# Reel to Real: Exploring Representation of Mental Illnesses in Media and its Effects

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## Abstract

In contemporary society, mental health issues have garnered unprecedented attention and recognition as critical components of individual well-being and public health. A significant part of this recognition revolves around the portrayal of mental illnesses in various forms of media. The representation of mental health in media, including films, television shows, documentaries, news reports, and social media, has evolved over the years and has become a subject of growing concern and interest. This dissertation is an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted and evolving landscape of mental illness representation in media, with a focus on its prevalence, tropes and stereotypes, impact on public perceptions, and the ethical responsibilities of media creators. The research methodology employed in this study encompasses a broad range of approaches, including content analysis, surveys, interviews, and critical discourse analysis. These methods are used to investigate the prevalence of mental illness representations in media, providing a quantitative and qualitative assessment of the scope and nature of these portrayals. This comprehensive analysis seeks to identify recurring themes, stereotypes, and narratives that are commonly associated with mental health depictions, shedding light on how media has shaped and perpetuated certain perspectives on mental illnesses. Moreover, this dissertation investigates the evolving trends in media representations of mental illnesses over time. It examines how these portrayals have transformed and adapted to reflect changing societal attitudes, scientific understanding, and cultural shifts. By tracing the trajectory of mental health representation in media, this study aims to reveal the broader context in which these depictions emerge and the impact of evolving narratives on public perceptions. By examining the relationships between media exposure, public attitudes, and behaviors, this study offers valuable insights into the complex interplay between media depictions and real-world outcomes. The study assesses the ethical responsibilities of media creators, journalists, and content producers when addressing mental health issues in their work. It critically examines the principles of responsible journalism, storytelling, and content creation, offering guidance on how media practitioners can navigate the delicate balance between artistic expression and ethical responsibility. This aspect of the research underscores the importance of promoting a more compassionate and informed societal discourse about mental illnesses in media.

Keywords: Mental illnesses, psychological disorders, media and representation.

## Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of media and entertainment, the representation of mental illnesses has emerged as a profound and complex theme. The portrayal of mental health issues has transcended the realm of niche discourse to become a prominent and influential aspect of our cultural dialogue. This phenomenon is evident across various media forms, including but not limited to movies, television shows, songs, documentaries, news reports, and the expansive world of social media. These platforms have collectively become critical instruments in shaping public discourse, molding perceptions, and profoundly impacting the lives of individuals grappling with mental health challenges. In this introduction, we will explore the rich tapestry of mental health representation in media, weaving in examples from these diverse mediums.

Consider the domain of cinema, where films such as "A Beautiful Mind" have provided a cinematic canvas to depict the life of John Nash, a brilliant mathematician who confronts the adversities of schizophrenia. Similarly, "Silver Linings Playbook" offers a compelling narrative of a man navigating bipolar disorder while seeking love and personal redemption. These movies, among others, have ventured into the intricate and often tumultuous inner worlds of individuals living with mental illnesses. The power of these cinematic creations lies not only in their storytelling but in their potential to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and provoke conversations that transcend the screen and resonate with audiences.

In the world of music, iconic artists like Lady Gaga, Logic, and Kid Cudi have not only crafted chart-topping songs but have also utilized their lyrics to address their own struggles with mental health. Tracks like "Million Reasons" and "1-800-273-8255" have become anthems that invite audiences to empathize with the emotional turmoil of artists and, in turn, engage in open conversations about mental health. These musical expressions serve as an example of the transformative role of artistry in dismantling stigma and cultivating understanding.

Television shows are another realm where mental health narratives have been both embraced and scrutinized. "13 Reasons Why" and "BoJack Horseman" have been celebrated for their candid portrayals of mental health issues, but have simultaneously faced criticism for potentially triggering vulnerable viewers. These series have ignited debates about the consequences of media depictions, particularly in the context of mental health issues.

Documentaries, such as "The Devil and Daniel Johnston" and "Life, Animated," offer audiences a glimpse into the unique journeys of individuals dealing with mental illnesses. While these documentaries provide insights into the lives and challenges of their subjects, they also underscore the inherent complexity of capturing the full spectrum of mental health experiences on film.

News reports and social media, as real-time platforms, provide an arena where discussions about mental health unfold daily. These outlets have the power to shed light on stories of resilience, advocacy, and hope, effectively mobilizing individuals and communities to rally behind the cause of mental health awareness. Simultaneously, they can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, fueling misunderstanding, and further contributing to the stigmatization of those living with mental illnesses.

As media creators and journalists grapple

with the delicate balance between responsible storytelling and artistic expression, it is imperative to scrutinize the principles and guidelines that should guide them in this journey. The ethical implications of media representations are far-reaching, affecting not only the portrayal of mental health but also the broader societal understanding and the experiences of individuals living with mental illnesses.

In the modern era, the representation of mental illnesses in media has become an undeniable force, wielding unparalleled influence over the collective psyche of societies worldwide. The portrayal of mental health conditions in various forms of entertainment has transcended mere artistic expression; it has become a powerful determinant of public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors regarding these complex and often misunderstood disorders.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Morgan Malouf's (2019), "13 Reasons Why and the Ethics of Fictional Depictions of Suicide," explores the moral ramifications of fictional suicide depictions, with a particular focus on the controversial television series "13 Reasons Why." Malouf, critically examines the potential impact of fictional narratives on real-world attitudes and behaviors surrounding suicide. It explores the ethical responsibilities of creators when handling sensitive topics such as suicide in fictional works.

David P. Phillips' (1974) seminal work, "The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect," as published in the American Sociological Review, addresses the Werther Effect, which refers to the phenomenon wherein exposure to suicide-related media content can lead to an increase in suicide rates.

Kerri Lynn Blackstone's (2013) study, "Stigma and Identity Formation in Young Adults with Chronic Mental Illness: An Exploration through Personal Narrative and Art-Making" conducted at Loyola Marymount University, examines the relationship between development of identities and stigma among young individuals who are dealing with long-term mental illness.

Oliver Lunn's (2017) article, "How do you safely depict self-harm, suicide, and mental health problems in the mainstream media?" published in Vice, critically addresses the challenging issue of representing mental wellness, suicidal deaths, and harming oneself in media in a responsible manner.

Thomas Niederkrotenthaler's (2010) study, "A suicide-protective papageno effect of media portrayals of coping with suicidality," explores a nuanced aspect of media influence on suicide prevention. The research introduces the concept of the "Papageno effect" suggesting that responsible and solution-focused portrayals of coping with suicidality in the media can have a protective effect. The term "Papageno" refers to a character in Mozart's opera, "The Magic Flute," who overcomes adversity without resorting to self-harm. Niederkrotenthaler's work investigates how media representations that highlight positive coping mechanisms and resilience can serve as a preventive factor against suicide. By emphasizing the potential positive impact of media content, the study challenges conventional wisdom that media reporting only contributes to suicidal ideation.

## 3. METHODOLOGY:

A series of surveys were developed, and once the data was analyzed, a conclusion was produced.

## LOCALE OF THE STUDY

The locale of my research were individuals who consume Media on a weekly, if not daily basis in the age group of 18- 25 within a year.

### TOOL USED

Two mood scales make up the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS): one gauges positive affect and the other gauges negative effect. The PANAS is a psychometric scale that can be used to demonstrate relationships between personality traits and statistics and positive and negative affect. To define the definitions of each PA scale and NA, ten descriptors are employed.

### RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

Watson (1988) reported moderately good validity and reliability. The Cronbach alpha coefficients were 0.84 to 0.87 for the Negative Affect Scale and 0.86 to 0.90 for the Positive Affect Scale. The test-retest correlations for the PA and NA over an 8-week period were 0.47-0.68 and 0.39-0.71, respectively. When measuring things like overall distress and dysfunction, depression, and state anxiety, the PANAS has a great track record of validity.

### 3.1 INSTRUMENTATION:

This study uses Google Form-filled questionnaires as its survey instrument. First, a few questions are formulated. Every question that has been generated has multiple choice responses. As seen in Figure 1, the link to the questionnaires is then sent via the WhatsApp group for the responders to complete. There are two sections to the questionnaire. The first part consists of questions from PANAS (Positive and Negative Attitude Scale) which asseses the Mood/ Attitude of individuals after watching a video clip and the second part consists of general questions. Respondents can choose one option and according to the options they have chosen, overall scoring would get calculated.

## 3.2 DATA COLLECTION:

The information was gathered from several people. There were three stages to the data collection process. Initially, conduct a brainstorming session to generate questions and potential responses for the collection of surveys. After everything is finalized, send the responders the link to the questionnaires via WhatsApp groups. Lastly, going over and analyzing the information gathered. The goal was to receive as many answers as we could. It took roughly two weeks to distribute the surveys to the responders.
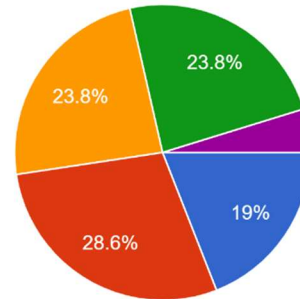
## 4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS:

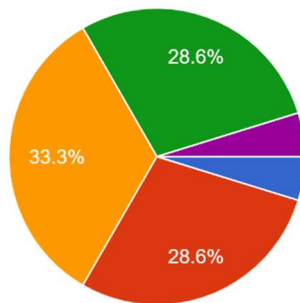There is discussion about the data collection's outcomes. The results derived from the surveys are displayed.

### 4.1 Positive Affect Score (Items - 1, 3, 5, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, and 19)

## ITEM #1
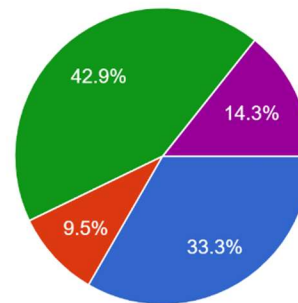## INTERESTED
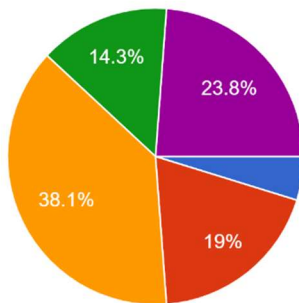


## ITEM #9
## ENTHUSIASTIC



- Very slightly or not at all
- A little
- Moderately
- Quite a bit
- Extremely

## ITEM #3
## EXCITED



## ITEM #10
## PROUD



- Very slightly or not at all
- A little
- Moderately
- Quite a bit
- Extremely

## ITEM #5
## STRONG
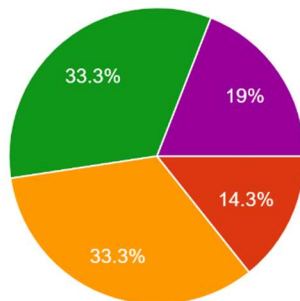


## ITEM #12
## ALERT
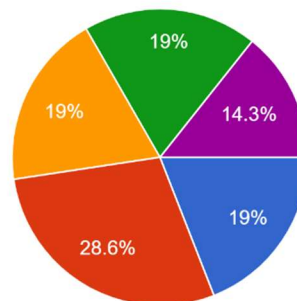


- Very slightly or not at al
- A little
- Moderately
- Quite a bit
- Extremely

**ITEM #14**
**INSPIRED**



- ● Very sl
- ● A little
- ● Moder
- ● Quite a
- ● Extrem

**ITEM #19**
**ACTIVE**



- ● Very slightly or not at
- ● A little
- ● Moderately
- ● Quite a bit
- ● Extremely

**ITEM #16**
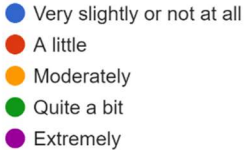**DETERMINED**
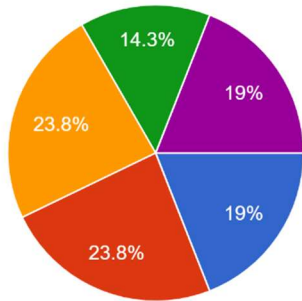


- ● Very sli
- ● A little
- ● Modera
- ● Quite a
- ● Extreme
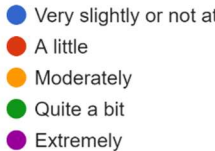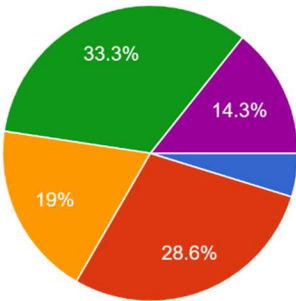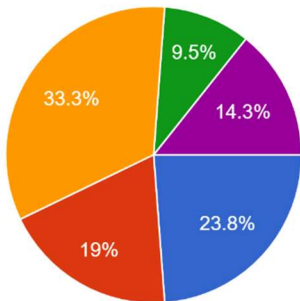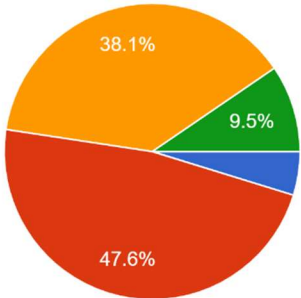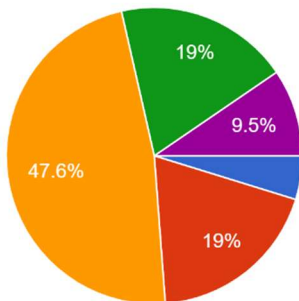
## 4.2 Negative Affect Score (Items - 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 15, 18, and 20)

**ITEM #2**
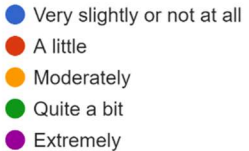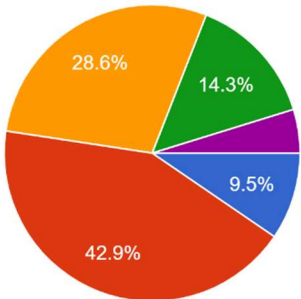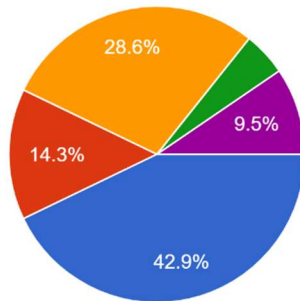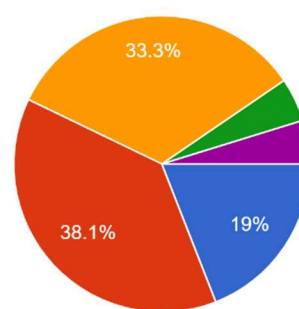**DISTRESSED**



- ● Very slightly or not at all
- ● A little
- ● Moderately
- ● Quite a bit
- ● Extremely

**ITEM #17**
**ATTENTIVE**



- ● Very s
- ● A little
- ● Moder
- ● Quite a
- ● Extren

**ITEM #4**
**UPSET**



- ● Very slightly or not at all
- ● A little
- ● Moderately
- ● Quite a bit
- ● Extremely

## ITEM #6
## GUILTY



- Very slig
- A little
- Moderat
- Quite a
- Extreme

## ITEM #11
## IRRITABLE



- Very slightly or not at all
- A little
- Moderately
- Quite a bit
- Extremely

## ITEM #7
## SCARED



- Very slig
- A little
- Modera
- Quite a
- Extreme
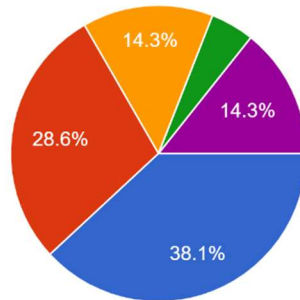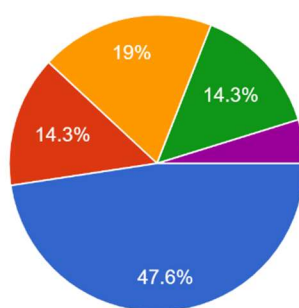
## ITEM #13
## ASHAMED



- Very slightly or not at all
- A little
- Moderately
- Quite a bit
- Extremely

## ITEM #8
## HOSTILE



- Very slig
- A little
- Moderat
- Quite a
- Extreme
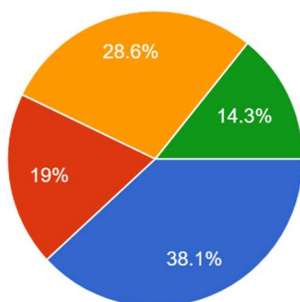
## ITEM #15
## NERVOUS
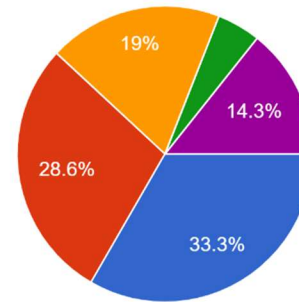


- Very slightly or not at all
- A little
- Moderately
- Quite a bit
- Extremely

**ITEM #18**
**JITTERY**
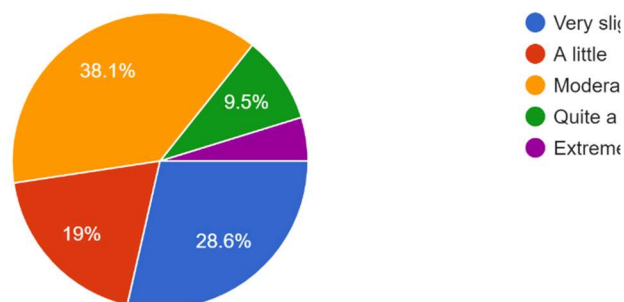


**ITEM #20**
**AFRAID**
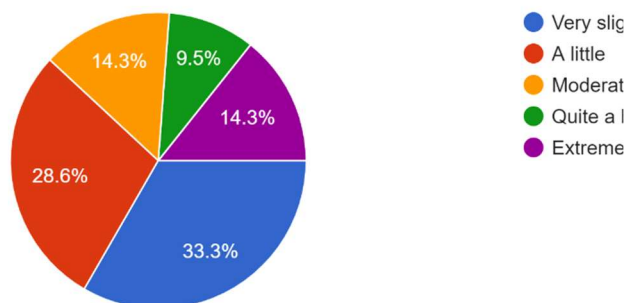


These charts show how these Individuals, after watching a video clip of an Entertainment Show revolving around an emotional outburst of a character stemming from the suicide of a close friend felt and how it affected their mood, be it a positive affect or negative affect.

As it can clearly be observed the results of the study revealed a notable shift in participants' mood following exposure to the video content. Analysis of the PANAS scores indicated a predominantly negative impact on mood among viewers. This finding underscores the potentially distressing nature of media portrayals of mental illness and suggests that such representations may elicit

feelings of sadness, anxiety, or other negative emotions among viewers. These findings align with previous research highlighting the powerful influence of media content on emotional states and suggest the need for greater caution and sensitivity in the depiction of mental health issues in media. Furthermore, the results prompt consideration of strategies for mitigating the potential negative effects of media exposure on viewers' emotional well-being, such as providing content warnings or incorporating more balanced and nuanced representations of mental illness.

Moreover, the observed negative impact on mood brings up significant issues regarding the moral obligation of media producers and creators. While media can serve as a powerful tool for raising awareness and fostering understanding of mental health issues, it also has the potential to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and misconceptions. The findings of this study highlight the need for media professionals to carefully consider the potential impact of their content on viewers' emotional well-being and to strive for accuracy, empathy, and authenticity in their portrayals of mental illness.

## 5. CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, this research serves as a significant contribution to the ongoing discourse surrounding the representation of mental illnesses in media and the subsequent impact on individuals' emotional well-being. Through the meticulous application of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) as a metric for measuring mood, this study has provided nuanced insights into the diverse array of emotional responses evoked by media portrayals of mental health. By scrutinizing these responses, When people interact with media depictions of mental illness, we learn more about the complex mechanisms at work.

The findings of this study underscore the critical importance of critically evaluating and contextualizing media representations of mental health. Media has a profound influence on shaping societal perceptions and attitudes toward mental illness, and inaccuracies or sensationalized portrayals can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and misconceptions. Conversely, responsible and accurate depictions have the potential to foster empathy, understanding, and destigmatization, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and supportive societal landscape for those living with mental health conditions.

Moving forward, it is imperative for media creators, industry professionals, and policymakers to prioritize ethical and authentic representations of mental illness in media content. This necessitates collaboration between mental health advocates, media producers, and content creators to ensure that portrayals are respectful, informed, and reflective of the diverse experiences of individuals with mental health conditions. Moreover, media literacy initiatives should be implemented to empower audiences with the tools to critically analyze and interpret media representations of mental health, thereby mitigating the potential for harmful effects on emotional well-being.

Subsequent investigations ought to persist in examining the complex correlation among media intake, attitudes towards mental health, and personal affective reactions. The long-term impact of media exposure on attitudes about mental health and emotional resilience may be better understood through longitudinal research. Furthermore, qualitative study techniques like focus groups and in-depth interviews may provide a richer understanding of the complex ways that people perceive and internalize media representations of mental illness.

In conclusion, this study underscores the complex interplay between media, mental health, and emotional well-being, highlighting the need for responsible and nuanced representations in media content. We may endeavor to create a more inclusive and supportive societal narrative surrounding mental health by promoting increased awareness, understanding, and empathy.

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