The Portrayal of Mental Illness through *Bojack Horseman* and *Thirteen Reasons Why*

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Authors note & trigger warning: the following essay contains triggering information regards to substance abuse and details on suicide. Reader discretion is advised.

1.0 Introduction

A toxic characteristic of most television shows that is often not discussed is an inaccurate portrayal of mental illness and allowing characters to get away with destructive behavior. "Well what are you gonna do? Life's a b*tch and then you die, right?" Released on August 22, 2014, Netflix's adult animated comedy show *Bojack Horseman* stars the main character, Bojack, after starring in a popular sitcom, suffers with his popularity slowly deteriorating as he struggles to be picked up for a new show. While the show is somewhat a comedy, and mostly satirical, it does not allow for the characters to slip by without paying with the consequences of their actions. Bojack clearly suffers from severe depression, substance abuse issues, anxiety, and borderline personality disorder, which is accurately portrayed throughout the show.

Mental illness is a very serious, very real issue, and while many TV shows attempt to portray it well, not all pull through as easily. Released on March 31, 2017, Netflix's *13 Reasons Why* portrays mental illness poorly, with misrepresentation of how characters deal with depression, as well as filming and producing the scene in which the character commits suicide. Many teenagers that have outwardly spoken against the show have reported the romanticism of mental health, making this severely harmful for those struggling with mental health issues. The show has been reported to send out dangerous messages that deter teenagers into not seeking help by showing that the school counselor does not believe the victims and does not provide help in any way.

In Bojack Horseman, the portrayal of depression, substance abuse issues, and difficulty maintaining healthy relationships is portrayed more realistically, as well as more appealing, than in other shows such as *13 Reasons Why.* The question being asked in this research is 'How does the portrayal of mental illness in viral TV shows impact viewers?' The research will be

conducted through an examination of the portrayal of general mental illnesses, such as anxiety, depression, and substance abuse issues, and will also be analyzing the suicide scene in which Hannah Baker commits suicide.

1.1 Key Terms

Several key terms must be defined to present the research thoroughly and allow for the same understanding of each term throughout the research.

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines 'depression' as "more than just sadness. People with depression may experience a lack of interest and pleasure in daily activities, significant weight loss or gain, insomnia or excessive sleeping, lack of energy, inability to concentrate, feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt and recurrent thoughts of death or suicide."

The APA defines 'anxiety' as **"**an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure.
People with anxiety disorders usually have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns. They may avoid certain situations out of worry. They may also have physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, dizziness or a rapid heartbeat."

The APA defines 'addictions' as "a chronic disorder with biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors influencing its development and maintenance. About half the risk for addiction is genetic. Genes affect the degree of reward that individuals experience when initially using a substance (e.g., drugs) or engaging in certain behaviors (e.g., gambling), as well as the way the body processes alcohol or other drugs. Heightened desire to re-experience use of the substance or behavior, potentially influenced by psychological (e.g., stress, history of

trauma), social (e.g., family or friends' use of a substance), and environmental factors (e.g., accessibility of a substance, low cost) can lead to regular use/exposure, with chronic use/exposure leading to brain changes."

The APA defines 'borderline personality disorder (BPD)' as "a severe mental health condition characterized by emotional instability, impulsive and self-damaging behaviors, and stormy interpersonal relationships"

Romanticism is defined in the context of romanticizing mental illness for a more accurate definition. NAMI (National Institution for Mental Illness) associates the term 'romanticism' as synonymous with 'sensationalizing', which is defined as such: "might encourage others to view mental illness as something that is 'tragically beautiful.' Additionally, sensationalism can lead people to believe that mental illness is just a part of who they are, and that therapy is a 'sham.'"

2.0 Netflix's *Bojack Horseman*

The hit Netflix series, *Bojack Horseman*, conveys important messages about mental health and the stigmatization that surrounds it. While other television shows have addressed mental health before. *Bojack Horseman* is the go-to show when addressing the portrayal of what certain disorders truly look like. The show never presents any concrete solutions to the issues that the characters face, instead it shows the consequences that the characters are forced to face due to their actions.

Raphael Bob-Waksberg, the director and creator of *Bojack Horseman*, was interviewed by a YouTube Oscar Nominations predictor, GoldDerby. When asked about his most proud part of *Bojack Horseman*, he stated "The thing that I am most proud of about Bojack Horseman [is] the effect it has on people and the ways in which it helps people talk about their own feelings. To

their loved ones, or their therapists perhaps, the ways in which the show has encouraged them to get help for their problems, to feel less alone, to give them a language to articulate the feelings that they've had." The way in which mental health was portrayed was completely intentional, and Bob-Waksberg did a beautiful job of representing it just right.

2.1 Bojack

While Bojack could be considered the protagonist of the show, he's not a good guy (or horse) by any means. Bojack suffers from severe depression, anxiety, and substance abuse issues including drug use and alcoholism. It is clear that he does not hold himself accountable, and others pay the consequences of his lack of responsibility. However, despite this, he never pities himself or blame anyone else.

The show is centered around Bojack, even when other characters are going through worse situations. The slow deterioration of Bojack's mental health is prevalent as the show moves through seasons. Bojack expresses feelings that a large percentage of society feels, and instead of normalizing mental health issues, the show finds comfort in making sure that fans are not alone. A notable quote that Bojack said in Season 2, Episode 12, "My point is, I don't understand how people live. It's amazing to me that some people wake up and say, 'YEAH! Another day, let's do it', how do they do it? I don't know." This quote specifically had resonated with many viewers. Mirchi Play, an entertainment website aimed to recommend shows and movies, spoke on this quote, stating that "Depression is a disease that makes the smallest things, even getting out of bed, a struggle." (Subramanian 2020)

The representation of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse is not romanticized by Bojack's character in any way. His character represents the most toxic traits of these illnesses and exhibit that it isn't easy to get away with anything, regardless of initial intentions.

In Bojack's early show, Horsin' Around, he plays the horse father of a few human children, one of which is Sarah Lynn. Sarah Lynn looks up to Bojack during the show, outside of the show, and later on when they become friends again. She exhibits a major substance abuse issue, and most of the scenes she's in, she is not sober. Flashbacks that occur in the later seasons prove that her substance abuse issues stem from when Bojack's started as well, from when his show was being filmed and he was offered a bottle of vodka. Sarah Lynn got her hands on the bottle, and her substance abuse snowballed from there. Most of the scenes in which Bojack and Sarah Lynn are together they go on extreme drug benders, proving that Bojack is not a good influence on Sarah Lynn, and vice versa. Sarah Lynn ends up dying on one of their benders, where Bojack runs away when he discovers she's unconscious and runs away to make it look like he wasn't with her. He blames himself for her death, and once the media discovers that he was there, they blame him too. This move makes him extremely selfish. His agent, Princess Carolyn, assists him in his interviews about her death, making sure that he doesn't confess to being the reason she died. Despite all this, he still eventually owns up to being there, inevitably being part of the reason she died.

Bojack was not a good character and treated all of his relationships poorly in the show. However, the way that was portrayed through the eyes of Bob-Waksberg was well thought out and clearly was intentional. The representation of Bojack Horseman was perfect and intentional.

2.2 Diane Nguyen

Diane Nguyen is one of the few characters that the show portrays as getting better. While it's obvious from the beginning that she struggles with severe depression, but her friendship with Bojack seemingly makes that worse. At the beginning of the series, she was hired as a ghostwriter to Bojack's autobiography, *One Trick Horse*. Her compassion and empathy allow her to be kind and caring towards Bojack, as well as other characters, such as Bojack's roommate Todd and her husband who she later divorces, Mr. Peanutbutter. Despite her kindness, Bojack uses her and treats her horribly, making her feel guilty and unhappy for things that were not necessarily her fault. Bojack violates almost all of her basic naturistic values, and she still stands by him for the first half of the show. She clearly has high expectations for herself, and when she does not reach them, she blames herself.

The part of the show where it truly shows how beautifully accurate Diane's character is is when she begins medication for her anxiety and depression. While she gains a noticeable amount of weight, as per the side effects of medication, she is with a new guy, and is noticeably happier and less anxious. She takes the medication, despite her not liking the way her body looks, after her boyfriend in season 6 and her therapist encourage her to after realizing that she dwells in her depression.

Diane was quite possibly the biggest growth of a character in the entire series. In the last scene, of the last episode, Diane and Bojack are having a very insightful conversation after Bojack neared death, and Diane says "I think there are people that help you become the person that you end up being, and you can be grateful for them, even if they were never meant to be in your life forever." (S6E16)

3.0 Netflix's *13 Reasons Why*

Netflix based the show, 13 Reasons Why, on the book written by Jay Asher. Right from the get-go, the show attempts to depict suicide and depression through the character, Hannah Baker, who writes thirteen cassette tapes, with each being about a different person, labeling them the reasons that she ended up committing suicide. The show ended in 2020 after four seasons because it reached a "natural conclusion to the show", according to the Standard, however many that are against the show and its misrepresentation of depression claim that the show ended because of how poorly the producers depicted mental health.

A few sources note that that *Thirteen Reasons Why* completely neglected to follow the national recommendations for depicting suicide. Some of these recommendations include "show that help is available", and "avoid showing or describing the details about suicide methods", according to Action Alliance. The specific scene that stood out to most viewers was the scene where Hannah Baker, the show's focus character, commits suicide in a gruesome three-minute-long scene. The producers did not hold back – for those three minutes, Hannah's suicide is shown in full view, as she cuts her wrists and bleeds in the bathtub until her mother finds her unconscious. This caused an uproar in viewers all over the nation, so much so that Netflix ended up removing the scene from the show, over two years later when the third season was released. Netflix released a statement on Twitter, stating that "As we prepare to launch season three later this summer, we've been mindful about the ongoing debate around the show. So on the advice of medical experts, including Dr. Christine Moutier, chief medical officer at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, we've decided with creator Brian Yorkey and the producers to edit the scene in which Hannah takes her own life from season one", provided by Forbes.

3.1 Hannah Baker

Hannah Baker is notorious amongst teens for being the go to reference when they joke about suicide, such as “this was my 13th reason” or “I’m going to pull a Hannah Baker”. However, with these quotes comes context. The scene that these jokes reference is the scene in which Hannah Baker commits suicide in her bathtub by slitting her wrists. This scene was found incredibly intrusive, so much so that Netflix ended up taking down the scene and it’s no longer available for viewing. The US National Alliance for Mental Illness denounced this scene, disagreeing with many film critics that it was not ‘authentic graphic scenes’ like some claim it is.

The show depicts Hannah, a high school teen, who recorded thirteen tapes with each one being about a different person that assisted in her reason for committing suicide. After her death, she is shown love, grace, and support by all of her peers that did not initially show her this. This portrayal of the romanticism of suicide is extremely dangerous, and feeds into the ‘I’d be better off dead’ thoughts when it comes to depression. Suicide does not lead to people showing love to those who died like the show portrays with Hannah. Hannah is portrayed as a definition of her mental illness, not a well-rounded character that struggled with depression, and *Thirteen Reasons Why* seems to do this with most, if not all of the characters in the show.

A quote that many teenagers found disingenuous was “Hannah’s life was no worse than anyone else’s. She was just a drama queen who wanted attention”, which was said on many of the tapes. This provides a dangerous outlook on the romanticism of depression, perpetuating that only external factors are needed to struggle with depression, as said by ISSIA Magazine. The dangerous portrayal and romanticism of Hannah Bakers situation is not the best way to appeal to teenagers.

4.0 How the separate portrayals of mental health compare

Bojack Horseman and Hannah Baker are two characters in a show that both heavily portray mental illness, but Bojack Horseman portrays mental health beautifully, while Hannah Baker in Thirteen Reasons Why romanticizes depression and suicide. The question of 'How does the portrayal of mental illness in viral TV shows impact viewers?' can be answered through these two shows.

A study published in JAMA Internal Medicine further proves the negative impacts of the poor representation in *Thirteen Reasons Why*. John W. Ayers, Ph.D. found that the *Thirteen Reasons Why* suicide media coverage correlated with an increase in suicide attempts. US Blasting News reported this study, stating "Tracking the trends from the series' debut on March 31 through April 18 by using **Google Trends**, the researchers compared the online searches for the word 'suicide**'** throughout the 19 days since the series was released to the occurrence of searches that would normally occur without the show. Based on their findings, **suicide-related searches** rose by 15 to 44 percent following the series' release." (Blasting News 2017).

Contrary to this, Bojack Horseman's portrayal has inspired viewers to be more open about their mental health. Cassidy Cartwright, a digital media communications student at Gannon University, states "I think that some of the portrayals are extra dramatic, but I think the writers do that to make hard issues easier to talk about," Cartwright said. "I also think the way the anxiety and depression are dramatized makes it easier to relate to. We tend to be drawn to media that we find relatable in order for us to cope with the people and the world around us."

The difference in portrayals is clear, and viewers have been affected by the way that Netflix has gone about the individual series. Therefore, the results and conclusions of this research is plain and obvious: graphic portrayal of mental illness, such as suicide scenes, should never be allowed in media at all. Suicide rates increased because of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, while mental health awareness grew because of *Bojack Horseman.*

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