Original Research Article

IMPACT OF MOVIES ON KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES & PERCEPTION OF MENTAL HEALTH ON UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Background: Films have been dabbling in topics related to psychiatry and mental illnesses for a very long time, probably since the first "psychological thriller" came to be in 1945, Spellbound. The impact of movies in coloring perceptions of people about mental illnesses cannot be stressed upon enough. Not just a form of entertainment that it is so frequently branded, movies also function as mass media and can be a potentially useful tool in increasing mental health literacy of people. **Aim:** To assess the knowledge, attitudes, perception and their beliefs about mental illnesses and the effectiveness of various treatments ("mental health literacy") among undergraduate medical students, as portrayed in the movies they watch.
Materials and Methods: 401 healthy participants were evaluated through a semi-structured questionnaire and responses recorded via Google Forms. Pearson's correlation analysis was done to assess the relationship between various factors. Descriptive answers were recorded and thematic analysis was done.
Results: Majority (> 75%) of the participants reported being interested in watching movies with portrayal of mental health concepts and being interested in friends with someone with a mental illness. There was a positive correlation between participants who accepted that movies may have skewed their perception of mental illnesses and those who have attended psychiatry classes/clinics. 31.7% felt psychiatric medications are harmful/addictive and 7.7% felt all psychiatric patients are tied up/restrained physically.
Conclusion: Our study shows participants' attitudes towards mental illnesses and sufferers are affected by the how those are portrayed in the movies they watch. Movies could serve as a potential tool for promoting awareness about the same, especially as mass media for general population.
Keywords: mental health, movies, mental health literacy, mental health awareness, undergraduate students.

INTRODUCTION

One of the more troubling consequences of mental illnesses in their sufferers is the stigmatization they face from everyone around them, from close family to employer. The experience of stigma may result in a delay in seeking professional help, loss of self-esteem, and is an inhibitor of recovery and social inclusion.[1]

A technology designed to reach a large audience is implied by the term "mass media," which can include radio, newspapers, magazines, films, music, and news reels. Assessing the effect such technology might have on people has become

increasingly important in a world that has just survived a deadly pandemic which forced the entire world's population inside their own homes with screens as the sole communication with the outside world.[2]

Film as an art form, lends itself to the filmmaker, and what we see on the screen is but a reflection of his psyche. This becomes significant as this self-excavation often colours people's opinion of event/theme. Take, for example, Taare Zameen Par1, movie depicting dyslexia. Not only does it serve the purpose of educating the audience about the disorder through its portrayal in the film, it also generates empathy for the sufferer. [2-3]

Including regional films 2000 movies were made across the country, many of which utilize mental illnesses and the despised, feared or alienated 'other' mentally ill to portray villainy, comedy, horror, and also as a turning point in the story. This process of 'otherising' has been talked about in terms of economically challenged sections, or racially oppressed groups.[4] We feel it is appropriate way to describe those marginalized and stigmatized against because of their mental illnesses as well. Our study aims to identify how films contribute further to this stigma that has plagued the field of psychiatry since the time Freud put Anna O. on the couch.[5]

It is sufficiently clear from existing literature that the hyperreal images of film have a significant effect on the real-world opinions of those watching. To further describe and quantify this effect moving images have on imparting preconceived notions and prejudices to just about everyone who engages with them, we conceived this study, with an additional focus on possibility of using films as tool for teaching among medical students.

Researchers previously tried to utilize screening films as tool for teaching undergraduate medical students about psychiatry.[6] Though it reported a positive statistical significance, it was marred by small sample size.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This was a cross-sectional study conducted in undergraduate medical students of a teaching hospital in Karnataka, India, from January to March 2024. The aim of this study was to assess the knowledge, attitude, perception and students' beliefs about mental illnesses and the effectiveness of various treatments ("mental health literacy"), as portrayed in the movies they watch. There was also a focus on assessing the impact of psychiatry clinical posting in students by comparing the responses in groups of students who had attended psychiatry postings with those who hadn't and thereby assessing the impact of mental health awareness typically imparted in medical colleges through conventional teaching. We assumed that perception of movies had an association with

attitude, knowledge and beliefs about mental illnesses.

A Google Form was prepared for the study and the link was shared with all MBBS students. It included consent form, socio-demographic details of participants, and a semi-structured questionnaire prepared by the researchers on the basis of existing literature and insight gleaned from existing movies on the aforementioned topics, which was further validated by the senior psychiatrists. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, wherein all MBBS students studying in the medical college were approached in person for participation and were required to fill out the form while the both investigators were present in the room. All students were allotted 15 minutes to fill out the form after the purpose of the study was explained to them by the principal investigator who was the only person in the room present besides the students during this time. All responses were recorded only one time each and the interviews were conducted by Dr. Neha Mattikoppa (Assistant Professor; MD Psychiatry) and Dr. Nipun Makkar (Junior Resident, Psychiatry; MBBS) Institutional Ethics Committee approval was obtained prior to the study and informed consent was taken from all participants. Sample size calculated was 384, considering the 10% non-response rate and 5% margin of error10. Out of 600 approached, 406 responses were received, out of which 5 did not provide consent.

The form contained questions that included inquiries about personal watching habits (frequency of watching movies, language preferred), attendance in psychiatry clinics, contact with mental illness, a list of ten movies that were either focused on mental health or had a person with mental illness as the subject of the film. Many films were considered and narrowed down to 10 based on popularity, determined by the number of viewers on IMDb. The final list included Shutter Island (2010),[7] Split (2016),[8] Taare Zameen Par (2007),[1] Bhool Bhulaiya (2007),[9] Barfi! (2012)10, Atrangi Re (2021),[11] Anniyan/Aparichit (2005),[12] Dear Zindagi (2016),[13] My Name is Khan (2010),[14] Udta Punjab (2016),[15] and Black (2005).[16] Students were asked to answer the questions that followed based on the movies they had watched from the aforementioned ten. Subsequent questions assessed the attitude, stigma, and knowledge of the students, with some questions requiring the participants to fill out an additional subjective field justifying their opinions. These questions to assess the variables were prepared by studying the existing literature regarding impact of movies on mental health and watching the mentioned movies and studying them closely to assess the portrayal of manifestations of mental illness, person with mental illness and stigma against both patients and mental health professionals in those movies and these questions were further modified by taking suggestions from senior psychiatrists in the department. They were provided with range of

answers to choose from instead of absolute answers, so that their mindset can be assessed more accurately. The participants did not provide any feedback on the findings.

Statistical Analysis

Collected data was analysed using SPSS v25.0.0, IBM. Pearson's correlation was used to determine the correlation between attendance in psychiatric classes and other questions about knowledge related to the mental health field. Descriptive responses were analysed, responses were grouped into different themes and frequency of the same was recorded.

RESULTS

A brief overview of the sociodemographic details and other preliminary questions is given in the table below (Table 1). Out of the 376 participants (93.8%) that reported being interested in watching movies, majority of them were interested in watching English movies (64.8%), followed by Hindi (59.1%), Other regional languages (40.1%) and Kannada (34.4%).

Table 1: Sociodemographic details and preliminary questions

Variable	Categories	Total	Mean (SD)
Gender	Male	130 (32.4%)	-
	Female	271 (67.6%)	-
Age group	16-25	342 (85.28%)	20.67 (2.128)
	25+	59 (14.71%)	
Interested in watching movies	Yes	376 (93.8%)	-
	No	25 (6.2%)	-
Interested in watching movies with portrayal of mental health concepts	Yes	301 (75.1%)	-
	No	100 (24.9%)	-
Attended any psychiatric classes	Yes	209 (52.1%)	-
	No	192 (47.9%)	-
Close contact with a person with mental illness	Yes	150 (37.4%)	-
	No	251 (62.6%)	-

Participants were also asked to respond on a Likert scale of More likely to Neutral Response/ Did not think about this to whether they felt that the aforementioned movies have influenced their behavior towards people with psychiatric disorders. Out of 401 recorded responses, 68 (17%) responded it was more likely that such a thing could have happened, 153 (38.2%) felt it was likely, 69 (17.2%) felt it may be less likely and 111 (27.7%) felt neutral about it or did not think about the possibility of it happening.

Table 2: Thematic analysis of responses to the question

Questions	Themes	Verbatim Account (n)
Do you think above mentioned movies influenced your behavior towards people with psychiatric disorders?	Empathy	"Helped me understand how people with mental illnesses feel" (8) "I have been more empathetic towards people suffering from psychiatric illnesses" (2) "helped to empathize with the people suffering from mental illnesses" (1)
	Explanatory models	"How they think and interpret" (5) "Looking at movie gives a clearer idea than text about how the disease affects the individual" (3)
	Awareness	"Awareness regarding drugs and mental disorders" (5) "Sense of awareness and an idea about how these health conditions should be handled" (2)
	Denial	"Don't get influenced by movies" (4) "I watch movies for entertainment" (2) "Didn't think much of it, just enjoyed the movie" (1)

The following table (Table 2) elaborates on the thematic analysis to the answers for the above question. The responses were grouped into thematic headings and the frequency of similar responses were noted.

Among those who claimed to know the difference between a psychiatrist and psychologist, most of them answered correctly about psychiatrists being medical doctors able to prescribe medications as compared to psychologists who are unable to do the same or hold the same qualifications (n=22). Few of the incorrect responses included psychiatrists treating mental illnesses while psychologists preventing them (n=2), psychologists dealing with study of mind while psychiatrists with mental illnesses (n=2), psychologists being qualified to deal with the normal mind while psychiatrists dealing with people with mental disorders (n=1).

Among those who thought that psychiatric medications are harmful and addictive, most of them felt psychiatric medications are sedatives, thus addictive (n=6), or that the patient becomes dependent on them to help their mental state (n=4) while some people felt that the medications are addictive but not harmful as such (n=3), with a few of them referring to overdose with various

psychotropics as a proof for them being harmful to patients (n=1).

Among those who would not be interested in being friends with someone experiencing mental health issues, responses reported commonly were beliefs that persons with mental illnesses might harm them (n=7) or that being friends with them would affect their own mental state negatively (n=5) or that mental illnesses might be communicable and that they might fall ill similarly (n=5) the belief that nobody on the college campus suffered from any mental illness (n=2).

Among those who would not hire someone with a history of mental illness if they were an employer, most people felt that recurrence of such illness might affect the employed person's performance which might be bad for their business.

On whether they thought the portrayal of mental illness in movies will change the perception about mental illnesses and patients suffering from them, 132 participants (32.9%) felt it was more likely to happen, 226 (56.4%) felt it was likely, 24 (6%) thought it to be less likely while 19 (4.7%) felt there would be no change in perception.

Among those who felt that the usage of movies in teaching framework would be better than the conventional teaching, most people felt that movies were a more interesting way of communication and education (n=16), especially for the general population who might not be interested in conventional literature, aimed at potential doctors.

A significant correlation was found between participants who felt that movies had influenced their behaviour towards people with psychiatric disorders and their attendance in psychiatric classes or clinics, as depicted in the table below (Table 3).

Table 3: Correlational analysis comparing participants' responses and their attendance in psychiatry clinics

		Do you think above mentioned movies influenced your behaviour towards people with psychiatric disorders?				
Have you attended any psychiatric classes or clinics?		**Less likely**	**Likely**	**More likely**	**Neutral Response**	**p-value**
	No	40	60	31	61	**0.020**
	Yes	29	93	37	50	
Total		69	153	66	111	

Following is a table (Table 4) assessing the correlation between different responses by the participants and their attendance in psychiatry clinics. A positive correlation was found between participants knowing the difference between psychiatrist and psychologist, the awareness of stigma against people with mental health issues and professionals and of the opinion that usage of movies in teaching framework would be better than conventional teaching methods with attending psychiatry clinics.

Table 4: Correlational analysis of various questions in the questionnaire with attendance to psychiatry classes

		Do you think above mentioned movies influenced your behaviour towards people with psychiatric disorders?			
Do you know the difference between psychiatrist and psychologist?		**Yes**	**No**	**Total**	**p-value**
	Yes	158	97	255	**0.000**
	No	51	95	146	
Total		209	192	401	
Do you think all patients in psychiatric wards are tied up/ restrained?	Yes	13	18	31	0.237
	No	196	174	370	
Total		209	192	401	
Do you think psychiatric medications are harmful/addictive?	Yes	61	66	127	0.265
	No	148	126	274	
Total		209	192	401	
Do you think behaviour towards psychiatric patients in all hospitals is inhuman/cruel?	Yes	39	29	68	0.343
	No	170	163	333	
Total		209	192	401	
Do you know the difference between unmodified and modified ECT?	Yes	50	32	82	0.072
	No	159	160	319	
Total		209	192	401	
Would you be interested in being friends with someone experiencing mental health issues?	Yes	173	144	317	0.056
	No	36	48	84	
Total		209	192	401	
Do you think mental health difficulties are associated with lower intelligence?	Yes	15	16	31	0.665
	No	194	176	370	

		209	192	401	
Total		209	192	401	
Would you hire someone with a history of mental illness if you were an employer?	Yes	141	123	264	0.473
	No	68	69	137	
Total		209	192	401	
Do you think seeking help to treat mental illness is a sign of weakness?	Yes	9	13	22	0.279
	No	200	179	379	
Total		209	192	401	
If you notice someone in your family is experiencing a mental health difficulty, would you refer them to mental health professional?	Yes	191	171	362	0.432
	No	18	21	39	
Total		209	192	401	
Do you think there is a stigma against people with mental illness?	Yes	185	144	329	**0.000**
	No	24	48	72	
Total		209	192	401	
Do you think there is a stigma against mental health professionals?	Yes	117	82	199	**0.008**
	No	92	110	202	
Total		209	192	401	
Do you think incorrect portrayal of mental illness in movies causes stigma against people with mental illness?	Yes	176	147	323	0.053
	No	33	45	78	
Total		209	192	401	
Do you think movies can be used as an educational tool for teaching psychiatry?	Yes	182	169	351	0.776
	No	27	23	50	
Total		209	192	401	
Do you think usage of movies in teaching framework is better than conventional teaching?	Yes	79	45	124	**0.004**
	No	36	32	68	
	Equally good	94	115	209	
Total		209	192	401	

DISCUSSION

To our knowledge, this is the first mixed study of its kind to assess the impact of films on the knowledge, attitude, and stigma regarding mental illnesses in undergraduate medical students. Since we obtained subjective explanations for some of the responses the students submitted, we were also able to identify the different themes in their explanatory models. Stigma associated with mental illnesses could be dealt with much more effectively if we were to deal with the different themes in the answers above, separately. Students reported that movies helped them better understand how patients of psychiatric illness feel and correct portrayal in movies provides an insight into the world of thoughts of mentally ill person and effect on their life.

One more approach to the stigma was thought towards the treatment with psychotropic medications and they were perceived as harmful and addictive. It also gives us an insight into myths existing regarding psychiatry as whole and delays seeking help due to lack of knowledge. This was the perception of undergraduate students despite being taught about psychotropics in their syllabus. This shows the ignorance towards importance to psychiatry as a subject in curriculum for MBBS students. People also have the mindset that mental health should be maintained through sheer willpower and not with aid of medications even though this doesn't apply to physical health as the treatment for physical illnesses are readily accepted. The study population consisted of MBBS students, most of them between the ages of 16 and 25 and female, which represents the target population for such studies. Out of 401 students who participated, a total of 317 participants (79.1%) stated that they would be interested in being friends with someone experiencing mental health issues and 264 participants (65.8%) said yes to being open to hiring someone with a history of mental illness if they were an employer, which was similar to the results obtained by Ogorchukwu et al. (2016), in their study among preuniversity college students (n = 916) in South India; it was found that 77.5% participants (n=314) were interested in being friends with someone with depression while 65.5% participants (n=255) did not mind working with them professionally.

This particular result gives us an insight into the perception of people regarding decision making capacity and intellect of person with mental illness. People fail to recognize that highly prevalent psychiatric disorders like anxiety and depression have negligible effect on their cognition and their working capability and doesn't affect their intellect per se and this can be tackled by awareness through

movies. Ogorchukwu JM et al. also found that overall mental health literacy was low among adolescents; only 29.04% participants could identify depression and 1.31% could recognize psychosis/schizophrenia from their case vignettes.[17] In our study, less than half the participants could not correctly elaborate on the difference between a psychiatrist and a psychologist, after correcting for those who answered wrongly. The difference in this parameter can probably be explained by the exposure to psychiatric classes/clinics that undergraduate students in our study had.

More than half (52.1%) participants in our study felt that usage of movies in teaching framework is better than conventional teaching; most of these participants felt that movies were a more interesting way of communication and education, especially for the general population that might not be interested in conventional medical literature. These results were in line with those stated in the review article by Srivastava et al. (2016) which stated that depiction of mental health, psychiatric disorders and mental health professionals in mass media can be used as one of the sources of information regarding mental health and illnesses. It was further elaborated that conventional media like celebrity endorsements, content rich narrations, documentaries and internet; social media is an important part of model for mental health awareness among others.[18]

A meta-analysis of outcome studies on the stigma associated with mental illness by Corrigan PW (2012) revealed that social contact was the most effective way of reducing the discrimination associated with psychopathology in adults.[19] This is probably why participants in our study who showed an interest in being friends with people suffering from mental illness also showed mostly positive responses on most of the other questions.

The responses to most of the questions in our study indicated that people's attitudes regarding mental illness could be changed by the movies they watch, which has been shown earlier in an interventional study in medical students in Turkey by Altindag A et. al (2006) that revealed positive attitudinal changes in terms of 'belief about the etiology of schizophrenia', 'social distance to people with schizophrenia', and 'care and management of people with schizophrenia' in the intervention group immediately after exposure to the anti-stigma program consisting of films. In contrast, no significant change was observed in the control group.[20] This can be extrapolated to say that correct depiction of mental illness and depiction of forms of stigma against person with mental illness aids people in recognizing how mental illness might manifest as well as introspect into their own behaviour towards people with mental illness and thus reduce stigmatic attitude.

Tables 3 and 4 also reveal that participants who attended psychiatry clinic/ classes performed better on certain questions related to mental health literacy than those who did not attend any psychiatry postings; they could accurately tell the difference between a psychiatrist and psychologist and expressed less stigma against people with mental illnesses and mental health professionals. This highlights the importance and effectiveness of creating awareness regarding mental health among medical students and general population alike.

Film is art but it is also a ruthless commercial enterprise, driven by populism and low cunning,[21] which is often why the drive behind making films on new themes stems from the desire to make money. This raison d'être for popular movies results in media that sensationalizes and aestheticizes mental illnesses, at times, leading to increased suicides,[22] or making a mockery out of the illness, sufferers or the doctors who treat them.[23]

Due to this tendency to sensationalize sensitive themes to make more money, films have overrepresented and mispresented severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). Out of the 10 movies selected for this study based on their central themes of mental illness and popularity among the general population, 3 of them, Anniyan[12], Bhool Bhulaiya[9] and Split[8], depict DID while 2 of them, Shutter Island[7] and Atrangi Re[11] depict schizophrenia.

The experience one has with any form of media they have consumed, especially film, lingers long after leaving the theatre. One's experience with a film is initiated on a physical and visceral level, leading to very tangible emotions felt in anyone watching. Consequently, this hyperreality within the film can erode the lines between fact and fiction, leading viewers to absorb inaccurate and perhaps damaging portrayals of particular communities and circumstances. French philosopher Michel Foucault theorised extensively on power relations which might help in illustrating media whose effects on audience include stigmatizing persons with mental illnesses.

Foucault's theories about 'discourse' tell us that discourse has a material effect, and that perceptions of things create the things themselves.[24] Graham (2011) extends this further by eliciting the pattern which follows through a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis – that the language we employ to describe our understanding of ideas and behaviours actually produces those ideas and behaviours. Applied in the context of mental illness representation in film, these ideas and behaviours lead to the production of stereotypes which besides being inaccurate, are also demonising.[25] Unlearning of these maladaptive ideas and behaviours is what mental health professionals can help the general populace with. Following the same Foucauldian analysis, we can surmise that there is an antithetical case to be made for films with positive representations of mental illness. Such films may be used as a tool for teaching among the

medical undergraduates and for creating awareness among the general populace. The onus then falls on the filmmakers too, to create media that skirts away from sensationalism and towards an empathetic amalgamation of entertainment and understanding.

The strengths of the study were that this study being mixed, helped us gain insight into thoughts of participants regarding their attitude and stigma via their subjective explanations and it also highlights the areas that need to be worked on. Another advantage of this current study was a robust sample size. To the best of our knowledge, the only previous study with similar aims was an interventional study with a sample size of 6020.

There were limitations to our study: an interventional design would have been better suited to quantify the degree of mental health literacy imparted to us by movies, the possibility of recall bias among the participants and the lack of a comparator arm.

CONCLUSION

Our study establishes that mental health literacy is fairly average among medical undergraduates. In general, participants who had attended psychiatry classes/ clinics in the past could recognise better that movies might have affected their attitudes, stigma and knowledge about mental health issues, and displayed more positive attitudes towards those suffering from mental illnesses & those treating it. These results paint a worrisome picture – that of a general populace with less than acceptable mental health literacy. We feel that movies could play an instrumental role in spreading awareness about topics related to mental health and alleviating stigma against psychiatric patients and mental health professionals, in addition to more conventional ways. This retreads the importance of mental health literacy, preferably through a combined framework of the two.

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