made during my time in the ACC and UGR programs as well as the people I was able to show my project to. I had the opportunity to meet industry

professionals during my college's industry fair and they were happy to share their contact info for me to send my portfolio and work in progress to for advice and critique. While I was not able to contact them for critique prior to my final submission of the thesis, I will be utilizing their wisdom and assistance in refining the film after the program is over for my own personal portfolio.

4.5 What Would I Change?

There are quite a few things I would have done differently if I had the opportunity. If I could go back and do only one thing differently, I would have shelved my original idea sooner and started with the smaller-scale story. It would have left me with more time to refine the short and perhaps even implement some of the ideas I had to leave out of the finished product. I also would have taken the necessary steps to perform my own survey asking people questions about their mental health, coping strategies, and other informative questions to assist in my research. I think it would have helped to have more formally researched perspectives to use as reference in writing my story and my main character. The research phase also should have lasted longer and continued more thoroughly throughout the entire process instead of one short gathering spree and hardly gathering more after. Probably the most disappointing aspect of the project for me was that I was unable to present a fully fleshed out and refined short film and had to settle with an animatic for submission. Through learning what all goes into creating a short film, I also learned just how much time it really takes to perfect one. Even with the time of a whole school year to back me, I would have needed to quit my job, drop all my other classes, and neglect responsibilities at home to have enough time to produce what I had envisioned. It was humbling, to say the least, to have to come to terms with not being able to present my exact vision. While I

was not able to refine the film for the purposes of my undergraduate thesis, I will absolutely be working to realize the finished product I had envisioned through the rest of the year.

4.6 Conclusion

This was the best experience I could have ever asked for a senior capstone, not in spite of the challenges, but because of them. The very events that made it so difficult were exactly what made it worthwhile in the end. I knew this would be a hefty challenge when I took it on, but it became ten times as hefty by the time I finished it. Never in a million years did I think I would have an opportunity to conduct research and write a formal thesis as an undergraduate student. This is something I will be proud to put in a portfolio and present to future employers. I feel that I effectively communicated a deeply personal and emotional story to my audience and that it is a relevant project to the current and changing times. I am excited to refine my animatic into a fully finished film and for the public to see it the way I truly intended them to. Technology has given artists new opportunities and methods to explore 2D animation, and animated film, to tell all kinds of stories. I believe that we are about to experience another renaissance in the animated film industry that will see stories reaching audiences of all ages, ethnicities, backgrounds, etc. I personally am proud to have been a contributor to such a cause and am ecstatic to continue pioneering this movement.

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The Prince of Egypt. Directed by Brenda Chapman, Simon Wells, and Steve Hickner, Dreamworks Pictures and Universal Pictures, 1998

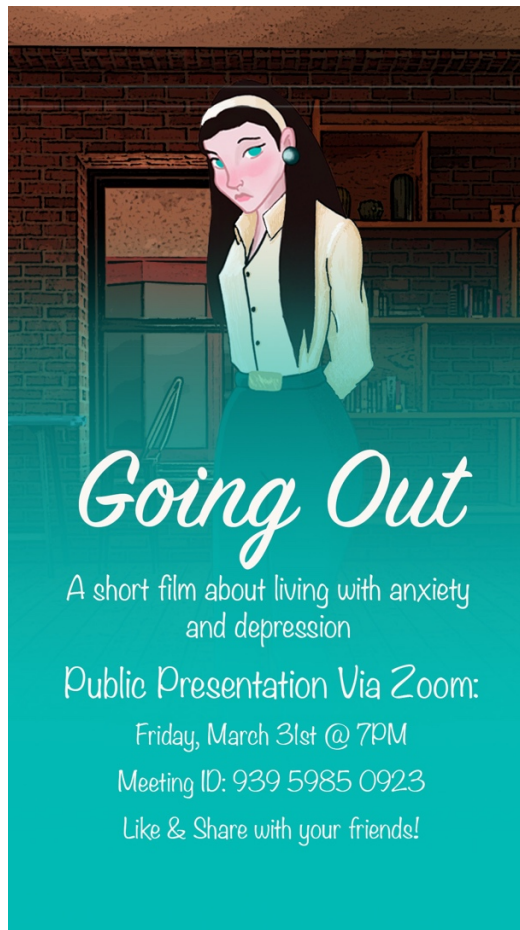
Treasure Planet. Directed by John Musker and Ron Clements, Walt Disney Pictures, 2002

“Zima Blue.” *Love, Death, and Robots*, created by Tim Miller and David Fincher, season 1, episode 14, Netflix, 2019

APPENDIX: CREATIVE ARTIFACT

Poster & Final Video

I presented part of my short film to the public for the first time via Zoom. I advertised it via a digital poster I made using Photoshop and Illustrator.



Poster: I created this to post on social media and for others to share

The link to the Google Drive File containing the mp4 of the short film:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1kchTFNWNp1_Vjd6cwXC6FIb2tI7igM3P?usp=

[share_link](#)