Mental illness in visual media

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Popular culture helps to shape conversation about almost every major topic. This includes mental health, mental illness, and how they are viewed in society. Popular culture —particularly visual mediums such as television and movies — has influenced general conceptions of what it means to have a mental illness and what the possible outcomes are. Unfortunately, many times they have increased the general misunderstanding of what having a mental illness means, and have led to further alienation.

For many television crime dramas, mental illness has become a short-hand for criminal behaviour. Even if a show has the best of intentions, more often than not a suspect or a perpetrator for a crime has a mental illness. A mentally ill character in a prime time American TV show commits violent crime at ten to twenty percent rate higher than those who have mental illnesses in reality (Fawcett, 2015). Other ways that mental illnesses are frequently misrepresented include:

- Mental illness being leading the character to becoming a genius (Fawcett, 2015)
- Not showing that recovery is possible (Fawcett, 2015)
- Generally having characters disregard medications and distrust treatment attempts (Bastién, 2016a)
- Refusing to give characters a diagnosis, instead creating inaccurate depictions of mental illness (Bastién, 2016a).
- Portraying mental illness as primarily affecting white people, with people of colour most likely being portrayed as therapists (Bastién, 2016b).

My Mad Fat Diary Poster, retrieved from http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2407574/mediaviewer/rm4124887552

Teen shows in particular can get the portrayal of mental health and illness dangerously wrong. In countless shows, from *Lizzie McGuire* to *Pretty Little Liars*, for example, a mental illness like an eating disorder is easily overcome (Grant, 2015). This ignores the fact that the road to recovery for eating disorders can be a long and difficult one, possibly giving teens false expectations for treating their mental illness. It can also lead to misunderstandings between teens with mental health issues and their peers, creating a culture of silence and stigmatization.

Despite the negative portrayals of mental illness, there are some television shows and movies for teens that get it right. These include:

- My Mad Fat Diary (2013-2015): A British television show, it follows 16-year-old Rae Earl after her stay in a psychiatric hospital.

Exploring the intersection between mental health and body image, it shows how complex recovery can be and what daily life can be for someone with a mental illness.

- The Perks of Being a Wallflower (2012): Adapted from the book by the same name by author Stephen Chbosky, this coming of age movie features a protagonist with clinical depression.
- Crazy Ex-Girlfriend (2015 – present): An American musical series, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* explores the lead character's anxiety, obsessiveness, and depression. Using humour and music, creator and star Rachel Bloom provides insight on what it means to have mental illness.
- Skins (2007-2013): Another British show, *Skins* follows several groups of teenagers through their final years of high school. Several characters have mental illnesses, including one with an eating disorder. Although arguments can be made about the show glamorizing mental health issues, it also is one of the few shows to portray them as something not easily solved.
- Empire (2015-present): Centred on the powerful Lyon family, *Empire* is one of the few shows to have a black male with a mental illness. The eldest son, Andre, has bipolar disorder, and some of his plotlines include him managing his illness. While not always accurate, it is one of the few series to show that mental illness is not confined to white people.

Positive and accurate portrayals of mental illness can be difficult to come by, but are desperately needed. Movies and television shows are some of the most widely distributed and easily accessible forms of media. Giving teens who may be struggling with mental health characters who are not defined by their mental illness, as well as showing it is not something that easily goes away, can be immensely valuable and affirming.

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