

MENTAL HEALTH PORTRAYAL ON WEB SERIES - BOJACK HORSEMAN

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ABSTRACT

The paper gives a description about the portrayal of depression through digital media specifically a web series called BoJack Horseman. Produced and conceptualised by an American director, the series portrays depression in a the most satirical manner. Based on a hollywood ex-star, BoJack Horseman, the series brings out mental health in the most modest manner. It takes a semi-structure interview approach and analyses the responses gathered. The target age group was from 19 years old to 28 years old youngsters. Moreover, semi-structured interview was conducted to support the hypotheses created. The study confirms the improvement in the portrayal of mental illness by the media specifically web series. Further, the study confirms that the series BoJack Horseman impacted the mindset of youths suffering with depression. A positive impact was been witnessed on the youth crowd.

INTRODUCTION

Growth is the only constant in human life. We, the human beings of this earth, have built and identified everything from scratch. It was about 345 million years ago when humans discovered the use of fire. This event recognized human beings *“as a defining property of intelligence, separating us from other animals.”* (Scott, 2018). And there has been no looking back since that time. From rubbing marble stones for heat generation and hunting for food in the jungles, humans have paved the way to building and living in an era of technological advancement.

Currently, we are living in the Digital Age or the Information Age. Growth is a requirement that is inevitable. It indeed helps us in creating our life much more advanced and easier but these developments also have resulted in negative drawbacks. One of the most recent drawbacks of the current digital age era is the mental health of individual human beings.

Babadi-Akashe et al. (2014) define mental health according to WHO in his paper on the relationship between mental health and mobile addictions among university students *“Mental health according to the World Health Organization is a health condition in which a person knows their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, is fruitful for the community, and is able to make decisions and collective participation.”* An individual has the ability to think, learn and understand one’s emotion and the reactions of another. He/she has been gifted by God the aptitude to maintain a good lifestyle and welfare. But this new emergence has also led to a lot of destructive and harmful effects on human behaviour and mental state.

This development in turn resulted in creating an atmosphere where nil or negligible interactions are visible among family members even if they are sitting together for lunch or friends meeting for a get-together. Quoting Sharma from Klient Solutech (2017) *30 years ago people had time for friends and families. They live and enjoy their life in real-time. At the same time, they are emotional, care for nature and humanity.* But today, this development has resulted in creating a feeling of lonesomeness. *“In terms of psychology, communication technology reduces social relations and the welfare of the individual due to loneliness, depression, and isolation”.* (Babadi-Akashe et al. 2014) and the given phenomena are very much visible in the current generation.

1.1 Mental illness as portrayed by Media:

Mental health illness has been very prominent worldwide for a long time. *“The media teaches us about people with whom we do not routinely interact.”*(Saleh, 2020) Media acts as a bridge to understand and learn about topics that cannot be accessed in individual beings’ life. Earlier media always portrayed mental health as a negative visual. There has been a stigma always revolving around mental illness. As per the study conducted by Ma (2017) *“Mental illnesses are often associated with crimes and violence and still depicted negatively.”* Further research conducted in reference to the media portrayal of mental illness showcased an improvement in the depiction, but a large number of visual media still continued portraying the psychological health of individuals as threatening. The studies by Stout (2004) in Ma’s (2017) paper on how the media covers mental illness claimed that newspaper portrayal of individuals suffering from depression as dangerous had reduced compared to television which still portrayed such patients as unlikable and dangerous.

Studies in the due course of time have witnessed changes in the portrayal of depression. Media has become the bridge for creating change in mind in regards to mental health in the population. Additionally, a change in the representation of looking at people suffering from mental health has also been witnessed. They are seen with many concerned and caring eyes. Importance is given to their past stories and incidents of life which caused them distress. An individual is treated with “*a more sympathetic side to showing mental illness, even when it is the person has committed a crime*”. (Burden, 2017)

1.2 Digital age and web series

The development of the digital world gave us the so-called web series or sitcoms. The term ‘Netflix and Chill’ became a routine for every individual. Netflix came across as a medium that produced series and documentaries talking about the last decade's political achievements to upcoming health and digital development and destruction, respectively.

One of the series available on these streaming services and has very much been appreciated and talked about is BoJack Horseman. An American adult and dark humour animated television series created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg. The show as stated by Mason (2019) is “*very dark and harsh, and the jokes told are dark as well. When put out of context, the jokes may even seem bizarre and inappropriate. However, the subtle and subversive humorous jokes are greatly contrived. They come in puns and gags..*” Based out of Los Angeles, the series revolves around the character of a horse whose name is BoJack and who was in the '90s the most popular and famous actor in Hollywood. His show *Horsin Around* was the highest-rated and loved show of the '90s. With the lost paparazzi and struggles of coming back, the series showcases the struggles BoJack as an individual faces both mentally and physically. The series ensures to express the emotional trauma of BoJack from his life experiences since his childhood – him staying with his parents to his love life and friendships. Harper (2020) in her article on BoJack Horseman's love interest says “*BoJack Horseman is one of the most troubled and depressed fictional characters of all time ...*”

1.3 Web series: Bojack Horseman

Theme of the serial:

BoJack Horseman is a dark humour web series. Created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, the series is an American adult animated web series telecasted on Netflix. It stars the voices of Will Arnett, Amy Sedaris, Alison Brie, Paul F. Tompkins, and Aaron Paul. As Miculan (2016) talks about the theme of the series and says “*The show, like many other comedies, draws humor from several miserable sources such as substance abuse, celebrity culture, and death. However, unlike most comedies, Bojack Horseman has a strong central theme of sadness. While not necessarily about depression in the clinical sense, the show frequently outlines the crushing sadness and self-loathing of three of its five principle characters. This includes discussions over toxic personalities, self-deceit, and a central theme of failing to find fulfillment.*” The complete series revolves around the idea of an individual (in this case, a horse) trying to fight his own inner demons and trying to prove to the universe that he is still the best actor. Additionally, the series also demonstrates various other characters fighting every day with the struggles of life and making it through. The series is a proper mixture of mental dissatisfaction witnessed among real-life individuals or specifically, youngsters. There is no urge of living your life and enjoying the ups & downs of every day.

Character: depression-

BoJack's character is a perfect example of an individual suffering from depression. His character showcases the struggles and sufferings of an individual. BoJack Horseman is a personality who at times is very confident about his decisions and actions. But also very underconfident about confronting his own feelings. He is so disturbed in himself that by the 4th series he is shown as not interested in his own life. He doesn't know what to do the next day and is not keen on watching the early morning sunshine. The series ends showcasing BoJack going through his complete life and being in an imaginary world speaking to all his near and dear ones about life and death. Quoting a phrase of an article by Chaney (2020) “*BoJack's depression, addiction, and worst impulses finally killed him in the most Hollywood of ways, leaving him face down in the pool behind the mansion he used to own ...*” In the last

episode of the season 06, BoJack is serving jail and comes out for one night on Princess Carolyn's wedding but is scared that he might just mess the situation.

No love from parents.

Additionally, his relationship with his parents has been very evidently shown in the series. A childhood with or little no love received from parent's demands attention as he grows. Quoting a paragraph from Chaney's (2020) article talking about the last two episodes of BoJack Horseman gives a clear perception about how BoJack felt about his parents,

"Butterscotch/Secretariat discusses this with BoJack and also, for the first time, admits he really cared about his son. In that moment, the fact that Butterscotch has taken on the form of Secretariat makes perfect, heartbreaking sense. Even when he's barely breathing, BoJack still can't imagine Butterscotch, in his own skin, admitting that he truly loved his son. The closest BoJack's brain can get is to call up the idea of his father, cloaked in the guise of the most famous horse who ever lived."

1.4 Youngsters and BoJack Horseman:

The show when telecasted first on Netflix had not received much appreciation. It was said to be boring. But with every new episode being released, the series was appreciated. Social media platforms of youngsters were filled with appreciative posts and stories stating it as the most relatable web series in terms of mental health depiction. An alcoholic addict, trying to run away from the realities of life by partying and drinking alcohol every day was very much relatable to the young crowd. Being aware of the tasks to be done every day and still ditching those responsibilities because it leads to anxiety and stress – a common phenomenon seen among the young crowd today. Noonan (2018) in her blog on BoJack Horseman states *"From the get-go it was clear that our equine protagonist was hardly a character of compassion and goodwill. Yet as he journeyed through each episode, encountering a string of meaningless flings and a constant state of un-fulfilment numbed by an array of vices; I was greeted by the harrowing realization that there's parts of BoJack resonating in all of us."*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rise in the digital world and introduction of web visuals and social media has led to a massive increase in creating a rift among individuals. Quoting Novella (2020) "Social media can be addictive, can lead to depression and a low self-esteem, and to FOMO (fear of missing out)." People like to 'chill' on social media "through constant interaction, access to live streams of others' lives, and trending content." (2020). Watching web shows and following different video content has resulted in comparing your real life with the reel world. Thus, leading to feeling lonely and looser.

2.1 DEPRESSION IN THE CURRENT WORLD

Depression is one of the most prominent mental health issues prevalent in the current world. As per the study by Friedrich (2017) *"The proportion of the global population living with depression is estimated to be 322 million people—4.4% of the world's population—according to a new report, "Depression and Other Common Mental Disorders: Global Health Estimates," released by the World Health Organization"*. Further, the report by World health organization also mentioned (2017) *"... the number of people in the world living with depression has increased by 18.4% between 2005 and 2015, and depressive disorders were the single largest contributor to nonfatal health loss globally in 2015. Although depression can affect anyone at any point in their lives, it is 1.5 times more common ..."* As per news article by India Today on World Mental Health Day (2019), 'depression will be the single biggest cause of ill health in the world by 2030.

Youths and mobiles

Gen Z first witnessed mobile phones in their early teenage days. They did not own a smartphone and only saw it in the hands of their parents. On the contrary, kids of the millennial generation owned mobile phones by the time they turned 10-year-old. This increase in the usage of mobile phones and introduction of tablets, laptop, etc. has

been considered as a major reason behind decline in psychological well-being among the Gen Z and millennial. Quoting Twenge (2020) from her research paper on US adolescent's mental health and digital media says "... smartphone ownership exceeded 50% by the end of 2012 and reached 81% by 2018. Similarly, daily use of social media increased among teens, from about 50% to more than 80%, and time spent online doubled. Unlike the economic recession, the effects of which have receded, the impact of increased technology use has continued to grow." Another research conducted by Abi-jaoude (2020) on the similar topics states that "An analysis of Australian longitudinal data found that 86% of students owned smartphones in grade 8, increasing to 93% by grade 11, with increased use of social media communication with age."

Furthermore, Quoting a press release on the topic - Mental Health Issues increasing heavily among young adults in the last decade by American Psychiatrist Association – APA (2019) "The rate of individuals reporting symptoms consistent with major depression in the last 12 months increased 52 percent in adolescents from 2005 to 2017 (from 8.7 percent to 13.2 percent) and 63 percent in young adults age 18 to 25 from 2009 to 2017 (from 8.1 percent to 13.2 percent)." A research conducted by Twenge et al (2019) on the topic *Age, Period, and Cohort Trends in Mood Disorder Indicators and Suicide-Related Outcomes in a Nationally Representative Dataset, 2005–2017* is a research paper which identifies the mood disorders faced by youngsters in the age group of 18 to 25 in the recent times and compares it with the past decade youngsters & individuals. The paper constructs result which states that serious psychological distress and suicide related outcome has increased in the millennial compared to the adult's age group of 26 and over.

2010 to current media portrayal of mental illness

Since 2010 the portrayal of depression in media has experienced a drastic change. In comparison to the past, there has been a wider acceptance in media portrayal. Portrayal of "mental illness has evolved over the past decade since the prior research was done." (Parrott & Parrott, 2015). The development of electronic devices led to the creation of a digital space which helped in increasing communication among individuals and hence, leading to everyday conversation, exchange of stories. This phenomenon in turn gave birth to the feeling of comparison. Finally, causing an increase in mental distress.

"The current results are mixed, which perhaps reflects the beginning of a transition toward less stereotypical and simplified mediated representations." observes Scott and Caroline who conducted a research on mental illness portrayal on crime television series in the US. Adding another excerpt from the research paper proves that there has been a major change in the illustration of the characteristics of individuals suffering with mental well-being. "...rather than endorsing phenotypic stereotypes and portraying mentally ill characters as dirty, unattractive, and with poor social standing, the dramas provided a more realistic portrait: anyone, regardless of physical appearance or social standing, may experience mental illness." (Parrott & Parrott, 2015).

Furthermore, the current era has now evolved in such a manner that collaborations between media and health professionals is a new thing. These collaborations are conducted in order to bring out the real struggles of patients and portray it in the correct manner in the entertainment sector. And ensure that the target audience is provided with true facts. Quoting a comment of a story consultant from the research paper of Henderson (2016) "My life is not always dramatic but my condition at times allows me to make a more positive contribution to the work that I do than perhaps other people would do." These story consultants not only help in creating the personality of the mentally ill character but also indulge in the colour being used for the hospital or background of the character, his/her dress up and the kind of food he/she should be eating as someone suffering from psychological distress. "A widespread view is that having members of the cast or production team with experience of mental distress frequently lead to those more nuanced storylines." (Henderson, 2016).

Additionally, a huge improvement is seen in the articles been published on the topic of mental illness since the early 2010. Sensitive headlines with true facts and stories have been shared in the newspapers. World Mental Health Day has been given a higher recognition since the 2016. "Articles published more recently were significantly more likely to have a positive tone, to mention shortage of resources, to quote people with mental illness or mental health experts, and to be less stigmatizing in content." (Whitley & Wang, 2016).

2.3 Web series talking about mental health

Very little research has been conducted in reference to the portrayal of mental health by web series, specifically. Various series have been released showcasing the protagonist suffering from mental health issues such as Schizophrenia, Depression or Anxiety. But most of the research conducted in such a context is in relation to identifying the stereotypes in regard to mental health. S. Parrott & C. Parrott conducted research in 2015 on the portrayal of mental illness in U.S. crime dramas. The research was conducted through quantitative analysis, examining the stereotypes concerning to mental illness in crime-based television series and *its potential influences on those of us living with mental illness in our communities*. (Parrott et al, 2015). Similarly, research conducted in the year 2014 by Hoffner and Cohen on the TV series Monk, examined *perceptions and behaviors related to mental illness*.

Writer of the blog *10 TV Shows That Got Mental Illness (Mostly) Right* (2017) says “a lot of newer shows have been making an effort to “get it right” and show mental illness in a realistic and humanizing way. These shows can evoke some powerful responses in viewers who may be seeing their own struggles accurately represented on screen for the first time.”

The content available online today wishes to speak on the struggles of mental health and give viewers an idea about how to help themselves or individuals suffering around them. While there are various series or shows in the entertainment media talking or at least trying to portray mental well-being, very less research has been conducted on the same idea and, its influence on young crowd.

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

The methodology used in the following paper was semi-structured interviews and questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed by American Psychiatric Association (APA) which had a total of 8 set of questions which are been globally used as tools for research and evaluating the condition of the patient. Youths ranging between 18 to 35 years were taken as a sample for this study. These individuals were beings who had watched the webseries and were ready to share their thought process. The semi-structured interview gave both the subject and researcher a chance to express their view in structured manner.

The result of the questionnaire with a sample number of 100, gave the following result,

- highest numbers of participants are in the age group of 24 to 26-year-old.
- The result sample shows that out of 100 responses 36 individuals i.e. 36.4% have felt sometimes worthless. And 22 respondents have never felt worthless.
- There were a total of 30 participants who said that only sometimes that they felt that they had nothing to look forward to while 21 participants mentioned that they felt so often.
- A total number of 42 participants i.e. 42.4% have felt helpless sometimes.
- 41.4% of participants have responded with the option sometimes when asked if they felt sad. While only 36 participants have said often.
- Among the 98 participants, 34 numbers of participants have answered with sometimes for feeling depressed while 21 participants have responded with often and never, respectively.
- 33.7% which accounts to 33 participants felt unhappy often.
- 29.6% of participants responded with the rare option for the feeling of hopelessness.

Finally, the semi-structured interview analysis helped to support the hypotheses of the study, which is, *Youth suffering or not suffering from depression were not affected by watching the web series BoJack Horseman*.

The sample participants did find the web series, BoJack Horseman, relatable enough to their personal life experiences. They could relate the portrayal of mental distress in the protagonist character with their personal living. Hence, it can be concluded that a major improvement has happened in the portrayal of mental health in the media. Additionally, it also states that BoJack Horseman created an impact on the youth crowd specifically individuals suffering from depression. This impact has been mostly positive and helpful for individuals.

CONCLUSION

Digitalisation has given us a platform to discuss every possible topic concerning the society and making good use of the same is highly required. *Popular drama plays a vital role in the public sphere and in the democratic functioning of society and can help raise critical societal questions while offering alternative perspectives* (Murdock 1999, cited in Henderson 2016). It is an easy way of reaching the hearts of people. In the current world dynamics, every house has a smart TV. And every individual loves to binge-watch a given web series or movie. These dramas can create a huge impact on the lifestyle of people. It can act as a source of communication for the minor groups. As Henderson (2016) notices in her paper '*we can see that certain voices which are marginalised in news media are potentially also silenced in popular mainstream drama.*' These voices are to be heard and talked about.

BoJack Horseman is one among various web series available online which talked about mental distress. But it is the only series which has been highly appreciated by the crowd and has achieved the goal to create awareness. The depiction of BoJack, as someone who had a bad childhood and was not loved by his parents, is a situation that lots of kids face in their life. From being ignorant to the responsibilities towards his love interests to being extremely rude and harsh to his own friends and young kids, the series could create a very relatable image for the viewers.

Mental distress in television drama is a thorny issue and reflects the complicated socio-cultural positioning of what it means to be 'mentally ill' (Signorielli 1989, cited in Henderson 2016). In the current times, mental health is a topic much talked about. It is the correct time for web series to create content around such a topic and spread the word. Though yes, '*it is worth noting that professionals in mainstream television are under considerable public scrutiny. This may restrict the scope of storytelling. It is entirely possible that independent producers working on single drama series awarded greater freedom from the constraints of genre and public service would hold different views and have different practices.*' (Henderson, 2016) This is an important point of view to be noted in regards to the depiction of mental distress.

Web series or television dramas have the chance to change and create an awareness regarding mental health. So why not just do it? Change in the criticism around the content of the story will surely help improve the media depiction.

BoJack Horseman, a dark humour show, has helped people around the world understand the life of a depressed human. The web series gave mentally ill people a reason to not feel alone. It helped them to think of the next day with a big smile and look forward to the successful days ahead.

The research undertaken for this given study might just help to create and provide a platform where story content around mental health will be much appreciated and not criticised. It might help to broaden the understanding of the social meaning of mental health survivors and help to increase the portrayal of mental health in television drama and web series.

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