Julia Rogers Research Prize Reflection Essay
Researching Mental Health Theming in *BoJack Horseman*

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I was driven to conduct research about Netflix's animated comedy *BoJack Horseman* because I was fascinated by how the show, despite being an animated adult comedy with a cast of anthropomorphic animals, presents nuanced and sophisticated representations of mental illness. Though the genre and medium seemed counterintuitive to the show's graceful handling of its mental health themes, I sought to demonstrate with my research that the show's animated medium and tactful comedy are the key to the show's ability to convey its poignant mental health themes. In my paper, I argue that *BoJack Horseman's* animated medium allows the show to communicate its characters' experiences with mental illness in an abstract, artistic way that inspires empathy with the viewer.

In order to prove my thesis, I needed to support my argument that the show's animated medium enables and amplifies the impact of its mental health theming through its ability to inspire empathy with the audience. As I expected, there was not much existing research on either the show or the intersection of animation, empathy, and or mental health. Through Goucher's library databases, I identified only two sources which discussed *BoJack Horseman* and its mental health themes. One of these articles (Higgs, 2019) briefly discussed the show's use of animation to communicate its mental health theming, and this analysis supported my thesis. Still, I knew that I needed to find further research which would help me explain the role of empathy and narratives in fostering acceptance of mental illness.

As my research topic is highly specific, I did not anticipate finding many academic sources that would directly relate to my topic. Other than Higgs (2019) I could not find any relevant sources that discussed using animation to depict or destigmatize mental illness. Though there is not much existing research surrounding animation and mental health, I was able to find many academic sources about the role of fictional narratives and empathy in destigmatizing

mental illness. The studies I cited from Ma and Nan (2018) and Hecht (2018) allowed me to fill in the gaps in my research with insight into this aspect of my research topic. I synthesized the findings of these studies with my analysis of *BoJack Horseman,* allowing me to illustrate that the show's animated, fictional narrative format inspires an empathetic response, that in turn helps destigmatize mental illness.

I also included academic studies which discuss negative representations of mental illness in film and television, as I felt it was necessary to provide this background information to illustrate how *BoJack Horseman* contrasts from other mass media representations of mental illness. My sources from Pirkis et al. (2006) and Klin and Lemish (2008) allowed me to provide further context on how the overwhelming majority of depictions of mental illness in media are negative, stigmatized representations.

With little existing research directly related to *BoJack Horseman* or animation's ability to inspire empathy, it was necessary for me to synthesize other, related research to successfully support my analysis. Though the specificity of my topic presented some challenges in my research process, and I had to adjust and broaden my search to find relevant academic studies related to mental health representations in mass media, all of my chosen sources aided my discussion of *BoJack Horseman.*

As my research process primarily occurred during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, all of my sources had to be accessed virtually. All of my sources, except for the article by Lavín (2018), were accessed through the Goucher Library databases. The library's accessibility to a wide range of online journals greatly aided the success of my research process. I have included a copy of my works cited page for your reference, as I have referenced many of these studies in my reflection essay.

Works Cited

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