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Mental Illness in Modern Media

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Introduction

Throughout history, many mental illnesses have been extremely stigmatized. In ancient times, people suffering from mental illness were believed to be possessed. The most common treatment for this was exorcism, which consisted of chanting prayers over the body of the possessed. Another treatment for possession was trephining. In order to let the spirits out, a small hole was drilled into the skull; however, most patients who underwent this procedure died. As time went on, people moved away from the theory of possession as they began to understand more scientific discoveries. Between the 1700s and the 1900s, asylums became the most common trend for those with mental illnesses. These were places of isolation, where those who were different could be cut off from society. In asylums, treatments were extremely painful and inhumane. Many patients were forced to take ice baths and undergo electroshock therapy. Most people did not know what went on in these places, and most did not want to know. As people began to understand more about the human mind, mental illnesses became less stigmatized. When people learned how patients were treated in asylums, there was a lot of public unrest and opposition. In the mid-twentieth century, most asylums were shut down; instead, cognitive behavioral therapy and antipsychotic drugs were introduced as a way to treat mental illness.

As time went on, mental health awareness, that is, the public’s interest and support of those with mental illnesses, increased dramatically. Today, mental illness affects a wide range of the United States’ population. According to the American Psychological Association (2023), 50 percent of adults ages 18 to 34 suffer from a mental illness; similarly, 45 percent of adults ages 35 to 44 also suffer from a mental illness. In college students, between 13 and 15 percent experience some degree of depression or anxiety (Aller et al., 2021). One source of the increase in mental health awareness could be the public health crisis that began in 2020. During the
COVID-19 pandemic, mental health issues and challenges like mental illnesses were reported by more than one third of high school students (Liu et al., 2023). Another explanation could be the decrease in stigma surrounding mental illness. According to Mak and colleagues (2007), the research regarding the impact of stigma surrounding mental illness has grown exponentially, leading to more people being aware of its prevalence in society. Additionally on the research front, much more research was dedicated to exploring all faucets of mental illnesses, from how they originate to how they differ between people to how they can and should be treated. This research led to a much better understanding of mental illnesses, and much more specific diagnoses, allowing people to get more customized, distinctive care.

Although the stigma surrounding mental illness is decreasing, it has not fully disappeared. In fact, mental illness has consistently been misconstrued and misused in the cinematic setting. Mental illness first appeared in films in the early 1900s, with movies such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *The Black Cat* (1934). In *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), there is an evil doctor suspected of controlling a murderer. Similarly, in *The Black Cat* (1934), there is a doctor who is guilty of kidnapping and murder. Since then, the trend has only grown, becoming immensely popular in specific genres of film, such as horror and thriller. Most people are familiar with the concept of thriller and horror movies. These movies can be defined as “films that strive to elicit the emotions of fear, horror and terror from viewers” (Wang et al., 2010). There are many sub-genres that ultimately fit under these umbrella terms but have specific, niche characteristics that separate them from others under the same umbrella. One of these sub-genres is that of the psychological thriller. In 2019, Stefani identified a set of niche characteristics seen within psychological thriller movies:

- Mentally unstable main character(s)
• Involvement in dangerous situations, both physical and psychological in nature
• Misleading/unreliable storytelling
• Suspense that capitalizes on consumer’s emotions

In psychological thriller movies, the main characters are often mentally unstable in some way; most often this is due to some sort of mental illness. Additionally, the plot of a psychological thriller features either a physically dangerous situation, such as kidnapping or murder, or a psychologically dangerous situation, where someone believes they are in danger but are not and creates physical danger for themselves. In psychological thriller movies, the storytelling is unreliable and misleading. This could be for several reasons. The main character could be intentionally manipulating those around them, or they could have a warped sense of reality and not understand the truth. Finally, psychological thriller movies use the nature of suspense to capitalize on viewer’s emotions, whether it be fear, anger, or sadness. These four characteristics work together to create the psychological thriller genre.

Psychological thriller movies often feature characters with mental illness. The audience often sees these characters not as a subject who can speak for themselves, but as an object to be discussed and analyzed. Oftentimes, in the cinematic universe, the audience needs to be able to understand certain concepts, plot points, or character actions quickly and easily. To achieve this goal, directors often lean into certain stereotypes. For example, in terms of unreliable storytelling, the audience almost always discredits characters suffering from mental illnesses, thinking it’s just their condition talking. In these films, those who suffer from mental illnesses are often seen as unpredictable, dangerous, and aggressive (Wedding, 2023). This phenomenon can be seen in countless different movies, such as the following:

• Misery (1990)
• *Primal Fear* (1996)
• *Identity* (2003)
• *Split* (2016)

Although they are meant for entertainment purposes, movies like these can still affect people’s perceptions about mental illness and those who suffer from mental illnesses. These effects are often explored through reception theories, which explain how audiences may understand certain communications. One of the main founders of the idea of reception theory was Stuart Hall.

Stuart Hall was a prominent cultural theorist during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. His reception theory is focused on media, specifically that of television, making it a good fit for movie analysis. Previous research has used reception theory to analyze portrayals of mental illness in film. For example, in 2011, Caputo and Rouner used reception theory to analyze how fiction versus nonfiction representations of depression in film impacted viewers’ stigmatization. Similarly in 2021, Pathak and Biswal used reception theory to analyze mental illness representations in Indian Hindi Cinema.

This paper will focus on the way mental illness is portrayed in modern media, specifically psychological thriller movies, as many of them feature main characters with some sort of mental illness. The specific mental illnesses present in the movies discussed in this paper are as follows: borderline personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, and dissociative identity disorder. Psychological thriller movies influence the way consumers view mental illness and those who suffer from mental illnesses. The potential effects of these portrayals will be explored through Stuart Hall’s theory of reception, as it was created based on television media, making it one of the more applicable reception theories to analyze films.

**Methods**
In movies, the psychological thriller genre has been gaining popularity in recent years. In fact, the streaming service Netflix now has an entire section dedicated to psychological thrillers. In addition to gaining popularity, this genre often uses a character with mental illness as a scapegoat for the violence and brutality in the movie. The psychological thriller genre is perhaps the genre that portrays mental illness in the worst possible light, making it more likely to drastically influence the audience’s perceptions of mental illness.

The four movies explored in this paper are *Misery* (1990), *Primal Fear* (1996), *Identity* (2003), and *Split* (2016). These specific films were chosen because each of them features a character with a mental illness that is portrayed in a way that increases its stigmatization. In *Misery* (1990), the mentally ill character kidnaps someone and physically abuses them. In *Primal Fear* (1996), the mentally ill character murders someone, then fakes a mental illness to avoid being punished for the crime. In *Identity* (2003), the mentally ill character was convicted of several murders. In *Split* (2016), the mentally ill character kidnaps three girls and murders two of them. Because of these poor depictions, the viewers are more likely to dramatize mental illness, which will allow readers to understand how drastic the impacts of these portrayals can be. Another reason these specific films were chosen was because each was relatively popular, grossing between 60 and 280 million dollars at box offices worldwide. Additionally, each film featured popular and up-and-coming actors and actresses. Because of their popularity, many people will be familiar with these movies, making it easier for them to understand this study.

These four movies will be analyzed through Stuart Hall’s reception theory. Hall’s reception theory is consistently and frequently cited; it has been cited over 18,000 times, with about 150 citations in 2024 alone. In Stuart Hall’s reception theory, he uses four steps to theorize how audience members acquire and comprehend messages sent through media.
Specifically, he claims there are three different ways in which they can decode these messages: preferred reading, oppositional reading, and negotiated reading. Preferred reading refers to the message the producer of the media intended to convey to the audience; this can also be called dominant reading, as it is rooted in ideological societal norms (Hall, 1973). Oppositional reading refers to the message the audience creates themselves, regardless of what the media producer was striving to convey. These messages defy the societal norms of preferred readings; they instead create their own exceptions based on novel situations (Hall, 1973). Finally, negotiated reading refers to a mixture of the two previous messages; the audience understands some of what the media producer was trying to convey, but they also create and understand some aspects of their own. Here, the dominant societal norms are acknowledged, however, some exceptions or novelties are also accepted (Hall, 1973). This is the most common way an audience will decode an encoded message. Hall’s theory of reception can be applied to psychological thriller movies in order to understand the different ways in which audiences may perceive them. Originally, Hall’s reception theory was created based on television. His purpose was to describe how producers encoded messages for their viewers and how the different ways in which viewers decoded these messages. Because television and movies are similar in this aspect, it is most appropriate to use Hall’s reception theory to analyze the films in this study.

**Discussion**

The first movie this paper discusses is *Misery* (1990). Paul Sheldon is the main character in the 1990 movie *Misery*. A well-known author, Sheldon’s final book in a popular series, *Misery*, was just released. The beginning of the film features Sheldon finishing an untitled book, presumably his first post-Misery novel. He then gets into his car to drive out of Colorado, where he traveled to finish the book; however, before he can get far, he loses control of the car in the
snow and it flips, knocking Sheldon out and resulting in many injuries. He then wakes up in an unfamiliar location, with an unknown woman telling him she is his “number one fan.” She introduces herself as Annie Wilkes, claiming to be a nurse, and helping Sheldon recover from the injuries he sustained in the accident. However, Sheldon notices there is something off about her. Wilkes has constant mood swings between happiness, anger, and depressive episodes. Sometimes, in her fits of rage, Wilkes lashes out and physically hurts Sheldon. This satisfies the misleading storytelling aspect of psychological thriller movies. Additionally, Wilkes forced Sheldon to burn the only copy of his new, post-Misery novel, and write another Misery novel because she did not like the ending, going as far as to lock him in the room until it was finished. This successfully meets the mentally unstable character criteria. As Sheldon’s condition begins to improve, he starts looking around the house while Wilkes is not home. While he is snooping, the author finds out the nurse was accused of murdering several infants at the hospital she worked at, and even quoted lines from his book at the trial. When she finds out about this, she straps Sheldon to the bed and breaks his ankles with a sledgehammer. This meets the dangerous situation criteria of the psychological thriller genre. When investigating the author’s disappearance, the local sheriff makes a stop at Wilkes’ home. The suspense in this scene is extremely high, playing on viewer’s fear and anxieties, letting them wonder if the sheriff will find Sheldon and what will happen to him. This effectively hits the last criteria of suspense. Therefore, Misery (1990) should be classified as a psychological thriller movie.

In this movie, Wilkes is described as suffering from borderline personality disorder. According to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, borderline personality disorder is defined as “a pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity, beginning by early adulthood and
present in a variety of contexts” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The aspects of the diagnosis can be seen in Wilkes’ behavior throughout the movie. In terms of interpersonal relationships, as Wilkes is driving into town, she has considerable, unwarranted road rage directed at the people around her, consisting of cursing, honking, and even kicking dirt toward passing cars. However, when she walks into the store, her entire demeanor is flipped; she’s smiling and making small talk with others. Additionally, in terms of self-image and affect, as she is making Sheldon rewrite the book, Wilkes is extremely excited, instantaneously reading chapter after chapter as they are written. However, as Sheldon comes toward the end of the book, Wilkes becomes depressed, frequently telling Sheldon she has nothing to live for and idolizing suicide. Finally, in terms of impulsivity, when Wilkes gets angry, she often does things she regrets; she frequently apologizes to Sheldon for her outbursts throughout the film. Based on these and other actions, one can determine that Wilkes suffers from borderline personality disorder. This representation of borderline personality disorder could impact the way the audience views borderline personality disorder.

In society today, there is not as much information available about borderline personality disorder as compared to more recognized disorders, such as depression and anxiety. Because of this lack of information, people are more likely to lean into stereotypes concerning the disorder. A large stereotype of people with borderline personality disorder is that they are attention-seeking, as well as “manipulative, destructive, and violent” (Women’s Centre for Health Matters, 2020). Hall’s reception theory assumes the dominant reading of borderline personality disorder from the movie Misery describes the current societal stereotypes. Therefore, Hall’s reception theory would describe the dominant reading as follows: people with borderline personality disorder act in manipulative and violent ways to gain attention from others. In contrast, the
negotiated reading combines the current societal stereotypes with components shown in the film. In the film, Wilkes exhibited a lot of violent behavior; however, she was not seeking public attention. In fact, she wanted to keep a low profile in town, so nobody would suspect she was holding Sheldon captive. Based on this information, the negotiated reading, which is the most common reading according to Hall’s reception theory, would be that people with borderline personality disorder have violent and criminalistic tendencies; this combines Wilkes’ violent behaviors and absence of attention seeking with the stereotype that people with borderline personality disorder act in manipulative and violent ways. The negotiated reading can be seen in reviews of the movie. After watching the film, one Reddit user wrote:

> From what I remember of the book, the movie was spot on. I think that she had human moments where she appeared to care and then would go batshit crazy in a second if something upset her. The humanizing her with the nice moments makes her even scarier to me tbh. Having those kinds of mood swings of caring to dangerous at any given moment is way scarier than knowing that your just dealing someone who is always in a bad mood (engineeringburbon, 2022).

This audience member’s interpretation supports the idea that people with borderline personality disorder have violent and criminalistic tendencies; it addresses the idea that Wilkes is not acting in this way for attention, like the stereotype suggests. Instead, it is something that just happens; she is not making a deliberate choice.

The second movie this paper discusses is *Primal Fear* (1996). In this movie, the main character, Aaron Stampler, is a suspect in the homicide investigation of an archbishop. At the beginning of the film, he is seen running from the murder scene, being chased by police, covered in blood. After running for a while, he is eventually caught and arrested. When Stampler talks
with his lawyer, he claims he did not murder the archbishop. Instead, he says he was in the room and saw someone standing over the archbishop, but he cannot remember what happened after that. Stampler tells his lawyer about his “spells,” where he blacks and cannot remember anything that happened for the duration of it. This contributes to the unreliable storytelling feature of psychological thriller movies. As Stampler continues to speak with his lawyer and a licensed psychiatrist, he has episodes of drastic personality changes, going from shy and reserved to angry and indignant. After a few of these episodes, the psychiatrist diagnoses Aaron with dissociative identity disorder. This is the mentally unstable character component of psychological thriller movies. The movie goes through different days of the trial, with scenes in between dealing with Stampler’s two personalities. Towards the end of the trial, Stampler takes the stand. His lawyer asks him questions targeting his anger, attempting to get the other personality to take over. During these questions, suspense is used to draw the viewers in, leaving them to question if the other personality is going to appear and, if it does, what it is going to do. When the other personality finally presents itself, Stampler jumps over the stand and begins to strangle the prosecutor. This addresses both the need for suspense and dangerous situations in psychological thriller movies, therefore allowing Primal Fear (1996) to be classified in the psychological thriller genre.

At the end of the film, the judge declares Stampler not guilty by reason of insanity. After the trial, he reveals to his lawyer he did not suffer from dissociative identity disorder; he was acting shy and innocent, and the aggressive personality was his true self the entire time. This suggests Stampler suffers from antisocial personality disorder. According to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, antisocial personality disorder is defined as “a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others” (American
Psychiatric Association, 2013). The aspects of the diagnosis can be seen in Stampler’s behavior throughout the movie. At the end of the movie, Stampler shows no remorse for any of his actions, whether that be murdering the archbishop, lying to his lawyer, or faking dissociative identity disorder to avoid punishment. He does not care what he did to others or what he made them feel; he only cares that he was able to fool everyone and get away with his crimes. Based on these and other actions, one can determine that Stampler suffers from antisocial personality disorder. This representation of antisocial personality disorder could impact the way the audience views antisocial personality disorder.

The third movie this paper discusses is *Identity* (2003). The 2003 movie *Identity* begins with two separate storylines: the day before the execution of a convicted killer, and eleven strangers stranded at a motel due to a rainstorm. At the motel, the strangers all check in and get their separate rooms. However, as the night progresses, the strangers begin to be murdered, gruesomely killed one by one. As the people at the motel attempt to stay alive, the tension and suspense is high, leaving viewers to wonder who will make it out alive. This meets the danger and suspense aspects of the psychological thriller genre. Switching to the other storyline, the trial was being reevaluated because a piece of evidence, the murderer’s diary, was misfiled. This allowed the defense to replead insanity, which was previously denied. They argued the different syntax styles and handwriting in the diary were evidence of multiple personalities existing in the defendant. The mental instability of the main character is a benchmark in the psychological thriller genre. As the defense argues this, one of the personalities presents itself in the judge’s chambers. It is then revealed that all the people at the motel are separate personalities of the defendant, and the motel does not actually exist; it is only in the defendant’s mind. This fulfills the unreliable storytelling component, making *Identity* (2003) a psychological thriller movie.
After understanding he is only one identity of another person, the personality in the courtroom goes back to the motel, which we now know is only in the mass murderer’s mind, and kills the homicidal personality. After this, the mass murderer is taken off death row and transported to a mental institution. However, the homicidal personality was not dead. He kills all the other personalities and takes over completely, strangling the transport driver and causing the vehicle to swerve off the road.

This film explores the mental illness dissociative identity disorder. According to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, dissociative identity disorder is defined as “Disruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states...[that] involves marked discontinuity in sense of self and sense of agency, accompanied by related alterations in affect, behavior, consciousness, memory, perception, cognition, and/or sensory-motor functioning” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The aspects of the diagnosis can be seen in the murderer’s behavior throughout the movie. This person has eleven distinct personality states, as seen by the eleven guests at the motel. When one of the identities appeared in the judge’s chambers, he did not recognize himself in the mirror or in the reflection of the window. He had no idea he was not a real person and only existed inside the head of another. Because of this, among other things, one can determine that the murderer suffers from dissociative identity disorder. This representation of dissociative identity disorder could impact the way the audience views dissociative identity disorder.

The final movie this paper discusses is Split (2016). In this movie, three teenage girls are kidnapped in a parking lot. When they wake up, the three of them are locked in an unfamiliar room. The man who kidnapped them identified himself as Dennis and tells the girls they are extremely special. As they try to figure out what to do, they see a woman through the crack of
the door. They call out for her help, but as she opens the door, the three girls are faced with the same person who kidnapped them; however, the person now has different clothes, voice inflections, and mannerisms, calling herself Patricia. As the movie goes on, the girls are introduced to another temperament of their abductor: a nine-year-old child called Hedwig. In the next scene, the kidnapper meets with their doctor, and it is revealed that they have dissociative identity disorder, meeting the mentally unstable character feature of the genre. When meeting with the doctor, the presenting identity is Dennis. However, he is pretending to be a different identity, a fashionista called Barry. Previously, Barry emailed the doctor because the identities that were taking over had been banned due to their poor choices. This is part of the misleading storytelling in the genre. As the girls interact with the different identities, they slowly learn why they were kidnapped: the plan is for them to be sacrificial food for an unidentified entity. This entity strives to rid the world of “impure” people, those he deems have not suffered. This is the danger portion of the genre. Towards the end of the film, as the girls are trying to escape, their kidnapper transforms into “the beast.” The movie then cuts between the beast running back to where the girls are and the girls trying to escape. This fosters the suspense of the movie, playing on the viewer’s fear and anticipation. This is the last criteria in the genre, allowing Split (2016) to be classified as a psychological thriller movie. The Beast murders two of the three girls, only sparing the third because she has scars from abuse, causing the Beast to consider her “pure” with proof of suffering. At the end of the movie, he is still on the loose with the same plan.

This film also explores dissociative identity disorder. The aspects of the diagnosis can be seen in the kidnapper’s behavior throughout the movie. This person has twenty-four distinct personalities; in the film, we are only introduced to a few, such as Dennis, Patricia, Hedwig, and Barry. Although these personalities are aware of each other, when they are not presenting, they
have no recollection of what the other identities have done. Because of this, among other things, one can determine that the kidnapper suffers from dissociative identity disorder. This representation of dissociative identity disorder could impact the way the audience views dissociative identity disorder.

In Stuart Hall’s reception theory, the way one interprets the meaning is dependent on the viewer and the society they live in. As mentioned above, the most common way an audience will decode an encoded message is through negotiated reading, where the dominant societal norms are acknowledged, however, some exceptions or novelties are also accepted. In order to decode the messages in these movies through negotiated reading, the audience uses the social and cultural aspects of the society they are a part of (Hall, 1973). In today’s society, although mental health is becoming more widely accepted and less stigmatized, many people do not fully understand mental illness. Because of this, people tend to lean into stereotypes surrounding mental illness. The most common stereotype is that people with mental illness are violent and unpredictable. These movies only feed into that stereotype. Based on socio-cultural stereotypes and the portrayals of mental health in these movies, Hall’s reception theory assumes this is the most likely way an audience would interpret the portrayal of these disorders:

- People with borderline personality disorder have violent and criminalistic tendencies
- People with antisocial personality disorder intentionally manipulate the emotions of others and have no regard for anyone other than themselves
- People with dissociative identity disorder are violent and unpredictable
- People with dissociative identity disorder are insane and extremely dangerous

Conclusion
The way the audience interprets a mental illness is extremely important. When they are faced with these portrayals of mental illness, people accumulate it into their own previous knowledge of the disorder. Therefore, by portraying mental illness in such a negative light, psychological thriller movies reinforce the stereotype that mentally ill people are violent, dangerous, manipulative, and unpredictable. This stereotype is extremely debilitating for those suffering from mental illness. It instills fear into the public, into those who do not understand mental illness. When people fear those who are mentally ill, it increases the stigmatization against them, leading to poorer treatment and seclusion, which only makes it harder on those suffering from mental illness.

One limitation of this paper is it only reviews the psychological thriller genre. Different genres may show different representations and, therefore, affect consumers differently. For example, the comedy genre portrays similar character types, but their actions are exaggerated for comedic effect, and the character is not marked as a psychopath at the end of the movie. Because of this, future research should consider other genres. Another limitation of this study is that it only looks at movies. Other forms of media, such as books, news, and magazines may also have different portrayals and effects, so future research should consider other forms of media. A final limitation of this study is that it only looks at a select few movies in the genre. There are many other films, like the ones discussed in this paper, that use mental illnesses as a large plot point. These films were selected from the author’s current knowledge, experiences, and availability of the movies; other movies may represent mental illness differently. For example, smaller, independent movies may have the opportunity and ability to represent mental illness differently by taking more risks and breaking away from mainstream culture. For this reason, future research should look at other films in the psychological thriller genre.
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