

Mental Health Theming in *BoJack Horseman*

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COM 262: Research Methods in Media Studies
May 15, 2020

Introduction

Netflix's adult animated comedy series *BoJack Horseman* follows the titular character, BoJack Horseman (Will Arnett), who is an anthropomorphic horse and a washed-up celebrity. BoJack struggles with depression and substance abuse issues, and he has difficulty maintaining healthy relationships.

The animated world of *BoJack Horseman* is a bright, colorful image of Hollywood which is populated by an array of both anthropomorphic animals and humans. Despite the series' vivid art style and its quick-witted humor, *BoJack Horseman* investigates themes related to mental health, such as depression, substance abuse, and trauma. As the show progresses throughout its six seasons, the series dives deeper into these themes. Though these themes on mental health are primarily conveyed through BoJack's character arc, the supporting cast have their own plotlines which communicate different perspectives on these same themes.

It is noteworthy that *BoJack Horseman*, an adult animated comedy about a depressed anthropomorphic horse, offers an insightful and artistic representation of themes on depression and trauma. *BoJack Horseman* is relatively unique in its nuanced representation of mental illness. Though the series is an animated adult comedy, there are few other television series or films that approach mental illness with a similar combination of tact and creativity. *BoJack Horseman* may be able to provide insight into how sophisticated representations of mental illness in media can impact viewers' attitudes towards or impressions of mental illness. In this research paper, I investigate how *BoJack Horseman* makes use of its genre and animated medium to communicate its themes related to mental health. My research suggests that the series' genre and medium are crucial to its ability to deliver a poignant commentary on mental health issues.

Literature Review

Introduction

Previous research indicates that depictions of mental illness in film and television tend to be negative, and that these exaggerated portrayals influence public perceptions of the mentally ill by perpetuating stigma (Pirkis et al., 2006). Other research suggests that more empathetic depictions of individuals with mental illnesses could positively influence public perceptions (Hecht, 2018). Furthermore, one study found that narratives were effective in increasing positive public attitudes towards mental illness. This background research provides a framework for understanding *BoJack Horseman*'s nuanced handling of its mental health themes. *BoJack Horseman* is often cited for its delicate and unique presentation of its themes on mental illness, and its animated medium allows the show to successfully engage with these themes (Higgs, 2019). As the show's animated format inspires empathy (Lavín, 2018), *BoJack Horseman*'s approach to its mental health themes can be understood in concert with the aforementioned research regarding the role of empathy and narratives in fostering acceptance of mental illness.

Research

Negative Representations of Mental Illness in Film and Television

Much of the existing research on representations of mental illness in film and television suggests that these representations are overwhelmingly negative and perpetuate false stereotypes about mental illness (Pirkis et al., 2006). Pirkis et al. emphasizes the role of entertainment media in shaping the public's attitudes towards mental health, suggesting that entertainment media may influence public perceptions on mental health more than news media (Pirkis et al., 2006). Furthermore, this study suggests that these negative representations "have a cumulative effect on

the public's perception of people with mental illness and on the likelihood of people with mental illness seeking appropriate help" (Pirkis et al., 2006).

In similar research, it was found that "descriptions of mental illness and the mentally ill are distorted due to inaccuracies, exaggerations, or misinformation" (Klin and Lemish, 2008). Furthermore, Klin and Lemish (2008) found that "The ill are presented not only as peculiar and different, but also as dangerous". Of course, these negative representations of mental illness further feed the stigma surrounding mental illness.

Pirkis et al. (2006) suggests a collaboration between mental health professionals and the film and television industry to explore how more positive representations of mental illness could be used in an informative and educational manner which still fulfills entertainment purposes. In a similar vein, Klin and Lemish (2008) suggest that a deeper interpretation of how mental health stigmas are perpetuated in media is an important part of understanding how to reduce the stigma. Both studies recognize the need to combat mental health stigma through mass media such as film and television. Through this, these two studies provide insight into how *BoJack Horseman* is in a position to reduce mental health stigma through its themes surrounding mental health.

Empathy and Narratives as Tools to Promote Acceptance of Mental Illness

There is some existing research surrounding the role of media in reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness. At the center of this research is the role of empathy in destigmatizing mental illness. Hecht (2018) investigated empathy as a tool for reducing mental health stigma in media. In this study, empathy was defined as an "other-oriented emotional response congruent with another's perceived welfare", and noted that "empathic feelings include tenderness, sympathy and compassion" (Hecht, 2018, p.5). The study is primarily focused on using empathy within media to reduce stigma, but it discusses the role of empathy within other contexts to

combat stigma. Hecht (2018) notes that even though “direct contact with stigmatized individuals was most effective” in combating stigma, “parasocial contact through video messages still had significant effects, thus highlighting the potential of audiovisual media for anti-stigma campaigns” (Hecht, 2018, p.5). This suggests that film and television, as they are popular audiovisual media, can potentially be used to reduce mental health stigma.

Hecht (2018) indicates that one of the ways which media can promote empathy is aligning the viewer with the stigmatized person’s perspectives and experiences. The research suggests that “adopting a stigmatized individual’s point of view can lead to empathy with the stigmatized person” (Hecht, 2018, p.5-6). Film and television media, especially through narrative fiction, can function as a means to align a viewer empathetically with a stigmatized person. Indeed, Hecht (2018) writes that with media representations of stigmatized persons, “empathy-inducing portrayals can contribute to stigma reduction” (p.6). Hecht’s (2018) study indicates that empathetic representations of individuals with mental illness, particularly through audiovisual means, has the capability to destigmatize mental illness. Hecht’s (2018) research would then suggest that *BoJack Horseman*, through its empathy-inducing audiovisual medium, has the capability of reducing stigma through its careful representation of mental illnesses.

Though there is limited research on the topic, narratives can serve as a tool for promoting acceptance of mental illness. In one study, “narratives were found to be more effective in promoting favorable attitudes toward people with mental illnesses than non-narratives” (Ma and Nan, 2018). The study suggests that the immersive, transportive nature of narratives contributes to an individual’s identification with the narrative (Ma and Nan, 2018). More specifically, Ma and Nan (2018) found that “participants in the narrative condition experienced more imagery, a greater sense of being in a narrative world, more intense emotions, and stronger

attentional focus than those in the non-narrative condition”. This study also addresses the significance of identifying with characters within a narrative, as it pertains to this study of mental illness acceptance. Ma and Nan (2018) comment that “When we identify with characters, we simulate their sensations, actions, thoughts, goals, and emotions”, which suggests that character identification can be a powerful component within the efficacy of narratives in inspiring mental health acceptance. This understanding of character identification is particularly poignant in my research on how *BoJack Horseman* reaches its audience through its mental health themes.

***BoJack Horseman*’s Representation of Mental Health**

BoJack Horseman is often cited in discussions of new television shows which depict mental illness with more nuance. As Brayton (2017) writes, “mental illness is now purportedly portrayed with greater sensitivity and sophistication”, citing *BoJack Horseman* as an example of this tactful representation of mental illness on television.

BoJack Horseman’s status as an animated adult comedy provides a unique forum for investigating the show’s mental health theming. In particular, the show’s animated medium helps communicate its mental health theming through animation’s “exaggerated reality” (Higgs, 2019). Higgs (2019) comments that “The world of *BoJack Horseman* seems pretty ridiculous at first, but it uses this ridiculousness as a foil for tackling issues such as emotional abuse, substance dependence and mental illness”. *BoJack Horseman* subverts its audience’s expectations by presenting its silly comedic gags within a bright, animated world, coupled with its nuanced mental health theming. This subversion is enabled by the suspension of disbelief that comes along with what Higgs (2019) terms “exaggerated reality” within its animated medium.

Higgs (2019) cites Lavín (2018) in explaining the relationship between the audience’s perception of reality within animation. Lavín (2018) writes, “By stripping

back reality altogether, animation can place these issues into a context whereby audiences consider them in an alternate light”. The detachment from reality that animation provides allows *BoJack Horseman*’s very real mental health themes to be perceived more universally (Lavín, 2018). Lavín (2018) also draws attention to *BoJack Horseman*’s use of anthropomorphic cartoon animals, and its intersection of animation, reality, and empathy. Referencing BoJack’s status as an anthropomorphic horse, Lavín (2018) comments that “Since this aspect of him is surreal and divorced from our own reality, perhaps we’re better able to relate to his emotional truth without the distraction of a recognizable human actor”. This suggests an intersection between Higgs’ (2019) discussion of animation and reality, Hecht’s (2018) commentary on empathy in reducing stigma, and Ma and Nan’s (2018) analysis of character identification.

Conclusion and Analysis

BoJack Horseman’s representation of mental health is a deviation from the negative portrayals of mentally ill individuals that otherwise dominate film and television. Higgs’ (2019) and Lavín’s (2018) discussion of the show’s use of animation to engage with its nuanced mental health theming and the show’s ability inspire empathy directly relates to Hecht’s (2018) emphasis on the role of empathy in reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness. Furthermore, *BoJack Horseman*’s positive critical reception indicates consistence with Ma and Nan’s (2018) study about the efficacy of narratives and character identification in promoting positive public opinion towards individuals with mental illnesses. The research selected in this literature review highlights the intersection between empathy, narratives, and animation, as it pertains to *BoJack Horseman*’s engagement with mental health themes.

Methodology

I selected two research methods to conduct this study: textual analysis of *BoJack Horseman*'s content, and in-depth interviews with viewers of the series. My textual analysis and the respondents' interviews are integrated together so that the results are discussed thematically.

With my textual analysis, I analyze the arc of *BoJack Horseman*'s mental health themes and BoJack's character development throughout the series. BoJack's character development in particular provides insight into a personal process of understanding one's own mental illness. My textual analysis portion also includes a discussion of specific uses of animation within *BoJack Horseman* that convey mental health theming and evoke empathy. In particular, I take a closer look at two episodes, "Time's Arrow" (S04 E11) and "Stupid Piece of Sh*t" (S04 E06), as both episodes notably use different animation techniques to communicate themes related to mental health.

Additionally, I conducted in-depth interviews with two viewers of *BoJack Horseman* to gain different perspectives about how the show impacts viewers, particularly regarding the show's mental health theming. The interviews also included discussions about the respondents' identification with certain characters, as well as their general attitudes towards and opinions of the show. Both respondents were selected because of their interest in the show, as well as their demonstrated intellectual engagement with the show's content. Both of the respondents' names have been changed for their anonymity.

Analysis and Findings

The two interview respondents, Kevin and Alex, were both selected for their demonstrated thoughtful engagement with *BoJack Horseman*. Kevin, who is twenty-two years old, and Alex, who is twenty-four years old, are both graduate students. Neither respondent

started watching *BoJack Horseman* at the release of the first season; Kevin recalls that he began watching after Season 3 was released, and Alex believes that he began watching after Season 2 or 3 became available on Netflix. Both respondents reported enthusiastically keeping up with the show as each new season was released after they began watching, and they both have watched the entirety of the series through its conclusion this year with Season 6.

Both respondents cited good reviews or positive word of mouth as their reasons for deciding to watch *BoJack Horseman*. Additionally, Kevin said that he was inclined to watch *BoJack Horseman* because he is an avid fan of animation. Within each interview, I discussed with each respondent about the incongruence of the show's colorful art style and comedic tone in juxtaposition with the show's mental health theming. Both respondents articulated that because of *BoJack Horseman's* unique aesthetic and unusual setting within an animated world of anthropomorphic animals, they did not anticipate the show to include its mental health themes. Both respondents indicated that even though they did not expect *BoJack Horseman* to include its nuanced approach to topics related to mental illness, *BoJack's* engagement with mental health themes became a component of the show that encouraged them to keep on watching the show.

Both respondents' initial response to *BoJack Horseman's* surprising handling of its mental health themes is consistent with the way in which the show frames its mental health themes within the first season. The first season of *BoJack Horseman* does not explicitly reference BoJack's behavior as mental illness. Though it may be obvious to the viewer that BoJack is depressed and has substance abuse issues, neither BoJack nor anyone in his life describe his behavior as mental illness. Within just the first episode, BoJack is established as a self-destructive, manipulative person who struggles with self-loathing and feelings of existential nihilism. Still, BoJack's behavior is presented with a comedic skew. In S01 E01, BoJack's

substance abuse is made immediately apparent and is played for comedy. For example, early in this episode he dumps carrots, vodka, and random pills into a blender for breakfast. This vignette is presented comedically, with BoJack's blatant substance abuse presented casually as a throwaway visual gag. Here, the presentation of the visual gag is treated the same way that BoJack treats his own mental health at this early point in the series. His behavior, demonstrated through his dubious breakfast concoction, is clearly troubling, yet BoJack does not seem to think anything of his actions.

Indeed, BoJack does not question his behavior or mental health in this first season. However, the audience is able to observe and interpret BoJack's behavior through an outside perspective, and therefore can easily identify BoJack's behavior as depression and substance abuse. For BoJack, it is not until the publication of Diane's (Alison Brie) book about BoJack that he seems to reflect upon himself, and even then, he is initially enraged and dismissive of Diane's nuanced and flawed depiction of him. Despite BoJack's fear that Diane's book presents him as a completely unlikeable person, the book is publicly well received and BoJack's career is revived as a result. The in-show response to Diane's book doubles in meaning for the viewers of the show. This is evident when Diane insists to BoJack, "See? People respond to the flawed portrait I painted of you. They see themselves in it" (S01 E11). She elaborates: "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" (S01 E11). Through this, it is clear that the show was crafted with an intention to reach the viewer on a personal level through BoJack's behavior. As outside viewers, the audience is granted the opportunity to interpret BoJack's behavior in a way which he cannot see, as he has not yet engaged in any kind of introspection about his behavior or considered his behavior to be the result of mental illness.

As discussed earlier, neither respondent expected *BoJack Horseman* to be centered around mental health themes. As an avid fan of the animation genre, Kevin had a lot to say regarding the intersection of *BoJack Horseman*'s mental health themes and its animated medium. Kevin commented that he thinks that animated series are able to “sucker punch” viewers because many viewers do not expect a work of animated media to be sophisticated. Kevin elaborated, “I feel like it’s very easy for animation to trap you and grip people in a way they’re not prepared for”. Indeed, both Kevin and Alex commented that they did not expect *BoJack Horseman* to present such nuanced mental health themes. Furthermore, as discussed in the description of Season 1’s presentation of its mental health themes, these themes were framed in such a way to inspire an incongruence wherein the viewer can identify BoJack’s mental illness, but BoJack himself does not address his underlying mental illness. This incongruence is consistent with Kevin’s comments about animation’s ability to “sucker punch” the viewer with unexpected, deeper themes.

In addition to the *BoJack Horseman*'s handling of its mental health themes, Kevin also cited the show’s sophistication and highly intentional structure of the dialogue, animation, and plot as appealing aspects of the show that kept him engaged as a viewer and encouraged him to keep watching. Furthermore, Kevin explained that he liked that the narrative arcs throughout the show, particularly as they related to its mental health themes, did not wrap up neatly or resolve within a single season; rather, the characters’ problems often remain throughout the show, or evolve. This is consistent with my analysis of *BoJack Horseman*'s mental health theming, especially in regard to BoJack’s character arc and journey with understanding and managing his own mental illness.

As previously discussed, BoJack does not engage in any kind of reflection on his behavior, or even acknowledge his issues as mental health concerns in Season 1. As the series progresses, BoJack's understanding of his mental health evolves. Seasons 2 and 3 are primarily concerned with BoJack's desire to achieve lasting happiness, which continues to evade him. Between these two seasons, BoJack's career reaches new heights and the greatest fame that he has had, yet he becomes increasingly more miserable when he realizes that his new career successes have not made him any happier. Such is the nature of depression; those who suffer depression may sink further into their depression when they find that their personal successes cannot cure their underlying mental illness. The series as a whole presents an evolving narrative and character arc which illustrates the evolving nature of BoJack's journey in understanding his own mental health issues.

When asked about which of the show's narrative arcs or specific mental health themes were most meaningful to the respondent, both interview respondents reported that they found Season 4's theming surrounding the heritable nature of mental illness to be the most meaningful or personally significant theme of the show. When discussing how the show presents BoJack's family history with mental illness, Kevin commented, "I appreciate the way it's [presented] like a string of trauma that leads to one trauma after another, I think it's an honest portrayal". The heritable component of mental illness, as presented in Season 4, presents the audience with a new layer of understanding of BoJack's mental illness.

Throughout the first three seasons, much of BoJack's behavior is presented in isolation. Other than brief references to BoJack's abusive parents, BoJack's mental illness is generally presented without context or causation. Even BoJack himself seems to perceive himself as a self-destructive individual, yet he does not engage in any introspection to investigate why he is

way he is. Season 4 adds another element to understanding BoJack's mental illness by investigating the hereditary component of mental illness through his family history. S04 E02 and S04 E11 include flashbacks to BoJack's mother Beatrice's (Wendie Malick) childhood. These episodes reveal a deep legacy of mental illness and trauma within Beatrice's family.

Both Kevin and Alex pointed to S04 E11, "Time's Arrow" as an episode that stood out to them, both in terms of its mental health theming and its notable use of its animated medium to communicate those themes. Alex commented that though he tends to be a casual viewer, that episode in particular "made me pause", and he noted that this was particularly impactful. In my interview with Kevin, we discussed at length how the heritable component of mental illness as presented in "Time's Arrow" has significant implications about how to understand an individual's mental illness.

"Time's Arrow" presents the audience with a detailed history of BoJack's mother Beatrice's life through a series of flashbacks. However, as Beatrice suffers from dementia, the flashbacks do not proceed chronologically, and the action of the episode is presented as Beatrice perceives time through her stream of consciousness and her impaired memory. Visual cues such as blank faces, rapidly altering backgrounds, and swapped-out props and other identifying setting markers all communicate Beatrice's perspective and experience with dementia. *BoJack Horseman's* animated medium allows for Beatrice's perspective to be communicated fluidly and artistically.



Image from "Time's Arrow". Beatrice (left) appears as her younger self, remembering talking to Henrietta (Majandra Delfino) (right), though they are both shown in BoJack's sports car from the preceding scene. Henrietta's face is scratched out, as Beatrice has gone through great pains to forget the pain caused by Henrietta's affair with her husband.

Within these flashbacks, it is revealed that Beatrice has suffered extensive trauma throughout her life, and this trauma influences the way she raised BoJack, thus shaping BoJack's own traumas and struggles with mental illness. Furthermore, Beatrice's memories reveal that her mother had mental health issues, further solidifying that heritable nature of mental illness within BoJack's family. Up until this episode, Beatrice had been portrayed rather unsympathetically, particularly through BoJack's intense resentment and vitriol towards her that is demonstrated in earlier episodes and seasons. "Time's Arrow", however, inspires greater empathy towards Beatrice by presenting the audience with the excruciating details about the circumstances which shaped Beatrice's mental illness, and subsequently BoJack's mental illness as well.

Though *BoJack Horseman* never discusses the scientific background related to the genetic heritability of mental illness, the inherited mental illness and related behaviors are illustrated through characters' mirrored actions, phrases, and tendencies across three generations.

BoJack Horseman does not take a stance on whether or not these shared behaviors are caused by nature (genetics) or nurture (abusive parenting), but the show firmly communicates that mental illness, and many of its subsequent behaviors, are passed along generations in a way which is incredibly difficult to decipher within one's own perspective and role within a family.

During our interview, Kevin spoke about the tragic nature of "Time's Arrow" as it pertains to BoJack's lack of knowledge about Beatrice's past. Kevin commented that it is "more tragic for us as viewers to watch he [BoJack] and his mother's relationship, because we know all this background information, like why she is the way that she is, and why she did the things that she did, but he does not". Kevin's observations are consistent with my textual analysis; though the audience is afforded knowledge about the legacy of mental illness in BoJack's family through the flashbacks, BoJack himself is not privy to this knowledge, and therefore lacks this crucial understanding about his own mental illness. BoJack spends much of the run of the show believing that he is a singular abomination, when in reality his mental illness is part of a long chain of trauma and suffering within his family.

This understanding fundamentally shifts the understanding of BoJack's behavior and mental health. Conceptualizing mental illness as a heritable cycle presents for vastly different interpretations of what this means about the manifestation of mental illness in an individual. On the one hand, understanding mental illness as a heritable genetic feature alleviates some personal responsibility; BoJack does not have complete control over who he is because he cannot change his genetics or the results of his upbringing in an abusive household. On the other hand, the suggestion that mental illness is an unavoidable, permanent genetic feature can inspire hopelessness in achieving relief or recovering from a mental illness. Within *BoJack Horseman*, this creates a new narrative tension: can BoJack actually become a better person or find

happiness, if his mental illness is genetically determined? Is it possible to break the cycle of trauma that has plagued his family for generations? Season 4 itself does not answer this question, and it is not until the series' conclusion at the end of season 6 that the show seems to offer a hopeful suggestion about how to healthily live with mental illness.

Both respondents also pointed to S04 E06, "Stupid Piece of Sh*t", as another example of an episode that stood out to them both in terms of content and its notable use of animation. In "Stupid Piece of Sh*t", there are sequences of an alternate animation style that illustrates BoJack's internal monologue of self-loathing and depressed thoughts. These sequences feature an art style which looks more like a roughly animated sketches, which is more exaggerated and less detailed than the typical animation style for the show. The use of this alternate animation style helps further communicate BoJack's depression, anxiety, and self-loathing.



*This still from "Stupid Piece of Sh*t" depicts BoJack's internal monologue of depressed thoughts and self-loathing.*

As seen in the image above, the audience is shown how BoJack perceives himself in the middle of a particularly difficult depressive episode. This sequence shows the audience that

BoJack perceives himself to be a hollow caricature of himself. Furthermore, this cartoonish illustration depicts BoJack as more overweight than he appears in the normal animation style, reflecting BoJack's frequently referenced insecurities about his weight. The grey background mirrors BoJack's bleak outlook, and the encroaching black scribbles demonstrate that BoJack is overwhelmed by the crushing weight of his never-ending depressive and self-loathing thoughts. These sequences of this alternate animation style help communicate *BoJack Horseman's* mental health theming by communicating BoJack's internal thoughts and mental health issues through this style of animation.

Aside from the previously discussed mental health themes, both respondents indicated that the character-driven nature of *BoJack Horseman* is a crucial aspect of the show. Alex in particular commented that he liked how character driven the show is, and reflected that he felt motivated to keep watching because he felt a strong desire to see the show's characters work through their problems and find a resolution at the end.

Both Kevin and Alex were able to identify aspects of certain characters that resonated with their personal experiences, however neither respondent voiced a particularly strong identification with a particular character. Despite not feeling a notably strong connection to any one character, it is clear that both respondents engaged in some level of identification with certain characters.

Kevin commented that he thought a lot about Diane, and he connected with her character arc in Season 6. Throughout much of the series, Diane is one of the most competent, well-organized characters in the show, and manages to tackle all of her personal problems as they happen. She seems to keep herself distracted with the never-ending problems that arise in her life. However, in the final season, Diane reaches a point in life where she is no longer distracted

by externally caused personal issues, so when she sits down to write her book, she finds herself paralyzed with depression. Kevin commented about Diane in the final season, “her professional life was fine. She turned things in on time, she had a job, so everything was mostly fine... When the work stopped, it’s like ‘Oh shit, now nothing is working, and I have no choice but to address it’. I appreciate, that’s a moment I really connected with”. Kevin reflected further, about himself and Diane, “it’s not just my environment, it’s not school, it’s not work... something is happening with me”. Kevin identified with Diane’s need to finally address her own mental health issues once it became impossible to ignore.

Alex initially did not identify a character that he felt he identified with. However, upon further reflection, Alex indicated that the plotlines regarding Princess Carolyn’s (Amy Sedaris) work-life balance resonated with him. Commenting on Princess Carolyn’s “workaholic vibe”, Alex elaborated that he liked her plotline about figuring out what she wants, and by the show’s end finally reaching both her professional and personal goals. Reflecting on Princess Carolyn’s resiliency and ability to overcome significant roadblocks, Alex commented that these traits resonate with him because he is in a difficult graduate student program at a highly competitive university. Alex commented, “I know a lot of people who sort of throw themselves into work, and being in that grad school environment, you do see a lot of people sort of dig themselves in really deep, and a lot of people do burn out”. Elaborating on why Princess Carolyn’s work ethic resonates with him, Alex stated, “it’s really easy to root for her because she’s scrappy and... she doesn’t give up. And that’s a really, I mean, it’s a wonderful quality to see”. Applying Princess Carolyn’s resilience further to himself and his approach to his graduate studies in microbiology, he commented, “I think the most successful scientists, for example, exhibit those certain same sort of characteristics”. Despite having vastly different personal and career goals from Princess

Carolyn, Alex identifies with the character's resiliency and her struggle to find a healthy balance between personal life and career.

As discussed in the Literature Review, Ma and Nan (2018) posit that character identification can be a powerful component within the efficacy of narratives in inspiring mental health acceptance. While neither of my respondents specifically reported that their personal identifications with certain characters caused them to perceive mental health issues with greater acceptance, their responses indicate that their personal character identifications are inspired by *BoJack Horseman's* ability to inspire empathy with characters live within an animated world that is so different from our reality. In particular, Alex noted that his career, lifestyle, and life goals are significantly different from Princess Carolyn's. Still, despite these differences and the fact that Princess Carolyn is a pink cat, Alex is able to identify with her because *BoJack Horseman's* animated medium enables a certain level of empathy to be achieved. The fact that both respondents reported any form of character identification within *BoJack Horseman*, especially with characters who exist in a more abstract animated world, indicates that *BoJack Horseman* enables character identification and empathy via its animated medium.

Despite not reporting any personal struggles with mental health, Alex commented that *BoJack Horseman* allowed him to understand mental health issues "in different ways and [in] the people around me". Describing the way that mental health issues are described in his school curriculum or other mental health seminars, Alex remarked that mental illnesses are "always presented as sort of narrow conscripted problems that stem from the single issue, whereas I feel like in the show you have a lot of different characters deal with problems in different ways". In this sense, *BoJack Horseman's* narratives allowed Alex to gain a deeper understanding of mental health issues when presented through the characters' personal narrative arcs. Alex's response is

consistent with Hecht (2018) and Pirkis et al.'s (2006) research on using audiovisual media such as television to inspire empathy and reduce stigma surrounding mental illnesses.

Both respondents offered perspectives about the way in which the overarching themes surrounding mental illness were presented at the show's conclusion. Alex identified self-acceptance as a key, overarching theme of *BoJack Horseman*. Additionally, both Kevin and Alex discussed *BoJack Horseman*'s themes of self-accountability and self-responsibility as a crucial component of its mental health themes. The final, sixth season of *BoJack Horseman* is very much centered around themes of self-accountability and self-responsibility. Despite going to rehab, attending therapy, and building a more healthy, constructive lifestyle, BoJack still must be held accountable for his actions and face the consequences of his actions across the six seasons. As Kevin commented, "BoJack's comeuppance came at a time when he was trying to be a better person". For Kevin, it was important that BoJack not only face consequences and hold himself accountable, but he commented that it was important that the show emphasized that BoJack's personal growth does not necessarily warrant forgiveness from those that he has hurt. "Forgiveness should never be a motivation for personal growth because we'll never grow that way", Kevin commented. After a moment, he elaborated: "Everyone should be growing because you should be growing to trying to be better, just because we should all try to be better". Kevin observed that *BoJack Horseman* insists that motivation for personal growth and recovery from mental health issues should be motivated by a desire to get better, not by a desire to be forgiven. This relates back to Alex's observations about self-responsibility; BoJack must learn to love himself and accept himself despite his mental illness, but he still has to be accountable for the damage that he has caused the other characters on the show.

In the very first episode (S01 E01), Diane comments to BoJack, “You’re responsible for your own happiness, you know?” Diane’s observation presents a common theme throughout *BoJack Horseman’s* presentation of its mental health theming. BoJack is ultimately responsible for himself, despite his struggles with mental illness. He is responsible for seeking help and mental health treatment, and he is responsible for the hurt that he causes others. Still, BoJack is deserving of acceptance and support, which the cast of characters all demonstrate throughout the series and in the show’s finale. *BoJack Horseman* communicates that with a combination of proper support and self-responsibility, it is possible to manage mental health issues and lead a balanced, constructive life.

Conclusion

The interviews conducted for my research included a very small respondent pool. Furthermore, both of my respondents shared similar demographics, as they were both male graduate students in their early twenties. Further research on this topic would benefit from a larger pool of more diverse interview respondents.

Another limitation is that this research topic is highly conceptual and abstract. This study presents my interpretation of the text and the interview respondents’ answers, but the interpretive nature of the research allows for flexibility in understanding my results and *BoJack Horseman’s* mental health theming.

Further research is needed to understand the fuller breadth of the show’s mental health theming. The show engages with mental health in a variety of ways, many of which I was unable to address within this research paper. Additionally, due to the limitations of my respondent pool,

further research should be conducted to gain a greater understanding of the impact of *BoJack Horseman*'s mental health theming on its viewers.

BoJack Horseman is uniquely positioned to communicate its themes on mental health because of its nuanced approach to its mental health themes and its animated medium. The interviews that I conducted for this study reinforce my textual analysis in understanding how *BoJack Horseman* animated medium inspires empathy, and my respondents offered insights into the show that reflected my analysis of how the show's animated medium allows the audience to engage with the show's mental health theming.

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