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Cinematic portrayals of mental health: Exploring Hollywood's impact on public understanding of mental health

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Abstract

Films play an important role in shaping public perceptions and influencing behaviour. They help audiences grasp mental health conditions by detailing symptoms, causes, and coping strategies. Moreover, films motivate those struggling with mental illnesses to seek help. They often showcase various coping methods such as therapy, lifestyle adjustments, meditation, medication, and the crucial role of family love and support.

This study aims to explore the contribution of media, specifically Hollywood films, in portraying accurate representations of mental health. It also investigates the influence of these films on public perceptions of mental health and their role in generating awareness and potential solutions for coping with mental illnesses

Using semi structured interviews as the primary method of data collection and employing thematic analysis, the study evaluates the accuracy of these films in portraying mental illness and their impact on societal attitudes. The findings reveal that while these films often provide empathetic and emotionally insightful portrayals, reducing stigma and promoting open dialogue about mental health, they frequently lack practical insights into coping mechanisms. Instead, they tend to focus on emotional narratives rather than offering concrete solutions for managing mental illnesses.

This study concludes that Hollywood films help reduce mental health stigma but should include actionable coping strategies and interventions to better support viewers.

Keywords: Film; Societal perception; Coping skills; Thematic analysis; Cinematic portrayals

1. Introduction

Cinema and media play an essential role in shaping public perceptions of mental health and influencing the way society understands and approaches mental illness. Films, television shows, and other forms of media not only reflect cultural attitudes toward mental health but also have the power to shape and influence these attitudes. Current studies have shown that social media can be used to promote mental health and well-being. Additionally, social media holds potential for facilitating mental health interventions (Naslund et al 2019). Over the past few decades, there has been a growing recognition of the media's responsibility in accurately portraying mental illness and providing realistic representations of the challenges individuals face (Goodwin et al 2014). While progress has been made, the portrayal of mental illness in media remains a complex and often problematic issue, with both positive and negative implications for public perceptions and the individuals affected.

Mental health, which encompasses psychological, emotional, and social well-being, plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions. It is influenced by various factors, including family history of mental health

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issues, biological elements such as genetics and brain chemistry, and life experiences like trauma or abuse. In recent years, media has emerged as a significant factor impacting mental health, both by contributing to challenges and by raising much-needed awareness (Byrne P 2000).

It is crucial to depict mental illnesses in a realistic and humanizing manner, fostering compassion and understanding in a chaotic world. Recognizing mental health disorders is a complex process that involves identifying symptoms, finding the right language to describe them, and understanding their underlying causes to seek appropriate solutions.

1.1. Dual Role of Entertainment and Education

Hollywood often blurs the line between entertainment and education in its portrayal of mental illness, frequently perpetuating harmful stereotypes. Beachum (2007) criticizes this trend, noting that films often depict individuals with mental health conditions as dangerous or tragic, which distorts public perception and fosters fear rather than understanding. To address this issue, Beachum advocates for collaboration between mental health professionals and filmmakers to create more accurate and positive portrayals, which could reduce stigma and improve public understanding.

This problem extends beyond film, as print media also plays a role in reinforcing negative stereotypes. Nawka et al. (2010) highlight how newspapers often perpetuate misleading narratives about mental illness. They call for educational initiatives to challenge these portrayals. By providing more nuanced and accurate representations, both film and media can move beyond sensationalism, helping to reduce stigma and enhance public awareness of mental health issues.

1.2. Striking a Balance between Empathy and Accuracy in Film

The tension between accurate portrayal and entertainment value is evident in films like 'Silver Linings Playbook' (2012), which Nadel & Negra (2012) critique for its oversimplification of mental illness. While the film provides an empathetic view of bipolar disorder, its reliance on "magical thinking" and simplified recovery narratives may mislead audiences about the realities of living with and managing such conditions. This highlights the importance of balancing empathy with accuracy in portraying mental health issues in films. Bhugra (2006) emphasizes cinema's potential as an educational tool for therapists and patients, illustrating mental health challenges and fostering empathy. However, he warns that sensationalized portrayals can oversimplify mental illness, reinforcing harmful stereotypes instead of promoting accurate understanding. Weir (2008) emphasizes the importance of portraying mental disorders as biological diseases, similar to physical conditions like heart disease. By framing mental illness in this way, media representations can help shift public perception away from moral judgment and towards an understanding of mental health as a legitimate medical issue. This reframing can significantly reduce stigma and normalize conversations around mental health. Weir argues that achieving this balance requires mental health professionals and media creators to collaborate closely to ensure that the depictions of mental illness are both accurate and respectful, avoiding the traps of sensationalism or oversimplification.

1.3. Progressive Depictions of Mental Health in Modern Cinema

Despite the challenges, modern media has made strides in improving portrayals of mental illness. Brown & Hammer (2014) discuss 'Perks of Being a Wallflower' (2012) as an example of a film that realistically explores themes of isolation, trauma, and mental illness, particularly as they affect adolescents. The film offers an empathetic and accurate portrayal of the struggles associated with depression and PTSD, demonstrating how mental illness can shape a young person's experience. These improved portrayals reflect a growing awareness and sensitivity to the complexities of mental health issues in contemporary cinema.

2. Research Method

This study used qualitative research design

2.1. Sampling Technique

This study used purposive sampling. The inclusivity criteria of participants determined by the participants have to be someone who is watched the films (Silver Linings Playbook, Perks of Being a Wallflower, A Beautiful Mind, Inside Out, Infinitely Polar Bear) of the genre that depict mental health. Researcher is only focused on the awareness that gained by participants from watching the films.

2.2. Data collection

Data is obtained from participants using a semi-structured interview. The questions covered several key components, including demographics, types of mental illness, and personality factors. These included prompts such as: "What motivates you to watch films or dramas in this genre?" and "What are your favourite films or dramas?" Additionally, questions addressed whether participants voluntarily choose to watch this genre and explored their preferences for other types of films or dramas.

The inquiry also focused on the effects and learning process after watching these films or dramas, as well as potential improvements for the genre. For example, participants were asked: "Do you feel you understand mental illness better after watching these films or dramas?" and "What have you learned from watching them?" They were also asked if they could explain mental illness more effectively after viewing and whether they believed society would benefit from watching such content. Finally, participants were asked for their suggestions on how filmmakers could improve these films or dramas to ensure a broader audience engages with and better understands mental health issues.

2.3. Data analysis

In this study, the researcher employed thematic analysis to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify patterns or themes within a set of texts, such as interview transcripts (Singer, 2018). The process involves several stages: familiarization with the data, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing and refining these themes, defining and naming the themes, and finally, writing up the findings. Through this structured approach, the researcher was able to extract meaningful themes from the interview data, providing deeper insights into the subject matter.

3. Results

The thematic analysis of 12 interviews about the impact of films on attitudes toward psychological disorders revealed the following major themes: (1) Increased Empathy and Understanding, (2) Lack of Direct Solutions for Coping, and (3) The Role of Pre-existing Experience. Each major theme is further divided into sub-themes, providing a deeper understanding of the effects of films on individuals' perspectives.

3.1. Increased Empathy and Understanding

One of the most prominent themes across the interviews was the increased empathy and understanding that participants developed after watching films that depicted characters with psychological disorders.

3.1.1. Sub-theme: Greater Emotional Insight

Films like "Inside Out" helped viewers connect more deeply with their emotions and those of others. For example, one participant noted how the film put a face on different emotions, helping them recognize and understand the complexity of emotional experiences. This led to greater emotional awareness in their daily lives:

"Inside Out... made me a lot more aware of what happens to a person's mind... I found myself thinking, 'Oh, this is my sad part that's popped up.'" (Interview 4)

Another respondent described how the film allowed them to understand the internal struggles of individuals with psychological disorders, helping them to empathize with people's unique emotional and psychological challenges:

"It showed me the perspective of people who have different psychological personalities... it definitely helped me change my perspective for the better." (Interview 3)

3.1.2. Sub-theme: Challenging Stereotypes

Participants reported that the films helped break down existing stereotypes about people with mental health issues. For example, one participant shared how their perception of people with bipolar disorder changed after watching "Silver Linings Playbook":

"After seeing that movie, you realize that person... is not able to control the mood swings... it opened my eyes." (Interview 1)

In this case, the film fostered a more nuanced understanding of bipolar disorder, leading the viewer to challenge their previous assumptions and view the condition with greater empathy.

3.1.3. Sub-theme: Importance of Context and Relationships

Participants recognized the critical role of relationships and environment in shaping the experiences of individuals with psychological disorders. In “A Beautiful Mind”, the portrayal of John Nash’s relationship with his wife highlighted the importance of love and commitment in helping individuals manage their mental health challenges:

"The movie showed that love and commitment play such a crucial role... without his wife’s support, it would have been so much harder for Nash to manage his disorder." (Interview 2)

This sub-theme emphasizes that the films encouraged viewers to appreciate the importance of supportive relationships in the management and recovery of mental health issues.

3.2. Lack of Direct Solutions for Coping

While the films successfully increased understanding and empathy, many participants noted that they did not provide clear solutions for coping with or treating psychological disorders.

3.2.1. Sub-theme: No Clear Path to Treatment

Several respondents commented that while the films shed light on the experiences of individuals with mental health issues, they fell short of offering specific solutions or therapeutic interventions. One participant stated:

"The movies didn't really give me a solution... they showed the struggles, but not how to actually fix the problem." (Interview 3 & 5)

This sentiment was echoed by another participant, who explained that while they gained a better understanding of the mental health conditions portrayed in the films, the films did not offer actionable solutions:

"It only helps me to understand the situation better, but I don’t think it leads to a solution." (Interview 4, 7 & 12)

3.2.2. Sub-theme: Raising Awareness without Offering Resolution

The films were often seen as tools for raising awareness rather than providing resolution. For example, one respondent reflected on how the films raised curiosity and awareness about the challenges faced by individuals with psychological disorders, but did not offer specific methods for treatment or recovery:

"The movies make you more curious and raise awareness... but there’s no clear solution presented." (Interview 3)

This sub-theme illustrates that while awareness is valuable, viewers may still feel uncertain about how to address the challenges depicted in the films.

3.3. The Role of Pre-existing Experience

Participants’ existing experience with mental health issues influenced their responses to the films. Those with previous exposure to psychological disorders often reported less dramatic shifts in their attitudes but still found value in the films’ messages.

3.3.1. Sub-theme: Pre-existing Empathy

For participants who had already encountered mental health issues in their personal lives, the films served to reinforce their empathy and understanding. One participant, for example, noted that they did not have a negative view of people with mental health challenges even before watching the films, as they had seen close family members struggle with similar issues:

"I’ve seen a lot of people, close ones, going through some mental health issues, so I’ve not really seen it as a ‘stay away’ situation." (Interview 4)

This respondent’s existing empathy was strengthened by the films, helping them further contextualize their own experiences with loved ones facing mental health challenges.

3.3.2. Sub-theme: Reinforcement of Existing Beliefs

For some participants, the films did not introduce new perspectives but instead reinforced beliefs they already held about the importance of empathy and understanding. One respondent shared:

"I already had a pretty empathetic outlook because of my work with people who had intellectual disabilities, and the films just reinforced that." (Interview 2 & 8)

In this case, the films helped validate the respondent's pre-existing understanding of mental health issues and reaffirmed their belief in the importance of empathy.

3.3.3. Sub-theme: Limited Impact on Attitudes

Finally, some participants with pre-existing experience dealing with mental health issues reported that the films had a limited impact on their overall attitudes. One participant expressed that while the films provided greater insight into specific conditions, they did not significantly change their views on mental health:

"I don't really see it as a normal malady... I just see it as something that requires treatment." (Interview 1 & 4)

This sub-theme highlights that for individuals with extensive prior experience, the films may have had a more limited effect on changing attitudes compared to participants with less exposure to mental health issues.

4. Discussion

A significant finding is the enhanced empathy and understanding participants developed after watching films about psychological disorders. Films like 'Inside Out' and 'Silver Linings Playbook' played a pivotal role in helping viewers connect emotionally with characters, thereby fostering greater emotional insight. Participants reported a newfound ability to recognize and articulate their own emotions, as well as empathize with others' psychological struggles. This aligns with existing literature that suggests media can be a powerful tool for increasing emotional intelligence and empathy by providing a window into diverse human experiences. (Bou-Karroum et al, 2017; Ashford & Bentley, 2019)

Moreover, these films challenged stereotypes about mental health. For instance, 'Silver Linings Playbook' helped participants understand the uncontrollable nature of mood swings associated with bipolar disorder, prompting them to reconsider preconceived notions. This finding is supported by research indicating that media portrayals can significantly influence public perceptions of mental illness, often reducing stigma and promoting a more nuanced understanding (Keal, C., et al.2022;Wahl, O. F. 1995)

Despite the empathy and awareness generated, participants noted a lack of direct solutions for coping with psychological disorders presented in the films. While the narratives illuminated the struggles faced by individuals with mental health issues, they fell short of offering concrete therapeutic interventions or coping strategies. This echoes critiques in the literature that while films can effectively raise awareness, they often do not provide practical guidance for managing mental health conditions. The absence of actionable solutions may leave viewers more informed but still uncertain about how to address these challenges in real life. (Keal, C., et al.2022; Vesere, A. 2020)

The impact of these films was also mediated by participants' pre-existing experiences with mental health issues. Those with prior exposure to psychological disorders reported less dramatic changes in their attitudes, as their empathy and understanding were already well-developed. For these individuals, the films served to reinforce existing beliefs rather than introduce new perspectives. This finding highlights the importance of considering viewers' backgrounds when assessing the impact of media on attitudes toward mental health. It suggests that while films can reinforce and validate existing empathy, their transformative potential may be limited for those already familiar with mental health challenges (Wahl, 1995; Wedding et al, 2010).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, films depicting psychological disorders have a multifaceted impact on viewers, enhancing empathy and challenging stereotypes but often lacking in providing direct coping solutions. By acknowledging the role of pre-existing experiences, these findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how media can influence perceptions of mental health. This research highlights the importance of leveraging films as part of broader educational and awareness initiatives, ensuring they are complemented by practical resources to maximize their impact.

5.1. Implications

The findings shows the potential of films to enhance empathy and challenge stereotypes, suggesting their utility as educational tools in mental health awareness campaigns. However, the lack of direct coping solutions points to a need for supplementary resources or discussions that provide viewers with practical strategies for managing mental health issues. Future research could explore the integration of educational materials or workshops alongside film screenings to bridge this gap.

Additionally, understanding the role of pre-existing experience can inform targeted interventions, ensuring that media campaigns are tailored to different audience segments. For those with limited exposure to mental health issues, films may serve as an introduction to empathy and understanding, while for others, they may reinforce and deepen existing knowledge.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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