**The Impact of Anti-Hero Narrative Structure in Film on Public Perceptions of Mental Health**

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**Introduction**

This study aims to determine how the anti-hero storyline in movies impacts public perceptions of mental health. According to the World Health Organization (2022), mental health is “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape our world.” Poor mental health has various negative consequences for all aspects of life. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) states that having depression can increase a person’s chances of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. Additionally, mental health disorders are common in the United States. The World Health Organization (2022) says, "More than 50% will be diagnosed with a mental illness or disorder at some point in their lifetime.” As a result, mental health problems among Americans are a significant issue with lethal consequences. Therefore, the longer Americans do not give their mental being the same amount of attention and care as their physical wellbeing, they will suffer holistically. According to a 2021 study conducted by Verywell Mind highlights the neglect that Americans show to their mental health with 77% of participants saying physical health is important and 76% of participants reported that mental health is important. However, 61% of participants said they give physical health more time than mental health and 39% said they give mental health more attention (Morin, 2021). Therefore, a majority of Americans recognize that physical health and mental health are both important to truly being healthy, but physical health recieves significantly more attention.

Next, mental health stigmas are harmful toward our society. The American Psychiatric Association (2020) states[,](https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/stigma-and-discrimination) "More than half of people with mental illness don't receive help for their disorders." A significant factor in that statistic is that people are concerned about how peers will treat them (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). The image of mental health in films reinforces the stigma against people with mental illnesses. For example, the film Once Over the Cucko’s Nest (1975) tackles several mental health stigmas. Consequently, according to Psychologist Danny Wedding, “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1975) makes the case that psychiatric hospitals are simply prisons with little or no regard for patient rights or welfare. These films, in part, account for the continuing stigma of mental illness” (Dixon, 2017. In part, this is because of the media dependency theory which states, “ there's a link between media, the audience and broader social systems. It claims that all three of these participants rely on each other for information and to achieve their goals”(Indeed, 2022). The dependency is reliant on three factors. First, is how the audience feels when consuming that media. When the audience feels satisfied with the media they are consuming they will be dependent on that news source. Secondly, the audience's dependency hinges on what is going on in society. If there are major changes such as a natural disaster or an election the audience member is more dependent. Lastly, the more an audience member feels pressure from external factors, they will depend on that news source more frequently. Therefore, if an audience feels satisfied, informed, and needed they are more likely to go back to that source. As a result, accurate and positive portrayals of mental illness in movies can alter public attitudes to be more accepting of people diagnosed with mental disorders. However, American audiences identify with the intentions of the anti-hero nature, and the characters’ behaviors ultimately make them a figure in pop culture. Anti-hero characters are defined as “A protagonist of a story who embodies none of the qualities typically assigned to traditional heroes and heroines. The anti-hero is a protagonist whose failings are typically used to humanize him or her and convey a message about the reality of human existence” (Purdue Owl, 2007). As media continues to grow and become more accessible to Americans, the messages have a significant impact on young people in today's society. Therefore, I am interested in analyzing how the narrative structure of anti-hero films with a protagonist with mental health disorders in films creates misconceptions about mental health.

**Literature Review**

**Mental health stigmas are harmful**

Any type of stigma is harmful to the directed group. Health Direct (2021) defines a stigma as “when someone is marked or discredited somehow, or reduced from being a whole person to being a stereotype or labeled as a collection of symptoms or a diagnosis.” In an article by the American Psychiatric Association (2020), stigmas with mental health harm people with mental disorders. For example, the 2019 film *The Joker* perpetuates stigmas by clearly defining the main protagonist, Arthur Fleck, as having mental issues. The more deranged Fleck gets, the more violent he becomes. The American Psychiatric Association (2020) cites, “More than half of people with mental illness don't receive help for their conditions." The American Psychiatric Association (2020) concluded that patients opt not to seek treatment because they fear how they will be treated and what will happen to their life once others know they have an illness. The *British Journal of Psychiatry* conducted a case study on the 2019 film *The Joker* and its impact on mental health. Authors Durham and Wilkinson (2020) concluded that the main character's actions with mental illness could reinforce negative stereotypes. Durham and Wilkinson write, "Nonetheless, we believe that the conflation of mental illness and violence in this film is likely to give the public the impression that people who are mentally ill are likely to be violent, reinforcing the stigma of a fairly common stereotype" (Durham & Wilkinson, 2020, p. 307). The study says that the movie's storyline makes mental illness the cause of Arthur’s violence. Durham and Wilkinson specifically reference the end of the film when they write, "Arthur is seen in a psychiatric hospital, leaving the viewer with the conclusion that his mental illness was the cause of his crimes, for which he was admitted to hospital rather than imprisoned" (Durham & Wilkinson, 2020, p. 307). Durham and Wilkinson recognize violence as a common stereotype people have of those who are mentally ill. Lastly, mental health stigmas have a significant impact on people's livelihoods. The Mental Health Foundation (2019) highlights the adverse outcomes of mental health stigmas. According to the Mental Health Foundation, "Mental health problems are among the least likely of any group with a long-term health condition or disability to find work, be in a steady, long-term relationship, live in decent housing, and be socially included in mainstream society." People diagnosed with mental illnesses already struggle to integrate themselves into society, and stigmas discourage better treatment from the public. The article shows how stigmas can disrupt all aspects of life for people with mental illness.

**Media representations reinforce stigmas about mental health**

Sieff (2009) details common stereotypes of mental illness in news coverage and film. The study concluded that characters in movies and television are more likely to be violent and commit crimes. Author Elaine Sieff wrote, "Television and film characters with mental illnesses were violent nearly ten times more frequently than 'normal' characters" (Sieff, 2009, pp. 259-269). These depictions are harmful and endorse stereotypes about mental illness that are not true. Typically, people diagnosed with mental health conditions are not ten times more violent than people who do not have mental health disorders. Additionally, certain words and phrases in all types of media contribute to growing stereotypes. For example, the Mental Health Foundation (2019) lists several such as “OCD”, “psycho,” “I’m going to kill myself,” and “anorexic.” Americans loosely use these words to hyperbolize an event or feeling. Simply describing someone very thin as anorexic stigmatizes people who suffer from anorexia nervosa because the condition is far more than being skinny. The Mental Health Foundation explains the process that makes this vocabulary style harmful, called associative activation. Associative activation is “a simple result of seeing or hearing a word. A word brings an idea, and an idea triggers many other ideas. Our brain keeps connecting all those ideas by resurfacing memories, which recall emotions that bring other reactions” (Mental Health Foundation, 2019). Therefore, when a film uses these terms with a visual, it can establish connections with harmful ideas shown in films. Next, Zimmerman (2003) explains the impact of what people see in movies on their behaviors. Zimmerman notices that characters with mental illness in films often resort to violence. These violent behaviors can be harmful. As Zimmerman writes, "Acts of violence by a small number of the mentally ill severely stigmatize all such persons. An association between violent behavior and madness has existed in the mind of the for hundreds of years; each such publicized incident reinforces this association" (Zimmerman, 2003, p. 101). Zimmerman focuses on movies that link the behaviors people see on screen and how people with mental illnesses act in society. Then Zimmerman elaborates that movies feature characters performing specific actions because of existing societal stereotypes. Another source that highlights the impact of media on mental health is a study by Brian Smith (2015). Smith references a study by the American Mental Health Association that examined the media sources people use to learn about mental illness. The results showed that "the public gathers its information regarding mentally ill individuals from television (70%), newspapers (58%), television news (51%), news magazines (34%), and the internet (25%)" (American Mental Health Association, 2015). Americans are turning to television and entertainment as their primary source of information about mental health, which distorts a large portion of our society's views about mental health. Smith (2015) then covers how shows that say are inspired by actual events lead audiences to associate the plots of these shows with real life. Smith references crime shows such as “*Criminal Minds”* and variety of “*Law Order”* series that claim their stories are based on true events. Smith goes on to argue that these shows frequently use mental health as a means to explain a crime.

**Narrative structure in film**

First, according to the Miline Publishing Company, the narrative structure is defined as “Narrative structure is about two things: the content of a story and the form used to tell the story. Two common ways to describe these two parts of narrative structure are story and plot” (Reich, n.d). Therefore, the narrative structure serves as the foundation for the content of a film. Furthermore, the plot is “what happens in a story, but the action itself doesn’t constitute the plot. Plot is created when actions are arranged and organized in a meaningful way” (Reich, n.d). Next, the Milline Publishing Company Library defines and lays the story structure into six parts. The first part is titled the exposition, where the audience learns about the main characters after they are introduced. Next is the complication, where the story lays out the conflict that the main character will face and deal with. After is the rising action, where the main character sets out to accomplish or overcome the conflict. Fourth is the climax, where the main character decides how he will face the main conflict. The climax is followed by the falling action when the main character completes any loose ends of the conflict. Lastly, the denouncement is when the story ends, and the audience receives the conclusion. As a result, filmmakers use story and plot when creating a new movie. Additionally, films follow the same basic story structure and are classified into four different types. The first type is called a linear narrative which “presents the events of the story in the order in which they actually happened. This can be accomplished through any narrative perspective, be it first-person narration, second-person narration, or third-person narration” (Brown, 2021). In contrast, the next classification is a non-linear narrative that “presents the events of the story out of order, employing flashbacks and other literary devices to shift the chronology of a story. A short story, novella, or novel may fracture the timeline of the story in order to emphasize the emotional mindset of a personal narrative or make thematic connections between noncontemporary events” (Brown, 2021). Next is the quest structure where “a story in which the protagonist works tirelessly toward a goal. Pursuing this goal likely becomes their all-consuming passion, and they must face seemingly insurmountable obstacles along the way. Typically, this object of their pursuit is geographically remote, and the character must go on a long journey to obtain it.” The last type of narrative structure is called a viewpoint structure that “is designed to express the points of view or subjective personal experience of the main character or other fictional characters in the story. In viewpoint narrative writing, moods, feelings, and other sensory details are filtered through the narrator’s own life and subjective point of view” (Brown, 2021). Every single piece of narrative in any type of media can be categorized into these four classifications.

**Schemas change the way viewers interpret the media's message**

*Schemas* are an integral system that humans use for processing and making interpretations about information. The American Psychiatric Association (year) states, "a collection of basic knowledge about a concept or entity that guides perception, interpretation, imagination, or problem-solving." These schemas are the basic framework for associating things and adjectives with a particular concept. These schemas are not necessarily based on facts; they are typically formed from a person's experience or knowledge about that specific thing. For example, a schema for people with mental health conditions could be violent, unpredictable, unreliable, crazy, and dangerous. Therefore, if someone starts a schema on a stereotype, stigma, or other pieces of false information, then that schema is harmful. Merrick (2006) investigates the relationship between schemas and how people make conclusions from mass media. In the beginning, Merrick writes about a phenomenon called the target corollary, which is how people perceive the image of the source of media they are interacting with. This means that audience members interpret content differently based on the member's perception of the source. Merrick (2006) determined that the two are correlated as he writes, "In short, if people assume media are powerful, then exposure equals effects" (p. 632). As a result, the more trustworthy and reliable the news source the audience receives information from, the more likely they are to believe the message from that piece of media. Additionally, the more power and influence the viewer believes a media outlet has, the more people are exposed to and listen to the message baked into the content. Later in the book, Merrick discusses how people perceive exposure to certain messages based on how that audience member perceives a specific person or group of people would react. Merrick (2006) goes on to explain research by a group of sociologists that says, "People habitually draw cause-and-effect attributions about things they observe, so when they see a message that advocates a certain behavior and see that behavior displayed, they assume media messages are powerful" (p. 633). Merrick establishes that people think about why certain things happen in the world based on the things and people they interact with daily. This idea is supported by the public pedagogy theory that states, “concept focusing on forms, processes, and sites of education and learning occurring beyond formal schooling and practices”(O’Malley, 2020). Not everything we learn comes from a classroom or in school. Instead humans also learn from life experiences as well as content they encounter throughout their lives. Therefore, entertaining mediums such as films and television can serve as a site of education about important issues. Consequently, when the message in a piece of media confirms what you see, viewers are more likely to hold that media in higher regard. Lastly, Shen (2004) dives into the relationship between framing and schemas. Framing is defined as “used to represent the communication aspect which leads to the people’s preference by consenting one meaning to another”()To begin, Shen discusses how framing the news in certain ways can access specific schemas and triggers a particular reaction. Shed theorized that people access information that aligns with their views and what is essential to them schematically. As a result, Shen decided to test her theory by conducting a focus group and asking participants to select articles and content they would read. Specifically, Shen (2004) chose the divisive topic of Arctic drilling and split the pieces into two groups: articles that emphasize the economic impact and those that emphasize the environmental impact. After conducting the focus group, Shen concluded, "Those schematic on the economic impact of Arctic drilling were more likely to be affected by news emphasizing the economic impact of drilling. Environment schematics were more likely to be affected when media messages emphasized how drilling might affect the ecosystem and environment" (Shen, 2004, p. 415). News and the media can display messages in a specific way to access viewers with one particular schema without the audience knowing. Therefore, people are more likely to consume information that confirms their beliefs. In films, the framing is more complex as explosions, car chases, special effects, and many other elements of movies hide messages (Shen, 2004). Consequently, films put in particular messages that access specific schemas to attract fans and viewers and even change how the public views certain issues. Next, schemas and schema theory explains how humans form stereotypes. Psychologist Travis Dixon (2017) details that “we naturally categorize people into groups and we make generalizations about the characteristics of those groups so that it makes it less cognitively demanding (easier) to think about the individuals we meet on a daily basis” (Dixon, para. 2). Therefore, when a film shows a stereotypical depiction of a race, gender, condition, or more it resonates with stereotypical schemas people have of that group. Even further, films access a specific type of schema called image schemas. Image schemas are “directly meaningful, pre-conceptual structures grounded in our physical movements through space and in our perceptual and physical interactions with objects” (Coëgnarts & Kravanja, 2012, p. 85). Additionally, films stimulate a specific type of neuron in our brains called mirror neurons. The mirror neuron system “is not only activated when we perform a certain action, but also when we see another person performing that same action. When the MNS is activated, the observation of action triggers the same neural networks that are active during its execution” (Coëgnarts & Kravanja, 2012, p. 94). Therefore, the visual aspects of a movie scene activate the same motoristic part of the brain that learns physical behavior. As a result, when someone watches someone perform a particular action, they are more likely to repeat that action (Coëgnarts & Kravanja, 2012, p. 94). Ultimately, each human has various schemas about every topic they encounter in their lives. When people view actions on a movie screen that mimic those schemas, the ideas within are reinforced.

**Viewers form beliefs from certain characters’ actions on screen and the narrative arc**

First, viewers associate with characters via a term called narrative transportation. Green & Block (2000) state transportation theory as“ the extent that individuals are absorbed into a story or transported into a narrative world, they may show effects of the story on their real-world beliefs” (p. 701). Additionally, Green & Block (2000) created an experiment by creating logical details of the story event to decide whether audiences transport when they agree more with the story and presenting the story as fiction or non-fiction. To test this idea, Green & Block (2000) had participants read a short story about a student whose sister is murdered at a mall by a psychiatric patient. In the end, the authors determined, "As predicted, highly transported participants reported beliefs more consistent with those implied in the story and real-world beliefs that were more story-consistent than low-transported participants” (p. x). As a result, audience members connect with characters based on societal messages spread logically within the story. On top of that, audiences associate their real-world beliefs with the beliefs that are presented in the narrative. A study was conducted by Hall & Bracken (2011) that looked into the impact of the plot on narrative transportation. Respondents filled out a survey with questions to evaluate a variety of films across different genres: action, comedy, drama, horror, or romance. Then participants commented on the experience and measures of enjoyment, transportation, and realism. After, another survey was distributed asking about empathy and personality scales. Hall and Bracken (2011) concluded that the “study also found narrative transportation, in turn, to be associated with enjoyment of plot and empathy toward the main character” (p. x). Next, Health Notes (1997) conducted a study investigating the relationship between what people see on screen and how it impacts their behaviors. However, instead of using movie characters with mental health issues, Health Notes used smoking cigarettes. First, Health Notes concluded that "Non-smoking teens whose favorite stars smoke on screen are 16 times more likely to develop positive feelings toward smoking. Smoking in movies triples the chance that youth will smoke." This impacts people's behavior from what they see on screen. The study explains how the constant on-screen tobacco use makes smoking seem normal and glamorous when the association between disease and death should be. Lastly, Wahl (1996)expands on cinema's recurring theme of violence associated with mental health. Wahl recognizes that mental health is stereotyped by the media through exaggeration and misunderstanding of these conditions. Wahl argues that people with mental illnesses are nothing like the portrayal in media when Wahl (1996) writes, "The great majority of people with mental illnesses, including those with the most dramatic forms of madness, are not the violent, dangerous, evil, and untreatable villains they appear to be in the mass media" (p. 6). Wahl continues by explaining how the media is the force that shapes the public's perspective on mental illness. As a result, films need to take it upon themselves to be careful about how they depict mental illness.

**Anti-hero movie characters are idols in American pop culture**

A 2013 Psychology Today journal article analyzes why audiences relate to and popularize anti-hero characters. Anti-hero characters are defined as “A protagonist of a story who embodies none of the qualities typically assigned to traditional heroes and heroines. The anti-hero is a protagonist whose failings are typically used to humanize him or her and convey a message about the reality of human existence” (Purdue Owl, 2007). Author Eric Bender writes, “Anti-heroes liberate us. They reject societal constraints and expectations imposed upon us. Anti-heroes give our grievances a voice. They make us feel like something right is being done, even legally wrong” (Bender, 2013, p. 2). Bender describes how people root for anti-heroes because they are morally flawed and not the perfect member of society seen in hero stories. As a result, society views anti-heroes as relatable and more accurate because nobody in the real world is perfect. Additionally, Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz's uses and gratifications theory explain why anti-heroes have become popular in American society. Uses and gratifications theory says, "media users play an active role in choosing and using the media. Users take an active part in the communication process and are goal oriented in their media use. " (Katz & Blumler, 1979, p. 8). Audiences view certain content to fulfill certain gratifications. In anti-hero storylines, society uses anti-heroes as entertainment to distract from everyday life and personal identity to learn values from characters they view as similar. Next, Dr. Howard Sklar shows what features audiences grasp onto to make characters popular. Dr. Howard Sklar (2009) writes, "characters that are rendered realistically can be considered similar to people we might encounter in life—indeed, life-*like*—and that readers frequently regard them and respond to them as such." (p. 3). The paper explains how anti-hero characters evoke pathos and empathy for the moral dilemma the character is going through. Sklar says that this is because when audiences become heavily invested in a movie and a character, they respond to the story as if that character were real.

**Anti-hero movies frequently feature certain traits and commit specific actions**

Greenwood & Clifton (2022)explain certain traits that describe anti-heroes in movies. The study says, "Anti-heroes—protagonists often depicted as Machiavellian, narcissistic, or psychopathic (Dark Triad traits)—have garnered recent empirical attention. Research has typically focused on the mass appeal of the characters and genre rather than on individual differences that predict such appeal" (Greenwood & Clifton, 2022, p. 170). Greenwood and Clifton highlight that the Dark Triad traits make these characters appealing. The traits separate an anti-hero from a hero by creating some moral dilemma with the protagonist. Since the character is flawed, the audience is attracted to the character because they are more relatable. Greenwood and Clifton (2022) establish that it can be challenging for audiences to connect with heroes because everything in their lives is perfect. In the real world, nobody's life is perfect, making the character seem more realistic. This paper aims to analyze how the narrative structure of anti-hero films with a protagonist with mental health disorders in films creates misconceptions about mental health.

**Method**

I plan to conduct thorough rounds of research to uncover existing information on my topic. Specifically, I will start by understanding the current representation of mental health in films. Next, I will research the narrative structure of films and the processes our brains use to make interpretations from media. Lastly, I will research the role of anti-hero characters in pop culture and how film actions impact human responses. After completing my background research, I conducted two case studies focusing on narrative structure and analysis. One case study is on the film *Taxi Driver*, and the other is on *Mad Max: Fury Road*. I have broken down the narrative structure of anti-hero films into five parts that the anti-hero film storyline typically follows and provided evidence from both films. After watching both films, I will analyze the narrative structure based on the film's content. Additionally, I will establish an analysis of how the narrative structure accesses harmful mental health schemas.

I have broken the narrative structure of anti-hero films into five separate parts. The first is that the character experiences something traumatic or a tragedy at the film's beginning. Examples of what I am looking for include: unforeseen death, sexual assault, witnessing a shooting, being beaten up, and others. Secondly, characters dissociate from societal norms and become obsessed with a goal following the traumatic event. Examples of what qualifies for this part of the storyline is the main character doing something uncharacteristic and focusing their attention on a specific objective. I will be looking for the main protagonists to do something unordinary for them, such as: becoming violent, being mean/hurtful toward loved ones, spending significantly more time alone, and many others. Additionally, when looking for what qualifies as focusing on their goal, examples include: searching for a loved one, finding someone that killed a loved one, searching for a villain, and more. Third, anti-hero movie characters set out to accomplish their goal. After directing all their attention to a particular purpose, the character leaves for the journey to complete the goal. Examples of this section of the narrative structure are putting everything else aside to find the person that killed a family member, finding a family member, or whatever means necessary to achieve the main character's objective. This is different than the second criterion, as the goal for the protagonist is established instead of going out to complete the goal. Fourth, anti-hero movie characters use violence as an end to the means. Frequently, this means killing or beating someone up to achieve the goal. The fifth criterion is that the character's violence improves the world. The violence typically destroys or kills someone much worse than the anti-hero.

**Case Study #1**

**Taxi Driver**

A discharged Vietnam War Veteran named Tarvis Bickel applies for a job as a cab driver in New York City to work the late night shift as he is crippled by insomnia from the war. Travis gets the job and begins driving all over New York City. Travis lives alone in a broken-down one-bedroom apartment in Manhattan. While out on the road, Travis becomes obsessed with an aide for a New York Senator named Charles Palatine. Finally, Travis dares to walk into her office and ask the woman, Betsy, out on a date. Betsy agrees, and the two are set to go out. Meanwhile, during Travis’s late night shifts, he witnesses some grotesque actions of humanity from rampant drug use, violence, and prostitution. He slowly becomes disgusted with the society. Travis’s discontent with society peaked when a 12-year-old prostitute tried to climb into his cab window to escape from her pimp. However, her pimp, Sport, caught her before she could escape. The image of Sport dragging a 12-year-old prostitute scarred Travis because he could not save her. Next, it was time for Travis and Betsy’s date. One of Travis’s favorite hobbies is visiting one of New York City’s many porno theaters, so he decided to take Betsy there for their date. Naturally, this is a massive failure, and Betsy immediately leaves the theater upon realizing what type of movie theater she is in. The rejection drove Travis into an obsessive depression that turned violent when he drove a man to kill his cheating wife at her boyfriend’s apartment. Travis now sees violence as the solution to fixing society, so he buys a variety of pistols.

After purchasing the guns, Travis returns home to practice some maneuvers with guns, along with some physical training to get in good shape. Travis then practiced what he would say to his victim as he pulled the trigger and created his handmade holster. On the other hand, he could not cope with the rejection from Betsy, and Travis began following Senator Palantine’s rallies to get a second chance with Betsy. Then one day, Travis was in a convenience store when a man attempted to rob the store. However, the robber was unsuccessful since Travis pulled out his gun and shot the man in the chest. The store owner thanked Travis and encouraged Travis to run from the scene to escape the cops. The murder of the robber gave Travis enough confidence to go after his target: Sport. Travis tried to convince Iris to quit being a prostitute, but she refused to listen. As a result, Travis took matters into his own hands by driving down to Sport’s territory. Travis got out of his cab and unloaded bullets into his stomach. Travis then continued inside the apartment, killing the remainder of Sport’s associates. Then Travis put the gun barrel to his chin and attempted suicide, but he was out of bullets. The police arrived and declared Travis a hero for returning 12-year-old Iris to her parents. Travis is featured in the paper headlines the next morning and carries on driving his cab.

**Why is Travis an anti-hero?**

Travis is defined as an anti-hero based on his unorthodox methods to achieve good and his personality. The Purdue University Writing lab defines an anti-hero as a “ … protagonist of a story who embodies none of the qualities typically assigned to traditional heroes and heroines. The anti-hero is a protagonist whose failings are typically used to humanize him or her and convey a message about the reality of human existence” (Purdue Owl, 2007). Travis possesses no typical positive qualities of heroes. Other than disposing of an even worse human being and driving his cab, Travis does not have a positive impact on society. Throughout the film, Travis uses drugs, attends porno theaters, stalks strangers, and more. These actions show the audience that Travis does not live a good or normal life. Unfortunately, these actions seem realistic because of the ways that American society stigmatizes mental health. Anyone that is introduced to an already disturbed man encounters more tragic and depressing things that worsen his condition would believe that that man could evolve into a killer. Travis strikes and scares audiences because his story is believable from the realistic events of the story. Therefore Travis’s character explains a message about the effect of living in horrible conditions and experiencing countless horrible events on the people that live in those circumstances. However, Travis is ultimately the protagonist of the film because he is trying to do good by achieving his goal of freeing Iris. Additionally, since Travis uses violence as the way to complete the objective he can not be classified as a typical hero.

**Five Criterion**

First, Travis Bickel follows the first criteria ofthe anti-hero experiencing something traumatic or a tragedy**.** Travis Bickel suffers from PTSD and insomnia due to his experience in the Vietnam War. As a result, the plot introduction in the first act allows viewers to understand that Bickel has seen and experienced some horrific things in Vietnam that drive his current actions. Additionally, Travis Bickel becomes even further traumatized when a 12-year-old prostitute attempts to get in his cab to escape her pimp, that was abusing her. This act disturbed Travis by this image, and it deepened his hatred of what American society has become. The narrative at the beginning of the film only expands and emphasizes the mental state of Travis Bickle. As a result, the main takeaway from the film's beginning is that Travis suffers from mental illness. The presence of Travis's insomnia and PTSD from the war affects how people view people who suffer from mental health conditions. Additionally, when choosing to portray Vietnam Veterans after the war Hollywood gives them mental health conditions. This pattern is evident in films such as: *Deer Hunter* (1978), *Rambo: First Blood* (1982), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and countless others. THis is a stereotyped depiction of Vietnam Veterans as not all veterans suffer from PTSD. According to the U.S Department of Veterans Affairs, “About 15 out of every 100 Vietnam veterans (15%) were currently diagnosed with PTSD when the most recent study of them (the National Vietnam Veteran Readjustment Study) was conducted in the late 1980s. It’s believed that 30% of Vietnam veterans have had PTSD in their lifetime” (Howley, 2019). Similarly to those films, Taxi Driver follows the same narrative since the first thing the movie establishes is that Travis suffers from mental health issues, this changes how people interpret the rest of the movie. Initially, the image audiences have of Travis Bickle as a disturbed man from the war only deepens once he experiences another traumatic event. Therefore, viewers only see Travis as suffering, and every action in the film returns to that notion. Additionally, Vietnam War veterans are controversial; many Americans believe in harmful stereotypes. As a result, the initial appearance of Travis as a Vietnam War veteran with PTSD accesses a variety of schemas.

Secondly, Travis Bickle dissociates from societal norms and becomes obsessed with a goal.Following Travis's experience with the 12-year-old prostitute and a failed date, he becomes increasingly frustrated with what society has become. However, his thought process does not change until he picks up a man who details a murder he is about to commit. As a result, Travis becomes more violent and ultimately buys a pair of guns from a drug dealer. Once securing the weapons, Travis embarks on a training program to get himself into shape to perform whatever violent crime he seeks. In this sequence, viewers see a series of disturbing scenes of Travis practicing his actions with the gun, what he will say, and even debuting his homemade holster. This montage displays Travis getting further away from his norms. While Travis is still shaken up by his experience in the war, Travis shows no evidence of any violent or psychopathic behavior. The narrative uses the montage to contrast the difference in Travis from the beginning of the film. Therefore, the plot builds from simply being about a disturbed man to now a violent, disturbed man. The sudden change in his behavior changes how people think of mental health because of using stereotypes of PTSD. Veterans are regarded as crazy, violent, and unsteady people. Showing a character whose PTSD and isolation are well established become violent unexpectedly reinforces those schemas and stereotypes. Additionally, this impacts mental health because audiences believe that life imitates the movies, with mentally ill people eventually evolving to become violent. Lastly, introducing Travis's murderous intentions changes the interpretation of the rest of the movie. Despite knowing that Travis is disturbed, viewers now understand that Travis has gone toward the end of his condition.

Third**,** anti-hero movie characters set out to accomplish their goal. After practicing his gun skills, Travis attempts to convince Iris to stop being a prostitute and return to doing what kids should do. This is representative of Travis setting out to accomplish his journey. However, he is unsuccessful but continues to try to get Iris to change her lifestyle choices. Each time Travis comes close to pulling Iris out of her way, her pimp, Sport, manipulates her to return to the prostitution business. Consequently, all the unsuccessful attempts drive Travis deeper into an obsession with ensuring Iris is appropriately treated. The middle portion of the film describes the journey Travis will go on throughout the rest of the film. Travis will do whatever he can to help Iris get free from her prostitute, Sport. This action of unselfishness by Travis shows audiences that he has a good heart and wants to do good. Following the sequence of Travis training with the pistol makes audiences believe he will do something violent to someone good. However, the scenes of Travis persuading Iris to stop being a prostitute show him acting as a true hero. Travis is acting selflessly to help a young girl changes his image amongst viewers. This is the first positive act from Travis and makes him look like a good person instead of a disturbed lunatic.

Fourth, *Taxi Driver* follows the fourth narrative criterion with the anti-hero character using violence to accomplish their goal. Travis uses violence to complete his goal when he suddenly pulls out his pistol and shoots Sport in the stomach. Travis’s goal was to save Iris from the horrible life of child prostitution and the only way for Travis to achieve that goal was to kill Sport. The success of the murder of Sport in the plot once again emphasizes that Travis became so disturbed that he evolved into a murderer. To this point, Travis is seen as a crazy murderer which damages the reputation of people diagnosed with mental disorders because not everyone with PTSD is a wildly violent killer. However, the extent of Travis’s mental state is not fully realized until he attempts to take his own life but is out of bullets. This sequence from Travis destroys whatever positive reputation he has with the audience. The structure highlights this moment in the sequence to go above and beyond to emphasize Travis’s suffering. However, the film makes a generalization to audiences that people who are suicidal are also violent murderers, which is not the case. Consequently, violence is a standard schema Americans associate with people suffering from mental health conditions. Travis's suffering evolves to a point where his mental illness is evident to any viewer. Then, the audience easily attributes the violent act to Travis's condition.

Lastly,the anti-hero movie characters' violence improves the world.After the police arrive at the crime scene and clear Travis of his murders, he becomes a local hero. Newspapers wrote an article detailing how he helped save Iris, and Travis even received a hand-written letter from Iris's family thanking him for bringing her out of the brothel. The film's conclusion gives the audience closure since the villain, Sport is killed by the hero Travis. The ending leaves viewers with the idea that violence is acceptable as long as the victim is far worse. Additionally, Travis picks up Betsy, who recognizes him from the papers, which sparks Travis’s obsessive condition where he flashes a deep dark stare that ends the film. Therefore, the film's structure leaves audience members with the idea that Travis remains very mentally ill. This structure intentionally emphasizes Travis’s worsening mental state as the film's closing message. Ultimately, *Taxi Driver* promotes harmful stereotypes against mental health by advertising Travis Bickle as only violent because of his mental condition.

**Case Study #2**

**Mad Max: Fury Road**

A rouge warrior named Max Rocktantsky is fighting for survival in a post-apocalyptic society without his wife or son. The film opens with Max as the narrator, who explains he is haunted by the memories of his deceased wife and son. However, he is quickly forced to flee the feared War Boys from the Citadel. The War Boys chase Max all over the desert and take him, prisoner. The War Boys shave his entire body and hook him up to a blood bag where he will serve as a blood slave. The Citadel is run by a warlord named Immortan Joe, who abuses his people by limiting their access to water, food, and other survival necessities. The Citadel prepares to collect more gasoline for a major mission to Gas Town. The mission is led by Commander Furiosa on her massive war rig surrounded by a cavalry of War Boys. Suddenly, Furiosa veers from the direction of Gas Town. Back at The Citadel, Immortan Joe hears the news and then checks the room where his five ways stay and serve as breeders. To Joe’s surprise, all five wives are gone and are with Furiosa. Joe then sends the War Boys after Furiosa to catch his wives. However, one of the War Boys needed a blood bank. Hence, he strapped Max to the front of a rig with a transfusion strap connecting the two. Furiosa evades all War Boys except for the rig containing Max on the front. The War Boys get close until Max breaks free from his muzzle, and the two crash into the desert.

After waking from the wreck, Max sees Furiosa and the five wives standing outside their rig. Max then points a shotgun at all six women and demands the steel handcuffs be cut off. Quickly, Furiosa spots Immortan Joe and tells Max that if they don’t get into her rig and take off, they will all be killed by Immortan Joe. Joe and his forces are nearing Furiosa until they race into a canyon where Furiosa’s allies are waiting to close the pass behind her with an explosion. Furiosa’s friends successfully stop Immortan Joe, and Max gains more trust in Furiosa’s skills. Soon, Immortan Joe’s reinforcements soon clear the pass and begin chasing Furiosa again. Unfortunately, one of the wives, Splendid, did not survive the escape from the rock pass as she fell under the wheels. Then Furiosa explains that they are on a journey to the green place with grass, vegetation, and fair treatment for all.

Later, Furiosa’s rig becomes stuck in the mud, and the onslaught of Immortan Joe allies nears closer. Eventually, an elder woman helps the group escape but shares some unencouraging news. The elder shares that the mud that the War Rig was stuck in was the Green Place, which is no longer habitable. The group is devastated and argues over what to do next. Max continues to be haunted by images of his dead wife and son. Therefore, he decides to help the women return to the Citadel and take over Joe’s unprotected water supply. Additionally, Furiosa suggests that they should trap Joe in the canyons. Immortan Joe spots the crew riding back to The Citadel and begins chasing them as fast as possible. Suddenly, both groups meet in a clash in the desert for a battle to end the conflict. Max jumps from rig to rig killing War Boys and eventually reaching Joe’s rig. He then breaks into the driver’s seat and rips Joe’s breathing mask off. Immortan Joe is dead, and The Citadel is now free of its discriminatory leader. The rig containing Max, Furiosa, and the four remaining wives returns to The Citadel, where Immortan Joe’s lifeless body is shown to the crowd. The crowd erupts in applause, and it is then announced that Furiosa will succeed Immortan Joe as the new leader. The water supply is opened, and people gather as much water as they need. Meanwhile, Max slips into the crowd, where he and Furiosa make eye contact acknowledging respect for one another before Max continues on his own.

Next, Max is classified as an anti-hero due to his use of violence and tragic story that makes him more human. Max adheres to the aforementioned definition of an anti-hero from the Purdue University writing lab stating, “ protagonist of a story who embodies none of the qualities typically assigned to traditional heroes and heroines. The anti-hero is a protagonist whose failings are typically used to humanize him or her and convey a message about the reality of human existence” (Purdue Owl, 2007). Max does not classify as a normal hero because of his introverted personality and violent actions that differ from the typical hero. Max is very quiet and reserved due to the tragedy with his family. Additionally, Max is a lonely vigilante drifting across the desert wasteland and using whatever means necessary to take down his enemies. These traits dramatically differ from the traditional backstory and actions of heroes. Max always uses violence to defeat the antagonist, who is typically committing atrocities against a large group of people. Therefore, Max’s violence is for good. On the other hand, Max’s tragic backstory of losing his wife and son makes him more relatable to audiences. Death is; unfortunately, a part of life, and everyone at one point has lost a loved one. Also, learning that someone lost a loved one creates audience empathy for Max. These points in the narrative make Max significantly more human.

**Five Criterion**

First, *Mad Max: Fury Road* hits the first criterion of the anti-hero experiencing something traumatic or a tragedy**.** At the beginning of *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the audience learns about Max's traumatic past through his narration. Immediately, viewers see that Max suffers from flashbacks, and these horrible memories of not saving his loved ones haunt him daily. Following this introduction, Max is followed and kidnapped by Immortan Joe's Warboys. The narrative structure introduces Max as a lonely warrior disturbed by how he could not save his family. Therefore, the first piece of information the audience learns about Max is that he suffers from PTSD. The film shows the effects of the loss on Max's health by showing flashbacks of times when he was with his wife and son. These flashbacks emphasize to the audience that the death of his family continues to take a toll on Max. The story wants audiences to remember that Max carries the past with him everywhere he goes and that his previous experiences play a dynamic role in his daily life. Additionally, the beginning description of Max can access schemas about people with PTSD because of the apparent flashbacks. Whether those schemas are positive or negative, mentioning Max's horrific past and the flashbacks quickly gets the audience to make assumptions about PTSD. Ultimately, Max's tragic event's early description and imagery spark and impact thoughts about mental health.

Second, Max follows the anti-hero storyline by dissociating from societal norms and becoming obsessed with a goal. After, Max escapes from the front of the rig and stumbles upon Furiosa, he immediately points a shotgun at the pregnant women and demands they leave the truck for him to escape. This point in the plot leaves a bad taste in viewers’ mouths and convinces them that Max is selfish and evil. Normally, Max would do whatever it takes to help people, especially those weaker than him. Therefore, Max's kidnapping resulted in him straying away from the values defining his identity. This is representative of Max's dissociation from his societal norms as these actions are uncharacteristic of Max. This change in Max's state impacts how audiences see mental health because views attribute these uncharacteristic behaviors to the PTSD established earlier in the film. One of the most impactful stigmas against people with PTSD is that they are unstable, and these actions perpetuate this stereotype. Unfortunately, mental health stigmas are widespread, and many schemas are associated with certain conditions—consequently, Max's actions at the beginning of the film access specific stereotypical schemas.

Third, *Mad Max: Fury Road* follows the criterion anti-hero characters set out to accomplish their goal. Max and Furiosa set out to escape death by fleeing from Immortan Joe's army. The war rig approaches a central canyon where luckily, Furiosa has a strong connection with the bandits that live in the canyon, and they create an explosion to force a massive rock slide to block the canyon. Max and Furiosa traveling together set the rest of the movie up as the storyline shifts. Viewers now understand their objective is to get to the green place while evading Immortan Joe for as long as possible. Additionally, in this section of the movie, audience members see Max do something good by helping Furiosa and the five wives escape Immortan Joe. This unselfish act positively impacts the audience's perception of Max. At this point in the film, Max is resourceful and cooperative. As a result, Max embarks on the hero's journey portion of the storyline, making Max likable and overshadowing his selfish actions from the beginning portion of the film.

Fourth, Mad Max's anti-hero character uses violence as the end to the means. This is shown in the final battle when Max and Furiosa jump from vehicle to vehicle to defeat Immortan Joe. Eventually, Max and Furiosa make their way onto Immortan Joe's rig, working together to kill Joe. Max used violence to complete the film's goal of evading and destroying Immortan Joe. Because Max killed Immortan Joe, the citizens of The Citadel will be treated better by whoever becomes their new leader. Additionally, Max's use of violence to achieve his mission harms public perceptions of mental health because it associates mentally ill people with being violent. The story's structure stresses the past that Max carries with him and the evolution of Max’s vengeance against Immortan Joe. Once again, the stigma is that people who suffer from poor mental health, specifically PTSD, are violent. When Max decides to kill Immortan Joe in this movie's version of a showdown, the audience can credit his violent streak to his mental condition. Millions of Americans stigmatize people suffering from mental health conditions as violent. As a result, the film accesses a common schema about mental health opinions in the United States.

Finally, *Mad Max: Fury Road*'s anti-hero movie character uses violence to make the world a better place. The impact of Max’s violence is displayed when upon killing Immortan Joe, Furiosa and Max's head back to The Citadel, where they show the people Joe's deformed body. Thousands of people in the crowd immediately erupt as their harmful and abusive leader finally dies. Next, their new leader, Furiosa, brings out their water supply and gives out as much water as the people need. Furiosa securing the new throne is representative of the destruction of the cruel treatment from Immortan Joe and the introduction of a better world for the people in The Citadel. The conclusion in this narrative structure gives the audience closure since the bad guy in the movie is killed by the hero. The happy ending overshadows the mental struggle that Max endured throughout the film. The final scene, when Max continues alone, harms public perceptions of mental health. The ending gives audiences the impression that Max walks away with all the baggage and troubles he came in with. Viewers saw how he was affected by his PTSD at the beginning of the film, and now he will go forward alone. However, he is not alone because Max is with the memories of his dead wife and son.

**Conclusion**

The narrative structure of *Taxi Driver* and *Mad Max: Fury Road* encourages harmful stereotypes about people with mental health conditions. First, mental health stigmas are harmful because they negatively affect millions of Americans every day. These schemas are spread to a large public audience through the media and are accessing harmful schemas to reinforce stereotyped views of mental health. In the films *Taxi Driver* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the stigma of mentally ill people being violent is perpetuated through both protagonists using killing to solve their problems. The portrayals in these films reinforce the harmful stigmas through an entertaining medium. Unfortunately, audiences use information in films to enhance their beliefs about certain subjects, which oftentimes contain stereotypical information. As a result, *Mad Max* and *Taxi Driver* access harmful schemas Americans have about mental health. Ultimately, negative images of mental illnesses access these schemas, reinforcing the viewer’s already destructive conceptions of mental illnesses. Specifically, the narrative structure of these films intentionally changes how audiences interpret the actions of characters with mental illnesses. Each anti-hero film’s narrative structure follows five criteria to tell the story. The five points along the narrative structure help shape the dangerous takeaways about people who suffer from mental health conditions. Also, anti-hero characters consistently exhibit certain traits and have certain life experiences. Consequently, the narrative structure is impactful because American audiences learn and form beliefs based on the actions of a movie. In *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *Taxi Driver* both establish the protagonist’s mental illness at the beginning of the film, which makes the reasoning for the character’s following actions in the rest of the film be their mental condition. After the film's beginning, audiences fall victim to character transportation and empathize with the characters because their flaws make the protagonist more human. Therefore, the narrative arc of anti-hero movies convinces audiences to become entranced by the actions of the character and overlook the protagonist’s apparent mental illness. These characters remain some of the biggest movie icons ever. Robert De Niro as Travis Bickle is regarded as one of the best performances of all time, as well as Mad Max receiving several remakes since the 1980s. Consequently, movies remain a massive part of our culture and can reach a vast audience. Our society should start paying more attention to the depictions of mental illnesses and more because negative images of mental health can have real-world consequences.

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