

Responsible Portrayal of Mental Health Issues in Visual Media

Mohammadreza Shalbafan¹, Adeleh Askari-Diarjani², Mohammad Kiasalar³, Soheyl Salehi⁴, Hadi Zarafshan^{5*}

1. Mental Health Research Center, Psychosocial Health Research Institute (PHRI), Department of Psychiatry, School of Medicine, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
2. Psychiatry Department, Clinical Research Development Unit, 22 Bahman Hospital, Qazvin University of Medical Sciences, Qazvin, Iran.
3. National Agency for Strategic Research in Medical Education, Education Deputy, Ministry of Health and Medical Education, Tehran, Iran.
4. Department of Psychology, Garmsar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Garmsar, Iran.
5. Department of Translational Psychiatry and Psychology, Psychiatry and Psychology Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.

***Corresponding Author:**

Address: Department of Translational Psychiatry and Psychology, Psychiatry and Psychology Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran, Postal Code: 1333715914.

Tel: 98-21 55422002, Fax: 98-21 55421959, Email: h-zarafshan@sina.tums.ac.ir

Article Information:

Received Date: 2025/05/03, Revised Date: 2025/05/16, Accepted Date: 2025/05/18

Dear Editor;

Numerous studies have shown that mental health problems are a critical public health challenge in all societies. For example, according to the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study in 2019, the global number of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) corresponding to mental disorders significantly increased, from 80.8 million to 125.3 million in the 30-year period between 1990 to 2019 (1). Not only are all of us at risk of experiencing some degree of mental health issues during our lives, but we may also encounter someone who suffers from serious psychiatric conditions, either among our relatives or in our social interactions. Given this probability, mental health literacy (MHL) constitutes an essential competency for all individuals in the contemporary society. MHL refers to an individual's knowledge and attitude about mental health problems, which helps the prevention, early detection, help-seeking, and stigma reduction (2). Visual media (e.g., films, television, and digital content) could play a critical role in improving health literacy; however, their influence does not always align with established health recommendations. While, as an artistic phenomenon, visual media are associated with freedom of expression and creativity, as a social force, it must also adhere to ethical limitations in public communication (3). Given

this duality, depictions of mental health and related issues in visual media are inherently complex, requiring careful psychological, ethical and cultural considerations. Here, we briefly review key considerations regarding the responsible portrayal of mental health issues in visual media, while acknowledging its dual nature.

First and foremost, it is essential to depict a realistic picture of psychiatric conditions (4). An accurate representation improves public understanding of mental health issues and MHL and helps reduce the stigma around them. As numerous scientific studies consistently indicate, stigma has significant direct and indirect effects on multiple aspects of the lives of affected individuals and their families, including help-seeking behaviors, employment, marriage, and social relationships (5). A positive example is the "Beautiful Mind" which portrayed schizophrenia rigorously. Another successful example is the "Inside Out" for educating emotions and their influence on behaviors with children and adolescents. At the same time, it is very important to avoid romanticizing or glamorizing harmful behaviors (e.g., suicide and self-harm), as this could lead to an increase in such behaviors, especially in vulnerable populations like children and adolescent (6). A famous and well-studied negative example is the "13 Reasons



Why,” which is criticized for graphic suicide scenes. Also, many visual products are under question for promoting high-risk and violent behaviors (e.g., using drugs, inappropriate sexual relationships and aggressive behaviors) that are correlated with increasing psychological problems.

Any recommendation to mitigate these potential negative effects must consider the balance line between freedom of expression and protection against harmful contents that are both essential for a progressive society (3). An effective equilibrium strategy could be implementing professional peer-review mechanisms through established industry organizations, such as filmmakers' guilds or mental health associations. These organizations should develop and disseminate ethical guidelines and best practices aligned with the culture, norms and social values of their own society. They could encourage media content creators, especially filmmakers, to responsibly depict mental health problems and related issues like using psychotherapy and pharmacologic interventions in their products. Using “age rating systems”, “content warnings”, “post-Film resources” and “helplines after screenings” in visual media products are other effective harm reduction strategies to reduce their potential negative influences. Finally, promoting both media literacy and MHL represents a critical strategy. All organizations working in mental health and cultural sectors should actively promote these dual educational priorities.

As an innovative encouraging strategy, the Office of Mental Health, Social Affairs, and Addiction of the Deputy Ministry of Health at the Ministry of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education, in collaboration with the Deputy Ministry of Cultural and Student Affairs, for the first time, has selected the best cinematic work in the subsidiary section of the 43rd Fajr International Film Festival—known as the “Manifestation of National Will”—with the aim of bridging mental health and art. The jury of the Best Mental Health Film section at the 43rd Fajr International Film Festival recognizes “Call me Ziba” (directed by Rasul Sadr-Ameli) as the outstanding film in this category for its exemplary content and form in promoting mental health awareness and reducing psychosocial risks. This cinematic work emphasizes the importance of family, strengthening identity foundations, fostering hope, and highlighting the role of empathy and forgiveness in reinforcing interpersonal relationships, optimism, and life satisfaction. The filmmaker's profound portrayal of patients with chronic mental health disorders and their families underscores the necessity of destigmatization in the society, employing a cinematic and narrative approach to enhance public awareness about psychosocial mental health. The film effectively addresses critical concerns such as adolescents and women's struggles, as well as suicide prevention, presenting them through compelling storytelling. Additionally, it offers a realistic depiction of

psychiatrists, counselors, and mental healthcare services, while showcasing the positive impact of pharmacological treatment and rehabilitation in patients with psychiatric disorders—key strengths of this cinematic production. The organizers, through an innovative and structured approach, also aim to provide specialized academic and professional resources in counseling to support the production of cinematic works dedicated to enhancing psychosocial mental health.

Conclusion

In summary, responsible mental health portrayals in visual media must balance artistic freedom with ethical considerations. Accurate depictions reduce stigma, while romanticizing harmful behaviors risks negative consequences. Effective strategies include content warnings, rating systems, and post-screening support. Professional collaborations between media creators and mental health experts can develop culturally sensitive guidelines. Simultaneously, enhancing public media and MHL enables critical content engagement. These combined approaches allow visual media to serve as educational tools rather than potential harm sources. Future research should evaluate implementation frameworks and longitudinal impacts, ensuring that portrayals align with evidence-based mental health principles while respecting creative expression. Collective action across sectors remains imperative for meaningful progress.

Acknowledgment

We wish to thank the organizers of the Fajr International Film Festival for their hard work and dedication.

Conflict of Interest

None.

References

1. Global, regional, and national burden of 12 mental disorders in 204 countries and territories, 1990-2019: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2019. *Lancet Psychiatry*. 2022;9(2):137-50.
2. Kutcher S, Wei Y, Coniglio C. Mental Health Literacy: Past, Present, and Future. *Can J Psychiatry*. 2016;61(3):154-8.
3. Kalliris K. Online harm, free speech, and the 'legal but harmful' debate: an interest-based approach. *Journal of Media Law*. 2024;1-27.
4. Hodge DR, Turner PR. A 10-year examination of people with psychosis in American television programming: are representations improving over time? *J Ment Health*. 2025;13:1-8.
5. Janssens KME, Joosen MCW, Henderson C, Bakker M, den Hollander W, van Weeghel J, et al. Effectiveness of a Stigma Awareness

- Intervention on Reemployment of People with Mental Health Issues/Mental Illness: A Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial. *J Occup Rehabil.* 2024;34(1):87-99.
6. Collaborators GMD. Global, regional, and national burden of 12 mental disorders in 204 countries and territories, 1990–2019: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2019. *The Lancet Psychiatry.* 2022;9(2):137-50.