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Bakalářská práce

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**The apt portrayal of mental illness in BoJack Horseman**

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Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Ivan Čipkár, Ph. D

## Čestné prohlášení

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## Annotation

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<b>Název práce:</b>	Výstižné vyobrazení duševních nemocí v seriálu BoJack Horseman
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<b>Zvolený typ práce:</b>	Výzkumná práce
<b>Anotace práce:</b>	Bakalářská práce se zabývá vyobrazením duševních nemocí v televizním seriálu BoJack Horseman. Přehled literatury zkoumá obecné vyobrazení duševních nemocí v médiích, dále se práce zabývá tématy, týkající se duševních nemocí, které jsou obsaženy v seriálu s cílem zjistit, zda jsou duševní nemoci vyobrazeny realisticky, přesně a vhodně.
<b>Klíčová slova:</b>	BoJack Horseman, duševní nemoci, vyobrazování v médiích
<b>Anotace v angličtině:</b>	The bachelor thesis deals with the depiction of mental illness in a television series BoJack Horseman. The literature review explores how mental illness is generally depicted in media. Then, the themes regarding mental illness that are conveyed within the series are explored to evaluate whether mental illness is depicted realistically, accurately, and appropriately.
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# Table of Contents

<b>1 Introduction</b>	6
<b>2 Literature Review</b>	8
2.1 Introduction to Media Depiction of Mental Health	8
2.2 Media Depiction of Mental Illness in Fiction	8
2.3 Media Depiction of Mental Illness in Real-Life Context	9
2.4 Glamorization and Diminishment of Mental Illness	10
<b>2.5 Specific Example of Negative Television Depiction</b>	11
2.6 The Impact of Negative Media Depiction	13
2.7 Responsible and Accurate Media Depictions of Mental Illness	14
<b>3 Analysis of the Protagonist</b>	16
3.1. BoJack’s Childhood, Adulthood, and Family	16
3.1.1 Overview of BoJack’s Childhood	16
3.1.2 BoJack’s Adulthood	17
3.2 The Effect on BoJack’s Relationships	18
<b>4 Mental Illness and Suicide Depiction</b>	20
4.1 Empathetic, Complex Characters and Storytelling	20
4.2 Treatment and Recovery	21
4.2.1 Therapy	21
4.2.2 Medication	22
4.2.3 Rehabilitation	22
4.3 Realistic and Accurate Portrayal of Mental Illness	23
4.3.1 Trauma and Intergenerational Trauma	23
4.3.2 Access to Character’s Raw Thoughts	24
4.3.3 Addiction and Substance Abuse	24
4.4 The Depiction of Suicide	25
4.4.1 Overview of the Suicide Depiction	25
4.4.2 Evaluation of the Suicide Depiction	26
<b>5 The Theme of Change</b>	28
5.1 The Attempts to Change	28
5.2 The Finale of BoJack Horseman	28
<b>6 Potential Impact on the Audience and Feedback</b>	30
6.1 Feedback from the Audience	30
6.1 The Creator’s Thoughts and Intentions	30
<b>7 Conclusion</b>	32
<b>8 Bibliography</b>	34

# 1 Introduction

*"Every day, it gets a little easier.  
But you gotta do it every day. That's the hard part."  
(Season 2, Episode 12)*

*BoJack Horseman* is an American television show written by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, released on the Netflix streaming platform in 2014. Six seasons, and years later, the show aired its final episode in January of 2020. Even though it is an animated show, it explores themes such as addiction, relationships, and mental illness, therefore, it may not necessarily be appropriate for younger audience. Furthermore, it contains dark humour, and thus is labelled as a comedy. It is a uniquely written story; the universe of *BoJack Horseman* consists of ordinary humans, but also animals who act human while adhering to their animal instincts. The purpose of these humanoid animals is to report on social problems in a humorous way (Sergeant, 2020). There are numerous episodes, where topics such as feminism, sexual assault, and abortion rights are discussed. Upon doing so, the show maintains its humor, while also being quite morally ambiguous about said topics, especially BoJack's decision and actions, which are touched upon in the thesis.

To introduce the main character more closely, BoJack Horseman is an actor in his fifties who became famous and rich in his youth through his main role in a television show *Horsin' Around*. The well-known saying states "money doesn't buy happiness," which perfectly applies to BoJack, or in general, to mental illness, because despite BoJack's financial and fame status, he still struggles with mental health issues that no amount of money would be able to fix. As Enlow (2017) agrees, *"BoJack's wealth and fame give him endless privilege — but not a vaccination against depression."* The show offers a unique perspective of a person suffering with mental illness, as well as of the impact of his behaviour and actions on his family and friends.

The television show *BoJack Horseman* is not, however, solely a story about a character and his mental struggles, but rather a powerful narrative that tells stories of numerous well-developed characters. It is undeniably a great approach to storytelling given that the show does not only serve to be relatable to people with mental health problems for them, but it is also intended to entertain the general, but diverse audience with its brilliant story and complex characters while dealing with serious issues such as mental illness in a respectful manner. As

the creator of the show clarified in an interview, the show is supposed to depict mental illness frankly and with respect (Enlow, 2017).

The aim of the thesis is to argue that *BoJack Horseman* portrays mental illness in a realistic, accurate but also appropriate manner. The objectives of this research are, firstly, to explore how mental illness is portrayed in media, secondly by reviewing existing literature and research papers on this topic, to identify the themes and messages related to mental health that are conveyed within the context of the show, thirdly, to explore how mental illness is depicted in the series, and lastly, to assess how the show contributes to destigmatization of mental health related problems. By achieving set objectives, the thesis aims to contribute to the somewhat limited research of the depiction of mental illnesses in media. The first chapter focuses on the analysis of various research papers that evaluate the general depiction of mentally ill people in media. The following chapters analyse the television show *BoJack Horseman* and evaluate the manner in which mental disorders are depicted in the show based on the research papers examined.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction to Media Depiction of Mental Health**

This chapter examines several research papers to help estimate how people with mental health issues are depicted in different media, including newspapers, television, and new media such as blogs and articles online. Subsequently, it explores the potential impact of these depictions on both the viewers and readers who are dealing with mental health problems, as well as the individuals without any mental health issues who interact with said media. As mentioned previously, the research in this area is quite limited; As Antwi (2021) agrees, "*For mental health to be characterized accurately, an extensive amount of research needs to be done.*" These gaps in research indicate a necessity for a more in-depth understanding of how mental health conditions are depicted in different forms of media, as it creates an unbalanced and incomplete review of them.

According to a study conducted in the years 2008 and 2016, a positive change in the number of newspaper coverages that report on mental illness in a manner that opposes stigma has been discovered, alongside a corresponding decline in articles that do so in a stigmatizing manner (Anderson et al., 2018, p. 4). More specifically, fifty percent of analyzed articles in 2016 were considered anti-stigmatizing compared to thirty one percent in 2008. (Anderson, et al., 2018, p. 4). It is apparent that there is progress in news coverage as they may adopt more considerate ways of reporting on mental illness. In nearly all categories in this research paper, there have been improvements as most of them including "strange behaviour," "danger to others," or "pejorative language" decreased in the percentage of frequency (Anderson, et al., 2018, p. 4).

But it can be said that there have been improvements in television shows and books as well; recent releases have characters who depict living with mental health problems more precisely (Tegar, 2021). This is undeniably a great starting point for media to depict mental illness realistically and respectfully, however, there are still gaps in the research regarding these recent releases as Tegar (2021) confirms: "*The depiction of mental illness is still not enough in the TV industry.*"

### **2.2 Media Depiction of Mental Illness in Fiction**

Despite the somewhat insufficient research carried out on this topic, the existing media that focus on mental disorders have the tendency to display mental illness negatively. As Wahl

(1992, p. 343) suggests, "...the information provided by the mass media tends to be unfavorable and inaccurate..." Moreover, in media, characters with mental illnesses were often described as "confused, aggressive, dangerous, and unpredictable," while adjectives with positive denotation were not as common (Wahl 1992, p. 345). This imbalance in the choice of words demonstrates the bias to attribute negative traits to mentally ill people rather than positive ones. Furthermore, as mentioned before, it negatively contributes to the unfavorable depiction of people who suffer from mental illness in media. A similar issue has also been identified with Disney movies, where characters who are mentally ill are often victims of mockery, which may lead to children adopting derogatory words to describe these characters (Johnson and Walker, 2021, p. 4).

In line with this argument, Wahl (1992, p. 345-346) states that characters with mental health conditions are often unlikable, additionally, they have the tendency to be bad characters. To elaborate on this statement, a research paper from 1980 reported that seventy percent of characters who were characterized as mentally ill acted violently (Wahl, 1992, p. 346). Ten years later, another study reported that seventy-two percent of mentally ill characters exhibited violence in their behavior (Wahl, 1992, p. 346). Over the years, the number has remained mostly stable, with a slight increase of two percent. Nevertheless, the number of characters who suffer from mental illness that tend to be violent is quite staggering. Given the essentially limited research, the information about the cause of this phenomenon remains unclear. Hence it can only be argued that this misconception could be rooted in history, in which people who displayed strange or unacceptable behaviour were often labeled as mentally ill. Another motive for creators of media, especially entertainment-focused media, to display mentally ill characters as violent or generally problematic, might be to attract attention and cause a reaction in the viewers.

### **2.3 Media Depiction of Mental Illness in Real-Life Context**

So far, the depiction of mentally ill characters concerned fictional characters. However, similar bias is often applied to real people, as readers of newspapers feel safer thinking that a person was killed by a person with mental health problems rather than knowing they died, for example, in a robbery (Stuart, 2006, p. 102). These misconceptions may lead people to form their opinions through discriminatory beliefs, and potentially, it may negatively influence them to avoid people with mental illnesses, who may then feel isolated or separated from society.

Additionally, people may feel unsafe interacting with mentally ill people, assuming they may also be violent as they are described in media.

There is, however, evidence that most people who are struggling with a mental disorder never engage in any violent behavior, in fact, they are at a higher risk of being victims of such behavior (Stuart, 2006, p. 102). These assumptions vilify people who suffer from mental illness as they persuade readers to wrongly assume that mentally ill people are more dangerous when they are, in fact, more vulnerable than them, which is certainly unfair. To be more specific, a study concluded that people with mental health problems commit somewhere between three to five percent of the crimes of violence, however, their likelihood of becoming the victims in these situations is more than ten times larger (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023).

Furthermore, there has been a misconception in media about mass shootings and mass murder being associated with mental illness. However, only about five percent of mass shootings are a result of individuals with mental health problems (Girgis, 2022). This is yet another negative stereotype that people with mental health problems tend to be associated with. This is not only harmful to them, but also to the audience who interacts with media that report on mass shootings, because they may engage in comparable behavior (Girgis, 2022).

Lastly, newspapers sometimes exploit the inappropriate behavior of mentally ill individuals to dramatize the titles of articles to hook the audience's attention (Stuart, 2006, p. 101). Such practices show an ethical problem in certain newspapers because they are partially responsible for the ongoing negative stereotypes associated with mentally ill people, as well as for the negative representation of them in media. It can go as far as hindering the acceptance of people dealing with mental illnesses by society.

## **2.4 Glamorization and Diminishment of Mental Illness**

One of the main issues of media depiction of mental illness is romanticization, also sometimes referred to as glamorization. Romanticization and glamorization express idealization, thus an unrealistic and idealized perspective of certain elements, in this context, mental illness. Antwi (2021) states that *"Even though we're entering a more accepting era, topics on mental health issues are still seen as taboo and lead to glamorization."* Moreover, as St Martins (2023) claims: *"Mental illnesses are often depicted as something mysterious and edgy, appealing to young, impressionable audiences."*

Glamorization leads to an inaccurate depiction of mental illness, most importantly, an incomplete one, because media often pick certain symptoms and present them as interesting or as something one may desire. This may include depicting characters as they engage in risky behaviors or activities making it seem fun, exploiting depression for artistic purposes such as writing music, and romanticizing paleness or other appearance aspects associated with illness. By ignoring other symptoms, they underestimate the suffering of the individuals who battle mental illness. For example, when depression is portrayed simply as sadness, it may lead to people thinking that they might suffer from depression as well if they experience sadness. In reality, they are simply not aware of the complexity of depression, or other mental health problems. This may also lead to people self-diagnosing themselves incorrectly based on the incompletely depicted symptoms in popular media. The problem does not inherently lie in self-diagnosis but in an incorrect one due to the glamorization of mental illnesses.

Similarly, another related problem is the diminishment of mental illness as people who suffer from mental health problems may be told to "man up" or "push through it." For instance, people who suffer from depression may be labeled as sad, and anxiety may just be referred to as stress. Generally, the struggles are not taken seriously, which may discourage people from seeking help. Johnson and Walker (2021, p. 1) state that the cause of the downplaying of mental illness is likely given by the *"invisible nature of these conditions."* They also claim that the invisibility of mental illnesses is often the reason why people do not empathize with individuals who suffer from mental illness as much as they do with individuals with visible physical injuries (Johnson and Walker 2021, p. 1). One of the ways to illuminate this issue is to spread awareness about it. Therefore, it is important to report on mental illness and educate people to eliminate the glamorization of mental illness.

## **2.5 Specific Example of Negative Television Depiction**

To effectively understand negative depictions in television shows, it is necessary to include specific examples of such media, which may include *Joker*, *American Horror Story*, and *13 Reasons Why*. The Netflix show *13 Reasons Why* is one of the most popular shows regarding mental illness. However, instead of depicting mental illness realistically, it featured certain scenes that had to be removed due to its violently graphic content after receiving backlash from the audience. Moreover, a content warning has been added at the beginning of each episode as well. The show ignores and disregards numerous guidelines on reporting on suicide provided by Gould (2006, p. 215-216) by not considering the following:

1. *Do not present suicide as a reasonable way of problem solving.*
2. *Avoid providing a detailed description of method and site.*
3. *Indicate that suicide is most often a fatal complication of different types of mental illness, many of which are treatable.*

Before Hannah's death, she records thirteen tapes of thirteen reasons why she made the decision to commit suicide. In addition, each tape is dedicated to a person who contributed to her death and the characters then discuss who is to blame as she says in the last tape "*Some of you care, none of you cared enough*" (13 Reasons Why, Season 1, Episode 13) This can be taken as a suicide note, which is then explored in the series in order to inform the viewers about the past. Reporting on Suicide (n. d.) mentions the necessity of not "*Sharing the content of a suicide note.*" However, this method of storytelling breaks the rule because the content of the tapes is shared among the characters. Then, the second rule is broken by the show featuring a violent suicide scene that depicts both the method, the location, and also the aftermath; her parents finding her unconscious. The episode was removed from the series two years after the show's release in 2017 due the negative reactions from the viewers. Lastly, the third rule is ignored because as Srivastava et al. (2018, p. 3) state, "*Suicide never occurs due to a single factor or event, but is the result of a complex interaction of a number of factors and often there is a background of psychosocial problems*" This is not the case for *13 Reasons Why*, because her suicide is seen as a result of bullying or poor treatment from her friends and classmates. As Antwi (2021) agrees, "*Baker's suicide eventually loses its importance and she is painted as someone who committed suicide as a form of revenge and left the tapes behind to guilt-trip her peers.*" Moreover, it is never mentioned whether Hannah suffered from psychological problems.

Instead, Reporting on Suicide (n.d.) suggests taking the opposite approach as the details regarding the location, suicide note, and method should stay broad. A study conducted by Bridge et al. (2019, p. 236-243) sought to find a connection between the show and suicide rates, and it compared the rates of suicide before the show was released with those in the month after its release. The results discovered a 28.9 % rise in suicides, particularly in individuals between the ages of ten to seventeen in the USA (Bridge, et al., 2019, p. 238). It is debatable whether it was directly caused by the show or a different element. However, despite the acknowledgment of this limitation, the researchers concluded that "*The release of 13 Reasons Why was associated with a significant increase in monthly suicide rates among US youth aged 10 to 17 years*" (Bridge, et al., 2019, p. 236).



In the show, Hannah also seeks help from the school's counselor but after sharing her problems, the counselor is rather dismissive and unhelpful asking inappropriate questions regarding her problem. Hannah is upset with his attitude and his final advice to "move on." Later in the series, one of the students comes to talk to the counselor about Hannah. The counselor says: *"There's no way to know why she did what she did"* to which the student responds: *"Before she died, Hannah recorded 13 reasons why she killed herself and you're number 13"* (13 Reasons Why, Season 1, Episode 13). This may discourage people watching the series from seeking help as they may assume it would be pointless because it is depicted as such. It is necessary for a show with a target audience that consists of young people to be safe and promote helpful approaches to dealing with problems, one of which is promoting the idea that asking for professional help is worth it.

## **2.6 The Impact of Negative Media Depiction**

As anticipated, there are consequences of negative media depiction. People who suffer from mental illness are likely to deny their symptoms and refuse treatment, and they may have difficulty sticking to their treatment due to exposure to media with negative depictions (Stuart, 2006, p. 103). While vilifying mentally ill people negatively affects both mentally ill people and people without any mental health problems who consume media, glamorizing people with mental disorders is not a valid approach to the depiction of mental health problems either, as it may have comparable results; in this case, downplaying mental illness that they suffer from and diminishing the struggles associated with it.

A survey comprised of slightly over four hundred respondents aimed to test the impact of television's depictions on the viewers. The results revealed that people tend to refuse to admit that they are impacted by media depictions, as sixty-five percent of them expressed that their opinions on mental health problems are not impacted by television. On the other hand, fifty-eight percent of them agreed that the general opinions on mental disorders are influenced by watching television (Diefenbach, West, 2007, p. 192-193). It is apparent that negative images in media harm both the consumers, as they may feel threatened when interacting with mentally ill people due to the impact of consumption of media infused with negative stereotypes, and people who struggle with their mental health that may consequently feel isolated from society and discouraged from interacting with other people. Furthermore, it can negatively impact their self-esteem and cause them to deny their illness or to refuse to seek professional help.

While media should be held responsible for such practices, it is essential to consider both sides of this issue because readers may lack media literacy and critical thinking to fact-check the information to estimate its accuracy. A mental health care organisation St Martins (2023) agrees that the people who interact with media should try critically evaluating possible misconceptions reported by the media. Nevertheless, as West and Diefenbach (2007, p. 193) state, media should aim to "...*alleviate rather than contribute to this problem.*" It is unacceptable for media to purposefully use misleading titles to engage reader's interest or not to provide their readers with unbiased information.

## **2.7 Responsible and Accurate Media Depictions of Mental Illness**

The question rises on how characters with mental health problems should be depicted in media. When reporting about mental health-related problems, Srivastava et al. (2018, p. 4) state that the following should be considered as these aspects and other can help create a realistic and accurate idea of living with mental illness. Moreover, it helps reduce the stigma about mental illness.

1. *Encouraging people with mental illness to seek help,*
2. *Offering hope to persons with mental disorders, humanizing mental illness,*
3. *Give accurate information about psychiatric disorders,*

Moreover, it is important to use suitable terminology, thus abstain from using phrases such as "*happy pills*" for medication used to treat mental illness or other pejorative words to describe people with mental illness such as "*psycho*" or "*schizo*" (Srivastava et al., 2018, p. 4). Furthermore, it may also be beneficial for writers and other content creators to discuss these issues with mental health professionals who can help them avoid harmful terminology and instead, ensure they report on these issues accurately. A specific example of harmful terminology would be a title that states that the victim "*jumped from a building*" (Srivastava et al., 2018, p. 3). Instead, when reporting on suicide, the specific method should be omitted, and so should the remaining details about the situation itself such as the location or images of the person (Srivastava et al., 2018, p. 3).

However, the existence of stereotypes is not fully the responsibility of those who write articles or in general, create content in media. Viewers, readers, and listeners of said content have a great impact on the spread of these stereotypes as well. One way to be more respectful towards these people is by using person-first language (PFL). It is, therefore, recommended to

refer to people as "men with depression," or "people with anxiety," rather than "depressed men" or "anxious people." Using appropriate terminology can be helpful as it helps avoid dehumanization and stigmatization of individuals (Wooldridge, 2023). Moreover, the same rules apply to the consumers of media; using proper terminology while also critically evaluating the information to avoid spreading misinformation and stereotypes.

## 3 Analysis of the Protagonist

### 3.1. BoJack's Childhood, Adulthood, and Family

#### 3.1.1 Overview of BoJack's Childhood

Firstly, his mother, Beatrice Horseman, maintains a difficult relationship with BoJack and is verbally abusive to him. However, it is crucial to note that her childhood is traumatic as well; when her brother Crackerjack dies, Beatrice's mother is grieving his death so deeply that her husband lobotomizes her. After the lobotomy, she makes Beatrice swear she would never love anyone as much as she loved her son, Crackerjack. This moment is significant because she adheres to this promise even after meeting her future husband, Butterscotch Horseman, with whom she accidentally becomes pregnant and has BoJack. She marries Butterscotch solely because of their son, despite her unhappiness. Throughout the series, it is apparent that BoJack is a burden to his parents, for instance, in the scene, where his mother says: *"You ruined me, BoJack... You better grow up to be something great to make up for all the damage you've done"* (Season 2, Episode 1). She is blaming her roughly six-year-old son for being miserable.

His father, Butterscotch Horseman, is not satisfied in the marriage either, mostly due to his unsuccessful career as a writer along with the pressure to provide for the family, which in his situation is a problem. Then, he cheats on Beatrice with their maid, who gets pregnant as well. He is bitter and resentful, and he often quarrels with Beatrice. However, Butterscotch is not given as much screen time as Beatrice. Instead, when young, BoJack seeks a father figure somewhere else; he enjoys watching television, and a famous athlete Secretariat becomes his role model, which carries with BoJack throughout the show as he is later given the opportunity to play his character in a movie about him. The show effectively captures the unconscious decision to seek a different father figure as his father is emotionally unavailable.

There are numerous instances of his parents being abusive and neglectful. One such instance is when BoJack catches his father cheating on Beatrice, again, this time with his assistant at work. Butterscotch gives BoJack his first alcoholic drink, and later, he tells him that his mother would be disappointed in both of them and suggests keeping that night a secret. A similar story is of BoJack's first time smoking a cigarette; as a young child, he is watching television and sees his idol Secretariat smoke. Subsequently, he grabs a cigarette lying on the coffee table, but his mother catches him smoking and commands him to finish the cigarette.

BoJack starts crying and asks her whether he is being punished for stealing or smoking, she coldly replies, *"I'm punishing you for being alive"* (Season 2, Episode 9).

### 3.1.2 BoJack's Adulthood

Even when BoJack gets his first role in the television show *Horsin' Around* and becomes famous, his mother does not take pride in him. Even though she goes to see his performance, she comments on the show: *"Well, it wasn't Ibsen"* (Season 2, Episode 1). BoJack reacts to her comment to which she responds, *"I'm sorry. Did you need a compliment?"* (Season 2, Episode 1). She later proceeds to call him a clown, to which BoJack responds with: *"You've always been a wonderful pillar of support"* (Season 2, Episode 1). BoJack's negative childhood experiences continue to affect him as an adult, as he never receives love as a child. Moreover, he takes his mother's criticism personally, which can be seen in an interview about his performance in *Horsin' Around*, where he comments on the show saying: *"It's not Ibsen"* (Season 1, Episode 1). While it may seem irrelevant, it shows that BoJack remembers the hurtful comments his mother says to him, and he internalizes many of them as well. Despite BoJack becoming "something great when he grows up," like his mother wants him to, he never receives any appreciation from his mother and that may be the reason why he is filled with self-hatred. Ferguson (2022) claims that dismissive or neglective parents and abuse in childhood are possible causes for the *"approval-seeking behaviors in adults,"* which directly applies to BoJack as he deeply desires approval and validation as an adult.

Later, Beatrice is diagnosed with dementia, and she experiences memory issues; she does not remember most of her life, including the promise to her mother to never love anyone so deeply. She possesses a baby toy that she cares for and shows her love for as well. This is hurtful to BoJack because he never receives such treatment as a child, and not even as an adult. However, it demonstrates that Beatrice might have been a good mother if it were not for her traumatic childhood or additionally, her regretful marriage with Butterscotch. Despite Beatrice's difficult childhood, it does not excuse her for being a neglectful parent to BoJack as she partially admits to him in a phone call that it is not solely his fault for being the way he is: *"I'm sorry...It's not just you, you know. Your father and I, we..."* (Season 2, Episode 1). This is the only instance where Beatrice reflects and finally takes certain responsibility for BoJack's misery.

Eventually, Beatrice dies in a nursing home and BoJack gives a eulogy about his relationship with his mother at her funeral. He states that his entire life up to this point, he had

always waited for his mother to show that she cared about him: *"Even though your parents aren't what you need them to be... at any moment they might surprise you with something... wonderful. I kept waiting for that, the proof that even though my mother was a hard woman, deep down, she loved me and cared about me... Even now, I find myself waiting"* (Season 5, Episode 6). He expresses his disappointment because he had always had a glimmer of hope that his parents loved him, but now that both are dead, he realizes that he will never receive the love from them he so deeply desires, as he says: *"Suddenly, you realize you'll never have the good relationship you wanted"* (Season 5, Episode 6). The show depicts BoJack come the realization that even if his mother showed him care, it would not repay for the years of damage he endured in his childhood: *"You need to be consistent, you need to be dependably good"* (Season 5, Episode 6).

### **3.2 The Effect on BoJack's Relationships**

One of the first instances, where the audience sees BoJack's negative side, is when Todd, a character that lives with BoJack in his house, is working on a rock opera that BoJack sabotages because it would lead to Todd moving out of BoJack's house, thus leaving BoJack alone. In this situation, BoJack prioritizes himself due to his fear of loneliness, instead of supporting Todd's success. According to Fritscher (2023), the possible causes for the fear of loneliness, also known as monophobia, include *"abuse, neglect, and the death of a parent,"* which applies to BoJack as in this case, he is *"going to great lengths to avoid being isolated,"* which is one of the symptoms of monophobia which might have been caused by his challenging childhood. As previously covered, one of the recommendations for media is to *"Give accurate information about psychiatric disorders"* (Srivastava et al., 2018, p. 4). The show powerfully captures the consequences of his abusive parents and subsequent trauma as it is evident that BoJack's relationships are negatively affected by it.

In season one, the viewers are introduced to Herb Kazzaz, the creator of the show *Horsin' Around* in which BoJack stars as a starting actor. Due to controversies around Herb, he was later about to be fired from the show, and BoJack could either continue filming the show without Herb or leave the show with Herb. BoJack decides to not leave the show and he betrays Herb. However, BoJack later finds out that Herb is not angry with him due to BoJack's decision to stay on the show, but due to BoJack never contacting Herb again until he is dying of cancer. Once they reunite to talk for the last time, BoJack apologizes for abandoning him. Despite his apology, Herb does not forgive him (Season 1, Episode 8).

BoJack has the tendency to escape his problems because he never tells Todd to not move out. Even though BoJack holds himself accountable for his actions and feels regretful, he perhaps assumes that since his actions can not be undone, he should move on. Consequently, he struggles to apologize or express his remorse to the people he hurts. This may be the reason why BoJack never contacts Herb again after betraying him as he wrongly assumes there are no measures he can take. This attitude could stem from Secretariat's advice to keep running and not to look back, which does not appear to be helpful. BoJack often ruins his relationships with other people through his inappropriate or dishonest actions. However, escaping problems only offers a short-term solution, which the show accurately displays in BoJack's tendencies.

In addition, BoJack likely fears confrontation as well. His parents never appreciate him, and he deeply yearns for appreciation and validation, as has been suggested before. He shares this desire in a conversation with Diane: *"I just want everyone to love me, but I don't know how to make them do it,"* she responds with: *"You can't force love... All you can do is be good to the people in your life, and keep your heart open"* (Season 1, Episode 11). At first, Diane Nguyen works for BoJack as his ghostwriter. During the process of writing his book, they become friends, and her story is explored until the end of the series. Diane is arguably BoJack's closest friend, and she genuinely understands him and cares for him. Despite his behavior, she provides him with honest and helpful advice, as suggested above.

The audience sees BoJack act poorly, repeatedly. However, BoJack is fully aware of his actions and always feels guilt about hurting and mistreating people. As he tells himself: *"You're a real stupid piece of sh\*t. But I know I'm a piece of sh\*t. That makes me better than all the pieces of sh\*t who don't know they're pieces of sh\*t"* (Season 4, Episode 6). Even though he always feels regretful, it does not excuse his behavior, as Todd tells him: *"You can't keep doing this. You can't keep doing sh\*tty things and then feel bad about yourself like that makes it okay. You need to be better"* (Season 3, Episode 10). Srivastava et al. (2018, p. 4) draw attention to the need to *"Emphasize the impact that mental illness has on family members, friends, and carers."* It can be argued that *BoJack Horseman* effectively captures the effect on his mutuals as BoJack makes wrong decisions that are essentially impacted by his traumatic childhood.

## 4 Mental Illness and Suicide Depiction

For the purpose of this work, three main areas are considered: empathetic characters and storytelling, treatment and recovery, and realistic and accurate portrayals of mental health problems that can be considered positive features.

### 4.1 Empathetic, Complex Characters and Storytelling

The characters of *BoJack Horseman* are complex and well-developed. They are presented in a manner that makes them empathetic and relatable, including BoJack, despite his problematic behavior. Understanding his past and the associated traumas that shaped him may evoke pity from the audience that watches his character begin his journey of recovery, but also experience numerous relapses as he struggles with addiction. Even though BoJack is a character whose actions and motivations are not always justified, it is arguable that BoJack is still the victim of some of his actions due to his traumatic childhood, mental illness, and unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Later in the show, BoJack asks Diane whether he is a good person deep down to which she replies: *"I don't think I believe in "deep down". I kind of think all you are just the things that you do"* (Season 1, Episode 12). BoJack is not portrayed as a good person or inherently a bad person, but rather a mixture of good and bad actions that paint the character he is. The show does not label people as good or bad. Instead, the characters have layers; they make mistakes, face consequences, and strive to improve their behavior next time, as Diane says: *"There's no such thing as "bad guys" or "good guys. We're all just guys who do good stuff sometimes and bad stuff sometimes. And all we can do is try to do less bad stuff and more good stuff..."* (Season 5, Episode 12). BoJack's mistakes are not excused or dismissed as he is held accountable for his behavior.

It is essential for television shows to display the consequences of character's actions because otherwise, the viewers might be *"sympathizing for the bad guy and trying to justify their immoral behavior"* (Tiwari, 2022, p. 322). This is accurate for BoJack as he faces the consequences of his actions legally, publicly, and in his relationships. To elaborate, BoJack breaks into a house that he used to live in and subsequently is sentenced to spend months in prison for breaking and entering. Moreover, the creator of the show clarifies his intention in an interview: *"I wanted to be really conscious about this, that if something happens, it has a lasting effect"* (Bob-Waksberg, 2020).



Even the character who may be seen as the antagonist, such as BoJack's mother who causes his trauma, is depicted in a complex manner and the audience may empathize with her. Beatrice's childhood is also traumatic and even though BoJack does not deserve to be treated poorly by his mother when he is growing up, she is yet another wounded character that endures trauma as well. Similarly, Butterscotch also has a few honest moments, one of them being a scene where he praises Beatrice, which is quite extraordinary: *"It's not her fault. She's doing the best she can, after all"* (Season 5, Episode 6).

In addition, the characters do not doubt each other's mental states, but on the contrary; they support each other and try to listen and understand. However, as Mukundan (2019) states, *"It's also about fearlessly holding them accountable – both personally and to the larger public."* Diane can serve as an example as she is always honest with BoJack about his actions and holds him accountable even if it does not concern her personally. Similarly, Princess Carolyn, BoJack's ex-partner and current agent, mostly stands by him. As his agent, she manages his career, which often means she deals with BoJack's actions and difficulties as well. Sometimes, he struggles to be on the filming set which is exemplified when BoJack escapes reality and goes visit his old acquaintance in New Mexico in episode eleven of season two, labeled "Escape from L.A."

## **4.2 Treatment and Recovery**

The show features numerous forms of receiving professional help including therapy, rehabilitation, and medication, which promotes the idea of seeking help, which is undeniably a positive aspect to feature in a television show if depicted accurately. Unlike in the previously analyzed *13 Reasons Why* scene, where Hannah seeks professional help from a school counselor but is dismissed, in *BoJack Horseman*, the positive effects of receiving help are emphasized acknowledging the side effects and possible complications as well.

### **4.2.1 Therapy**

Firstly, Diane attends talk therapy sessions throughout the series, and she refers to it as her safe place, where she can express her emotions and work on herself. In addition, in episode five of the fifth season, BoJack accidentally attends a few sessions as well. His intention is to talk to Diane's therapist about an advice she gives her and accidentally starts sharing his problems for a whole hour. BoJack is reluctant about therapy, so he refers to it as "a friendship hour" and after a few sessions, he never returns. Ironically, he spends several hours talking, and it is visibly helpful to him.

Finally, Gordon (2019) also highlights the depiction of the grounding technique for anxiety. The premise of the technique is to name objects around the person that they can see, feel, hear, smell, and taste to distract them from their anxiety symptoms that they are currently experiencing. In the show, Hollyhock attends a party, where she starts feeling anxious and a person standing close to her notices and tries to help her. Gordon (2019) also brings attention to the fact that he "...shares a technique he learned in therapy and says that he learned it from his psychiatrist without any shame."

#### **4.2.2 Medication**

Diane begins taking antidepressants later in the series because her mental health worsens. Diane divorces her husband, struggles to write her book, and is under immense pressure. Subsequently, she is in a relationship with Guy, and she moves from California to Chicago. Even though this is a positive change for her, she is adjusting to a new lifestyle which adds additional pressure to her life. The show realistically portrays the process of starting antidepressants. At first, she is uncertain about medication because it is not an easy decision to make, but eventually, she decides to try. While adjusting to her medication, she experiences several side effects such as mood swings, numbness, and foginess.

In addition, she also experiences antidepressant discontinuation syndrome, which occurs when Diane withdraws from taking her doses. According to Gabriel and Sharma (2017, p. E747), the syndrome is characterized by symptoms such as "...nausea, imbalance, sensory disturbances..." It can be argued that depicting problems and obstacles in the treatment of mental illness such as relapsing or antidepressant withdrawal is a positive feature as it realistically depicts receiving treatment as a complex journey rather than a simple matter to be solved in the short term. Moreover, it may be relatable to viewers who experience such issues on their own journeys while also informing those who do not about the complexity of receiving treatment.

#### **4.2.3 Rehabilitation**

At the end of season five, BoJack's mental state worsens, and Diane takes him to a rehabilitation center to recover, mainly from his drug addiction. This way, the show actively emphasizes the importance of seeking professional help as BoJack's untreated problems cause additional problems. BoJack later admits his regret of not going to a rehabilitation center sooner: "*The main thing I think about is how stupid I am that I didn't do this sooner. I wasted so many years being miserable because I assumed that was the only way to be*" (Season 6,

Episode 3). As Srivastava et al. (2018, p. 4) state, it is crucial that media "*Emphasize the importance of early recognition and treatment of mental illness.*" Therefore, BoJack expressing his regret can be considered a positive aspect. Besides, this message is strong, because throughout the series, there is a potential expectation that BoJack gets professional help, and he finally does. He spends around six months in rehabilitation undergoing different types of therapy including hike, art, and yoga therapy.

In the rehabilitation center, it is demanding for him at first, but then he sees a picture of Sarah Lynn on the wall. Sarah Lynn is introduced as BoJack's co-star on *Horsin' Around*. She sees BoJack as a father figure because, in the show, he plays the father and Sarah Lynn his daughter. Besides that, she interacts with him on set when she is young. When they age, they spend time together and do drugs. She has attended rehabilitation as well in the past because she also struggles with addiction. Seeing her picture on the wall motivates him to treat therapy more seriously and he feels at peace while he is there. Eventually, his mental state improves significantly, and he leaves.

### **4.3 Realistic and Accurate Portrayal of Mental Illness**

#### **4.3.1 Trauma and Intergenerational Trauma**

There are several characters that experience trauma including Diane, BoJack, and Hollyhock, who is introduced in the series as BoJack's daughter at first, but later, it is discovered that she is his half-sister instead. Each of these characters experiences and deals with trauma in their own way and from various causes; Diane had a traumatic childhood and she intends to transform her negative experiences into a book to help other young women who may relate, Hollyhock experiences a traumatic event by Beatrice drugging her without her knowledge and BoJack has childhood trauma from his abusive parents and primarily relies on substances and escapism as a coping mechanism.

Another aspect the show delves into is intergenerational trauma, which describes "*...trauma that is passed from a trauma survivor to their descendants*" (Marschall, 2022). As BoJack's family is analyzed in the previous chapter, it is apparent that the Horseman generations are stuck in cycles of trauma, firstly seen with BoJack's grandparents, and then with BoJack's parents. With Hollyhock, BoJack is genuinely careful about his actions and even the words that he says to her. Even though she is his sister, she is still younger than him, and arguably, he strives to form a healthy relationship with her, which is exemplified in a scene

where he assures her and says: *"You're allowed to be mad at me, but you need to know that whatever I do, it's not your fault"* (Season 4, Episode 6).

#### **4.3.2 Access to Character's Raw Thoughts**

The show features numerous scenes where the mind of the characters is accessed, and the audience is presented with a raw visual stream-of-consciousness narrative of what is happening in their mind with a visual representation. This usually includes overthinking and the effects of drugs. In one of the episodes, the viewers are exposed to BoJack's raw, unfiltered thoughts: *"Breakfast. Oh, I don't deserve breakfast. Shut up. Don't feel sorry for yourself. Get breakfast, you stupid fat-ass. These are cookies. This is not breakfast. You are eating cookies. Stop it. Stop eating cookies, go make yourself breakfast. Stop it. Don't eat one more cookie. Put that down. Do not eat that cookie. I can't believe you ate that cookie"* (Season 4, Episode 6). In this scene, his constant self-loathing can be seen and through the raw depictions of the inner voice of a person struggling with mental health, the audience gets a glimpse of what living with such illness is like.

In the same episode, BoJack's thoughts also touch upon his overthinking: *"...everywhere you go you destroy people. Your mother never loved you"* (Season 4, Episode 6) and also his anxiety convincing him: *"You're making your daughter hate you. Which is good, because look what happens when people love you"* (Season 4, Episode 6). Previously, it has been established that people tend to empathize more with people with physical problems rather than mental ones. The exposure to BoJack's unfiltered thoughts may thus induce feelings of empathy and pity from the audience, which is essential as it may fight the diminishment of mental illness.

#### **4.3.3 Addiction and Substance Abuse**

BoJack primarily copes with his mental illness by turning to substances, which undeniably causes him problems and influences him to make poor decisions. He drinks alcohol as an unhealthy coping mechanism to numb his feelings and forget his misery. While doing so, BoJack is reckless and engages in numerous dangerous situations, which effectively shows how using drugs as a coping mechanism causes more damage eventually as he has to face the consequences of his actions afterward. BoJack is visibly addicted to drugs, as is exemplified in episode nine of season five, where he deliberately crashes his car with the intention of getting hurt to be prescribed pills as he finds out he does not have any. He is willing to risk his life and the lives of others to get a new prescription which realistically shows how far people who struggle with addictions can go. Consequently, BoJack is injured and portrayed with a fractured

arm and a bandage around his head. The Gateway Foundation (2020) states that *"Drug and alcohol cravings quickly erode a person's morals and principles, causing people to stop caring about how their actions are affecting relationships,"* which directly applies to BoJack in this scene.

More specifically, he often drives under the influence, loses consciousness for long periods, and damages his relationships with people. In addition, he struggles to recall his actions afterward. Exposing himself and other people in danger is particularly applicable when BoJack engages in drugs with Sarah Lynn, resulting in her death. In season three, BoJack contacts Sarah Lynn in the hope of taking drugs together, to which she immediately agrees, and they spend weeks being under the influence of drugs which does not have a positive outcome for Sarah Lynn as she overdoses and passes. While it is debatable whether BoJack directly bears the responsibility for her death, he undeniably contributed to it because when he discovers she is unconscious, he does not call the ambulance to save her life immediately. Instead, he waits seventeen minutes to do so but then it is too late to save her. Despite that, this is perhaps the worst thing BoJack has ever done, and understandably, he struggles to forgive himself and is unable to move on because of the severity of such action. Strasburger (2010, p. 793) states that only twenty-three percent of the depictions of alcohol consumption portray the negative outcomes. As has been suggested, it is apparent that BoJack faces consequences for drinking and drugs frequently.

#### **4.4 The Depiction of Suicide**

In the penultimate episode of the series titled "The View from Halfway Down," (Episode 15, Season 6) BoJack attempts to commit suicide. Nonetheless, the word suicide is never directly mentioned, and neither are any words related to it. Instead, the show depicts suicide visually, thus not featuring any violent scenes. Instead, the episode focuses on BoJack reuniting with his friends and family who have passed, including both of his parents, Sarah Lynn, and Herb, as he slowly realizes he is unconscious, and that it is only a dream happening in his mind while he is in a state between life and death. This way, the audience, at first, is not aware of what is happening to BoJack, and as he discovers that he is drowning, so does the audience.

##### **4.4.1 Overview of the Suicide Depiction**

The episode begins with BoJack entering a house to share a meal with his friends and family. There are numerous elements of symbolism, for instance, all attending characters are

served their last meals. Moreover, there is an unknown black liquid dripping from the ceiling that gradually enlarges as the episode progresses until it starts to swallow everything around. Throughout the episode, each character ages until their performance, where each character sings, dances, or performs a characteristic skill of theirs. Arguably, the most notable performance is Secretariat's poem about suicide, after which the episode received its title. In this excerpt of his poem, he shares his regret for committing suicide:

*"Thrash to break from gravity  
What now could slow the drop  
All I'd give for toes to touch  
The safety back at top*

*But this is it, the deed is done  
Silence drowns the sound  
Before I leaped I should've seen  
The view from halfway down*

*I really should've thought about  
The view from halfway down  
I wish I could've known about  
The view from halfway down"*

Williamson (2021) further points out the uniqueness in the depiction of suicide as the episode takes place during BoJack's suicide, and so does Secretariat's poem that describes the moment after the decision and the consequent regret. After each performance, the character is swallowed by the black liquid and falls into a void that indicates their death. BoJack desperately tries to escape the void as soon as he slowly realizes he may be dying. He then remembers calling Diane before getting in the pool, who does not pick up, so he talks to her as he imagines what she would say. He asks her about her day, and the episode ends. There is an open ending, but in the next and last episode of the series, the audience discovers that BoJack survived and is now in a hospital.

#### **4.4.2 Evaluation of the Suicide Depiction**

It is crucial to evaluate how *BoJack Horseman* adheres to the guidelines; firstly, it is important to *"Report that a note was found and exclude further details"* (Reporting on Suicide,

n.d.). which in BoJack's case, there is no suicide note in the first place. Secondly, media should *"Indicate that suicide is most often a fatal complication of different types of mental illness, many of which are treatable"* (Gould, 2006, p. 215). BoJack's mental illness, addictions, and trauma sufficiently contribute to if not cause his suicide attempt and thus give context to it. Thirdly, media should *"Avoid providing a detailed description of method and site"* (Gould, 2006, p. 216). There is only one scene of BoJack, in a pool, drowning, which is also the moment he remembers what happened prior to that moment. Unlike *13 Reasons Why*, the suicide scene does not feature any violence, blood, or suffering. Even though it may induce strong emotions, it is depicted visually and symbolically rather than violently.

In Addition, given that BoJack's suicide attempt does not result in his death, the other guidelines may not apply. Nonetheless, in general, media should not *"...portray suicide in a heroic or romantic fashion"* and *"...present suicide as a reasonable way of problem solving"* (Gould, 2006, p. 215). In conclusion, *BoJack Horseman* follows the guidelines on reporting on suicide. In *BoJack Horseman*, suicide is portrayed in a petrifying manner, showing the regret, fear, and despair that is associated with it. As Secretariat expresses his regret for committing suicide in his poem, arguably, BoJack feels regretful as well as he tries to escape the black liquid: death. The episode received highly positive ratings in media, for instance, on the viewer rating website IMDb, the episode received a rating of 9.9/10 stars.

## 5 The Theme of Change

### 5.1 The Attempts to Change

One of the central themes in the show is change; even though a person frequently displays negative behavior, they can change and improve their attitudes. This is suggested in a conversation between BoJack who is hallucinating and a fictional version of Diane that he pictures in his mind where he asks her: *"Do you think it's too late for me?... am I just doomed to be the person that I am?"* to which she responds with: *"It's never too late to be the person you want to be. You need to choose the life you want."* (Season 1, Episode 11) Even though Diane does not say that, it is exactly what BoJack wants to hear. Therefore, he visualizes this moment in his mind and comforts himself with the idea that he is not glued to the person he currently is and that he can change. However, change does not happen overnight, there are obstacles and failures, but as long as you are overall getting better, it is a good sign.

BoJack often struggles to face the consequences of his actions. This might be due to the piece of advice that BoJack internalizes from his idol Secretariat when he is young to not look behind and keep running. This is especially apparent in episode "Brand New Couch" (Episode 1, Season 2), where BoJack tries to pretend he is a completely new person and acts as if all that happened in the past did not happen. He adopts a "brand new attitude" as he refers to it and tries to be positive. This inevitably fails when his mother contacts him and reminds him of his past. It can be argued that BoJack anticipates change without effectively reflecting on his past. Kidd (2017) affirms that *"Unfortunately for BoJack, he cannot march forward without understanding how the trauma his grandparents and parents experienced has seeped it's way into his subconscious."*

### 5.2 The Finale of BoJack Horseman

Toward the end of the series, BoJack finally experiences moments of peace and satisfaction. He attempts becoming a teacher, attends church for the first time, where he connects with other horses, and meets Hollyhock, with whom he genuinely tries to behave appropriately. One of the side characters says: *"It takes a long time to realize how truly miserable you are and even longer to see that it doesn't have to be that way"* (Season 3, Episode 3) and BoJack surely struggles to come to that realization. In the last episode of the series, BoJack finally displays indications of genuine change. For instance, throughout the series, BoJack is openly expresses his distaste in honeydew until this episode, where he tries tasting it



and admits that it does not taste bad. This is yet another instance or metaphor of BoJack trying to adopt a new mindset. Kidd (2017) agrees that "...*BoJack has noticeably softened by the end of the season. He's starting to let himself be vulnerable and empathetic, understanding...*"

The ending of the series is perhaps the most compelling as nothing significant happens. Nonetheless, this seems like a suitable and realistic ending as the life of the characters moves forward as it would in real life; they will experience new things, and engage in new relationships, but the audience is left with an open ending. The creator of the show shares in an interview that "...*this is a more interesting way to tell the story than to resolve everything in this episode*" (Bob-Waksberg, 2020). Despite the dull yet noteworthy ending, it is an emotionally resonant episode that focuses on the moment, as the central event is Princess Carolyn's wedding where the majority of characters gather for the last time. As Hunt and Russell (2023) summarize the episode: "*Instead, BoJack spends one more day with his friends, and then gets to go on with his life.*"

Some of the last words spoken in the series are between BoJack and Diane, where BoJack says "*Life's a b\*tch and then you die, right?*" to which she responds, "*Sometimes life's a b\*tch and then you keep living,*" (Season 6, Episode 16) which effectively summarizes the whole series, because it can be argued that *BoJack Horseman* offers a hopeful and positive ending as his life continues. Even though he may never be fully healed of his mental illness and trauma, optimistically, he proceeds to strive for improvement despite further potential relapses. The creator of the show provided his viewpoint about the show in an interview: "...*I've always felt that BoJack is actually an optimistic show. Not everyone agrees, but I see it as a story about how people can change, and change each other*" (Bob-Waksberg, 2020).

## 6 Potential Impact on the Audience and Feedback

### 6.1 Feedback from the Audience

As previously mentioned, Diane is hired as a ghostwriter to write a book about BoJack. In this book, she strives to depict him realistically, but BoJack is displeased with her idea as he wants to be seen as brave in public. Afterward, Diane tells him that *"People respond to the flawed portrait I painted of you. They see themselves in it"* and she tries to convince BoJack that the book is honest: *"BoJack, when people find out that someone like you, who seems larger than life, is actually just as wounded and vulnerable as they are, it makes them feel less lonely"* (Season 1, Episode 11). The book can be taken as a metaphor for the depiction of BoJack in the series because even though he is flawed and wounded, the viewers still essentially relate to him and feel like they are not alone in this. Enlow (2017) says that the series is *"...important because it makes people feel seen,"* and *"...because it shows people with mental illness as complex, relatable humans..."* In media, *BoJack Horseman* receives praise for its portrayal of mental illness, as Tegar (2021) suggests: *"The animated series, BoJack Horseman (2014-2020) has received critical acclaim for its mental illness portrayal"* and also that *"There are many accurate and realistic depictions of mental illness in TV shows... But of all the shows, BoJack Horseman is arguably one of the best"* (Tegar, 2021).

### 6.1 The Creator's Thoughts and Intentions

In an interview with the creator of the show, he expresses his perspective on BoJack as a character: *"I think it is up to the individual viewer to decide for themselves if BoJack is forgivable or redeemable or deserving of that. I personally like to believe that we are all flawed people, and we are all deserving of forgiveness and redemption and grace, but we have to work for it"* (Bob-Waksberg, 2020). It is apparent that the creator thinks of the show as a positive and hopeful one rather than a negative hopeless story of a person, or a horse, struggling with mental illness. Based on these statements, it can be argued that BoJack is *"Offering hope to persons with mental disorders,"* as it has been mentioned in the recommendations above according to Srivastava, et al. (2018, p. 4).

In the same interview, he further states that BoJack helped encourage people who watched the show to seek professional help and express their emotions and feelings more clearly: *"...people tell me that the show has helped them articulate or identify something about themselves that they've never been able to recognize or verbalize before. That the show has*

*helped them talk to a therapist, talk to a loved one, realize a truth that has always been there, but they've never quite had the words for it"* (Bob-Waksberg, 2020). From the received praise, it can be seen that the show has a positive impact on the viewers. As mentioned in the literature review, according to Srivastava et al. (2018, p. 4), media should be *"Encouraging people with mental illness to seek help,"* which seems to be applicable to *BoJack Horseman*.

## 7 Conclusion

The thesis analyses the television series *BoJack Horseman* and argues that mental health-related topics are depicted realistically, accurately, and appropriately. It has been revealed that *BoJack Horseman* addresses mental health problems accurately, as it features raw and unfiltered thoughts of the characters while providing a visual depiction of such thoughts as well as a well-executed depiction of suicide. Furthermore, it realistically portrays the reality of accepting professional help as a complex journey accompanied by, for instance, the side effects of antidepressants and relapses. Ultimately, the show touches upon important subjects such as intergenerational and childhood trauma and actively challenges certain stereotypes, for instance, since BoJack is rich and famous, he cannot possibly be unhappy or depressed. However, he serves as a demonstration that money and fame are not the solution to mental illness.

In addition, *BoJack Horseman* is simply a show relatable to people who suffer from mental illness, but also to people who may be impacted by a person who struggles with mental illness as they might relate to BoJack's friends or partners. Besides, the show is a comedy and therefore it is crafted to entertain those, who are not particularly interested in mental health subjects. This way, *BoJack Horseman* potentially attracts a diverse audience and spreads awareness of the lives of people struggling with mental illness. With multidimensional characters, the show fosters empathy towards people who struggle with mental illness. Furthermore, it effectively illustrates the impact of mental illness and childhood trauma on one's behavior and consequently on their relationships, while holding the characters accountable for their inappropriate behavior.

While *BoJack Horseman* may appear to be the ideal television series regarding mental illness since it has been established, it highlights notable aspects of mental illness, it is still essential to acknowledge the possible alternative viewpoints as well since *BoJack Horseman* features scenes that may raise questions. For instance, on a filming set, while under the influence of drugs, BoJack chokes an actress while he is expected to film a scene. Even though he has no malicious intentions, he engages in a violent act. This is the first and the last instance where BoJack commits a violent act. Consequently, there are still areas for improvement as even though the show generally succeeds in depicting mental illness accurately, BoJack may be considered unlikeable by the audience due to his actions.

To an extent, BoJack may serve as a cautionary tale as the audience is shown the negative effects of drugs, the tendency to escape one's problems, and his other coping mechanisms that bring him short-term satisfaction but long-term consequences, despite the ability to relate to his struggles. According to Tiwari (2022, p. 311), it is not uncommon for viewers to sympathize with characters that are morally ambiguous and thus justify their actions. For this reason, it is crucial to note that BoJack is not a character one should idolize or glamorize throughout the series. Besides perhaps the end of the series, where BoJack potentially reaches his redemption as the creator of the show illuminates in an interview, "...*I would like to think even a soul as lost as BoJack can somehow crawl his way toward redemption*" (Bob-Waksberg, 2018). Finally, it is worth noting that the thesis focuses on specific themes and topics conveyed within the shows, however, there are numerous other possible areas that may be assessed in future research such as the role of humor in the depiction of mental health or the direct impact of the show on the audience.

Ultimately, *BoJack Horseman* offers a unique view into a character's life affected by mental illness, addiction, and childhood trauma. Remarkably, it delves into complex topics, not shying away from the harsh reality of isolation, self-hatred, and self-sabotage, therefore, the show does not appear to minimize or trivialize mental illness. However, even though *BoJack Horseman* excels in the depiction of accuracy and reality of mental health-related problems, one aspect worth mentioning regarding the likeability of BoJack is open to interpretation as his actions often invite varying viewpoints. In conclusion, as the curtain falls on BoJack's journey to recovery, the show serves as a glimmer of hope towards optimism and as reminder that growth and recovery are perchance an option.

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