

# **The Representation of Mental Illness in Contemporary Film**

Thematic content analysis of fictional and based-on-a-true-story films

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## ABSTRACT

At the core of this research paper was the aim to explore the representation of mental illness in contemporary film. The research placed focus upon examining whether these portrayals are still largely negative or whether there is a general trend towards representing mental illness in a more humanizing and empathizing manner. Additionally, the study attempted to determine whether mental illness was represented differently within based on a true story and fictional films. A total of four films in English that were released between 2008 and 2020 were selected as a part of the sample – two fictional and two based on a true story films about individuals with a mental illness.

Previous findings suggest that overall, the portrayal of mental illness within film is largely negative and therefore contributes to the persistence of a vast majority of stereotypes and stigmas surrounding mental illness. Since media, especially films, are one of the primary sources of knowledge about mental illness for individuals who have never had direct contact with someone who has a mental illness, it is crucial that these portrayals within film do not continuously foster negative stereotypes. Moreover, according to the disability rhetoric, an individual should never be defined solely through his/her medical diagnosis, but rather through who this individual is as a person beyond the diagnosis. Therefore, through qualitative content and thematic analysis, this research explores the encoding process of contemporary films and provides an insight into what elements are most used when portraying mental illness.

A total of four themes emerged throughout the analysis process – (1) Stereotypical representation, (2) Overcoming adversity, (3) Personal experiences of the individual with mental illness and (4) Separating the individual from the diagnosis. The findings of the research show that even though the representation of mental illness within contemporary film is still largely dominated by negative and inaccurate portrayals, there is a general trend towards depicting mental illness in a more accurate manner, specifically, within fictional films. Moreover, the findings suggest that there were in fact some challenging representations and two out of the four films depicted a conflict between two opposing ways of perceiving mental illness – social and medical model of disability. Lastly, even though the films analysed include a lot of negative stereotypes, they also try to represent the individuals beyond their mental illness.

KEYWORDS: *mental illness, representation theory, contemporary film, disability rhetoric*

## PREFACE

Firstly, I would like to say that I am dedicating this thesis to my mother who has been diagnosed with schizophrenia for more than 20 years. A loving mother who for half of her life has been looked at by the society as the “Other” and felt misunderstood, judged and separated from society. However, despite her illness, she has obtained higher education degrees, travelled around the world, been a teacher in multiple schools and is overall a truly great person. All I hope for is that people finally open their eyes and realize that an individual with mental illness is so much more than just their medical diagnosis. Without her love and support I would have never been where I am today. I am grateful to be her daughter and thankful for her unconditional love.

Additionally, I would like to thank my supervisor Débora Antunes and express my gratitude for her support and guidance throughout the process of writing this thesis. Without the critical guidance throughout the research process and extensive feedback, I would have not been able to finish this thesis. Furthermore, I am grateful for my fellow students with whom I spend long hours sharing the struggle as well as the very essential coffee breaks when writing this thesis. Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for the mental support, motivational talks and understanding me throughout the process of writing this thesis.

## Table of Contents

Abstract and Keywords

[Preface]

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 1 Introduction .....   | 6  |
| 1.1 Research Problem .....   | 7  |
| 1.2 Academic and Social relevance .....                            | 8  |
| 1.3 Thesis Outline.....  | 8  |
| 2 Theoretical framework.....                                       | 10 |
| 2.1 Contemporary media .....                                       | 10 |
| 2.2 Encoding/Decoding model and representation theory .....        | 11 |
| 2.3 Connecting the disability rhetoric to mental illness .....     | 14 |
| 2.4 Representation of mental illness in contemporary culture ..... | 16 |
| 2.5 Summary .....  | 19 |
| 3 Methodology.....   | 21 |
| 3.1 Research design .....  | 21 |
| 3.2 Sampling of Films .....  | 22 |
| 3.3 Key concepts and operationalizations .....                     | 25 |
| 3.3.1 Medical vs The Social Model of Disability.....               | 25 |
| 3.3.2 Operationalization of negative representation .....          | 26 |
| 3.3.3 Operationalization of positive representation .....          | 27 |
| 3.3.4 Narrative choices .....                                      | 28 |
| 3.3.5 Challenging representations .....                            | 30 |
| 3.4 Data analysis .....  | 30 |
| 3.5 Validity and reliability .....                                 | 31 |
| 4.1 Stereotypical representation of mental illness.....            | 32 |
| 4.1.1 Mental illness as a taboo topic .....                        | 33 |
| 4.1.2 Curing the chaos .....                                       | 35 |
| 4.1.3 Negative stereotypical portrayals.....                       | 37 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 4.1.4 Mental illness as a personal tragedy.....                | 40 |
| 4.2 Overcoming adversity .....                                 | 43 |
| 4.3 Personal experience of individual with mental illness..... | 45 |
| 4.4 Separating the individual from the diagnosis .....         | 47 |
| 5 Conclusion.....  | 52 |
| 5.1 Addressing the research questions.....                     | 52 |
| 5.2 Implications of the Findings .....                         | 55 |
| 5.3 Limitations.....   | 56 |
| 5.4 Suggestions for Future Research .....                      | 57 |
| References .....   | 58 |
| Appendix A: Film overviews.....                                | 63 |
| Appendix B: Coding Tree.....                                   | 64 |

*“A message to the entertainment industry and to the press: On the whole, you've done a wonderful job fighting stigma and prejudice of many kinds. Please, continue to let us see characters in your movies, your plays, your columns, who suffer with severe mental illness. Portray them sympathetically and portray them in all the richness and depth of their experience as people and not as diagnoses.”*

*(Elyn Saks, TEDGlobal 2012)*

## 1 Introduction

There exists a perception of media mass communications as a mirror of society that serves as a reflection of reality (McQuils, 2010). However, this media reality is further from “reality” than it claims to be (van der Spuy, 2008). In fact, contemporary mass media within the 21st century functions as a form of social construction of reality (Fursich, 2010). Despite the fact that media is not an accurate reflection, it does have the power to actively participate in shaping and framing our perception of the world, hence also affecting how the world we live in functions and is interpreted (van der Spuy, 2008). Whether media is created for educational, informational, or purely entertainment purposes, it affects the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of individuals all around the globe (Akram & Kumar, 2017). In other words, mass media constructs the realities of their consumers – meaning that, different individuals interpret these media constructs differently which fits with the ideas of Hall (1997).

Media have been of important role especially regarding the representation of mental illness. Smith et al. (2019) state that “out of 4,598 speaking characters across the 100 top films of 2016, only 76 or 1.7% were depicted with a significant or persistent mental health condition” (p.5). Even though the depiction of individuals with a mental health condition is rare, Stuart (2006) argues that at one hand media have produced some of the most educational and sensitive material regarding mental illness, but on the other hand they are also highly responsible for creating imagery that represents mental illness as negative, therefore fostering the stereotypes about it. Portrayals of mental illness go way back into history that extends beyond current contemporary culture representations – historical art and medical images are just two examples of this (Eisenhauer, 2008). Eisenhauer (2008) elaborates on this by stating that all throughout Western history, there has always been a need, or rather even a desire, to visualize mental illness in a manner that would allow to protect the boundaries of a presumed normality – by separating “them” from us through exaggeration. This can be interpreted as a result of cultural anxiety of not being able to tell apart an individual with a mental illness from an individual without it. According to Eisenhauer (2008), this feeds the overall desire of society to visualize mentally ill people in terms of “madness”.

## 1.1 Research Problem

Thus, the aim of this thesis is to investigate representations of mental illness in contemporary culture. To be more specific, this thesis will focus not only on what sort of representations are provided but also on whether this representation differs amongst fictional films and films based on true stories. This thesis aims to answer the main research question (RQ) and the following sub-questions:

RQ: How mental illness is represented in fictional and “based on a true story” films?

*Sub-RQ1: What are the negative ways in which mental illness is represented in film?*

*Sub-RQ2: What are the common characteristics of films that represent mental illness positively?*

*Sub-RQ3: Are there any “challenging representations” of mental illness present throughout the films?*

An analysis of four films will be conducted, firstly analysing the general representation of mental illness within the selected films and, secondly, drawing a comparison between how mental illness is portrayed within fictional films and films based on true stories. For the purposes of examining the representation of mental illnesses in contemporary culture, four films were selected. Two of these films – *The Soloist* (Foster, Krasnoff & Wright, 2009) and *No Letting Go* (Rush, Silverman & Bucari, 2015) are based upon true stories of real-life events. The screenplay of *The Soloist* (Foster, Krasnoff & Wright, 2009) is based on the book written by Steve Lopez in 2010 about the story of Nathaniel Ayers, a talented musician who has schizophrenia and became homeless. Whereas *No Letting Go* (Rush, Silverman & Bucari, 2015) is based upon the true story of the co-screenwriter and producer Randi Silverman about a family who is struggling to cope with a teenager who suffers from mental illness. The two other films selected for the analysis are *Elizabeth Blue* (Dain & Sabella, 2017) and *Still Alice* (Brown, Koffler, Lutzus, Glatzer, Styler & Westmoreland, 2014) are fiction narrative films. *Still Alice* (Brown et al., 2014) is a film about a linguistics professor who is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, whereas *Elizabeth Blue* (Dain & Sabella, 2017) is a film about a young woman who is recently released from a psychiatric hospital and is trying her best to cope with various episodes of schizophrenia. Appendix A provides short summaries of the films selected as part of this study. Analysis of these four films is expected to allow to gain an insight into the representations of mental illness within contemporary culture, as well as explore whether the depictions of mental illness differ among fictional films and films based on true life stories.

## 1.2 Academic and Social relevance

During the last few decades, media representation has become an important academic field, studying the representation of gender, race, sexuality, as well as disability and other topics (Gerino et al., 2014; Trebbe et al., 2017; Duncan, 2016; Zhang & Haller, 2013). Previous research conducted by Middleton (2013) suggests undertaking further research into the exploration of depictions of mental illness within film. This increasing academic interest can be explained by, firstly, a larger understanding of the role media play within society concerning political, social, and economic issues. Secondly, majority of previous research about the representation of mental illness has been conducted in either the 90s (Frank, 1997; Hylar et al., 1991) or early 2000s (Entman, 2001; Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Grossberg, 2005), therefore, cannot be perceived as representative of the current trends in terms of portrayal of mental illness. Hence, the present research places focus upon addressing the representation of mental illness in contemporary film by analysing films released between 2008 and 2020. This is expected to provide a more deep and rich insight into whether and how these representations have changed compared to research conducted previously.

Socially speaking, the rise of media awareness and genuine concern regarding how accurate these representations are as media portrayal has the potential to alter and change the perceptions of the society at large. Lastly, media representation is crucial to consider when addressing the positive or negative opinions present within society regarding various issues, such as gender and racial stereotypes. Therefore, the research conducted as part of this thesis is expected to provide deep and meaningful insights into the representation of mental illness throughout contemporary film, as well as draw a comparison between the portrayals within fictional films and biopics.

## 1.3 Thesis Outline

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows: the first chapter of this thesis, *Theoretical Framework*, provides an extensive literature review on the already existing literature discussing the main concepts and previous research findings related to the role media takes within the contemporary society and emphasizes the extent to which media is shaping our interpretative frameworks, as well as more general insights into the representation theory and encoding/decoding model devised by Stuart Hall. Moreover, this chapter connects disability rhetoric and mental illness. Additionally, it also discusses previous findings related to. And lastly, it discusses the previous findings related to the representation of mental illness within media. This chapter will serve as the groundwork for analysing the sample of films selected as the units of analysis for the purposes of this thesis.

The second chapter of this thesis, *Methodology*, provides a comprehensive overview of the methodology used in this study. For the purposes of answering the research question and sub-

questions at the core of this study, qualitative analysis was chosen as the most appropriate methodology as it allows to gain deep and rich insights into the encoded meanings through means of thematic analysis in the four films selected as part of the sample. This chapter will discuss the reasoning behind the sampling of these films, as well as meticulously describe the data collection process, operationalization of the relevant concepts and the process of data analysis to ensure transparency and allow for the replication of the study.

The third chapter, *Results*, will introduce the results that emerged throughout the thematic analysis in the form of themes. In this specific chapter, four themes are elaborately discussed in relation to the previous academic findings and literature introduced in the *Theoretical Framework* chapter.

Lastly, the final chapter of this research paper will provide clear answers to the research question and its sub-questions at the essence of this thesis. Within this chapter, the findings are critically discussed, and a conclusion is drawn. Finally, the chapter addresses the limitations of the study conducted and outlines suggestions for future research within the field of representation of mental illness in contemporary film.

## 2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework will provide some previous findings regarding the role of media within contemporary society, along with the encoding and decoding model, as well as the social representation theory and its connection to the world of media. However, the focus will be placed upon connecting disability rhetoric to mental illness and providing important findings that have emerged throughout previous research conducted on the representation of mental illness within media and culture. The aim of the following chapter is to elaborately introduce and discuss the theoretical concepts in more depth as means of exploring how they can be applied to researching the representation of mental illness in fictional films and based-on-a-true-story (biopic) films.

### 2.1 Contemporary media

People always crave and strive towards achieving a sense of who they are and seek finding a place to ground their sense of identity, Grossberg (2005) claims that the media contributes immensely in producing this sense of one's identity and that of others.

Contemporary media plays an important role in shaping our interpretive frameworks in both evident and subtle ways, as it serves as a primary source of information for large audiences across the globe (Cohen, 2019). According to McQuils (2010), contemporary mass media is primarily concerned with producing and distributing knowledge that allows us to make sense of our experience of the social world. Happer and Philo (2013) emphasize that contemporary mass media not only informs the public about what is happening in the world, but also allows the audiences to gain information about things of which they do not possess direct knowledge or experience – this often results in audience dependency on media as the main source of information and knowledge.

This knowledge made available by the media in the form of images or text, to a large extent creates and shapes our perceptions of what is social reality and normality that follows a set of standards and norms (McQuils, 2010). Specifically, visual media has the power to impact and change our beliefs and social awareness about a variety of social, cultural, political and economic issues (Cohen, 2019). Additionally, McQuils (2010) argues that media is often perceived to be in a role of “a mirror of events in society and the world” (p.74). However, it is also important to understand that even though this implies a truthful reflection of reality, it can also involve possible distortion and inversion of reality. Since the perspective from which the events in society and the world are depicted in the mirror is decided upon by others, we are seeing a largely biased version of reality (McQuils, 2010). Regardless of the media not representing reality entirely accurately, Van der Spuy (2008) argues that it has immense power to actively participate in the shaping and framing of the public perception of the world, therefore affecting how the world we live in is interpreted.

This brings us to the central idea of this thesis – the importance of accurate and honest representation of mental illness in contemporary film. If mental illness within media would be represented more objectively and accurately, media would have the potential to serve as an effective educational tool for countering stigma and misinformation regarding mental illness. Unfortunately, it is common within the film and television industry to use mental illness or any disability as a narrative to make a character seem more complex or as if they have suffered something devastating that needs to be overcome (Harper, 2008). The following chapter will illustrate the importance of the encoding and decoding model in relation to the representation theory.

## 2.2 Encoding/Decoding model and representation theory

In the *Theory of Communication Through Media*, Stuart Hall (1973) introduces the encoding and decoding model which aims to provide a theoretical approach to analysing the production, dissemination, and interpretation of media messages. According to the encoding and decoding model of Hall (1973), producers are the encoders of media messages, whereas, audience takes the role of the decoder, implying that through verbal and non-verbal symbols encoded in the message, the audience is able to comprehend, as well as interpret the ideas or ideologies embedded in the media text. Media messages are commonly perceived as transparent and fixed, however, Hall (1973) proposes that audience members, in fact, play an active role in decoding media messages by relying on the social context around them, and are fully capable of altering the encoded messages themselves through collective action. In more simpler terms, the audience reconstructs the initial ideas by ascribing meaning to the symbols and interpreting the message based on own social context (Hall, 1973). As mentioned previously, media shapes our perception through providing information, and as Chandler (2007) states, media representation refers to the construction in any medium of aspects of reality such as people, places, objects, events and cultural identities. The encoding and decoding model devised by Hall (1973) has a crucial role when it comes to understanding how media representations shape our perceptions of the various aspects of reality.

Hall (1997) defines representations as images, frames, and descriptions for understanding the world and making sense of it – the representation theory states that representations are always related to social, symbolic, or cultural objects. At the core of the representation theory of Hall (1997) is anchoring – attaching new meanings to already existing and well-known ones. Social representations are anchored in other social representations, therefore leading to cultural assimilation through which new social representations emerge and are combined with already known ones, meantime the latter ones are transformed by the newly emerged social representations (Hoiijer, 2011). After a while, these new unfamiliar ideologies about social, symbolic, and/or cultural objects

become “common-sense constructs” and “taken-for-granted knowledge”, hence transforming into a part of the society itself (Hall, 1997). Through providing images of individuals and descriptions of various social groups, as well as their social identities, the media creates pictures in our heads that become intertwined with our perception of reality (Grossberg, 2005). For example, if a person is not personally familiar with a member of a particular social group, then it is very likely that their perception of a specific social group will be largely based upon what they have seen in media (Grossberg, 2005). Furthermore, representation involves not only how certain identities are constructed within media, but also in terms with which they are constructed in the processes of production and reception by people whose identities are differently marked than those of individuals portrayed. Chandler (2007) emphasizes this by stating that “any representation is more than merely of reproduction of that which it represents; it also contributes to the construction of reality” (p.70). Hence, the way certain social issues or social groups are represented within media can have a large impact on society as a whole – by changing how social groups are presented, media has the power to change how these groups are perceived within society, including the case of people with mental illnesses. To put it simply – the fundamental nature of media representations is to represent by encapsulating reality in the form of media texts, through shared symbolic, technical, and written or spoken codes (Young, 2017).

As outlined by Grossberg (2005), media is at the core of shaping our opinions on major social and political problems facing the contemporary world, such as the relationships among different social groups. Yet, representation is no longer bound by ideals of accurate depiction and distortion, but rather of identities that are produced and established through various practices of representation (Grossberg, 2005). Often media representations of social identities are discussed as stereotypical, hence implying that there is only one correct portrayal of certain social group’s identity that is largely distorted within media (Grossberg, 2005). However, that is not necessarily always the case. As outlined by Entman (2001), no representation is comprehensively accurate and inevitably omits some aspects of the represented. This brings us back to the encoding and decoding model devised by Hall (1973) – by drawing on pre-existing mental schemas, the audiences fill in those gaps themselves. Furthermore, since representation consists of both encoding and decoding, the intentions of the media message producers may have shockingly little relevance to the reactions of the individuals, thus to the social and political impacts of certain media representations (Entman, 2001). However, Grossberg (2005) highlights that sometimes stereotyping within media refers to an overall absence of representation of a particular social group. Within the contemporary media, it is quite common to see representations of social minority groups that are highly stereotyped, therefore defining expectations of how these minority groups ought to behave (Grossberg, 2005). This has the potential to result in real and

important consequences – if these stereotypes are repeated often enough, people forget that they are dealing with images and begin to believe that these images are the reality (Grossberg, 2005; McQuils, 2010).

Thus, for the purposes of this research, the emphasis is placed upon the encoding process of media texts as the aim of the research is to investigate how mental illness is represented within contemporary film instead of researching how these representations affect the opinions audience members may have about mental illness. Entman (2001) states that film cannot provide the audience with every aspect of the individuals' life, rather film producers and directors take upon the role of carefully curating what and how everything will be portrayed within a film, meaning that they select, highlight and often choose to suppress certain elements according to what fits best in terms of creating a compelling narrative within the film. This selection and curation in the process of production is the means through which media representations take place (Entman, 2001). Through selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more prominently noticeable within a media text, in this case – film, a specific problem definition and interpretation is promoted (Entman, 2001).

As outlined by Kidd (2016), the primary challenge film producers face is creating a narrative that is capable of telling a complete story within a short period of time, as means of allowing the audience to identify and connect to the characters within the film without losing focus. For the purposes of establishing this connection between the audience and the on-screen characters, films use archetypes (Kidd, 2016). Archetypes, according to Kidd (2016), are necessary components from a storytelling viewpoint. However, a problem arises when these archetypes are connected to stereotypes. If a social group is depicted in dramatized manner and the characters are not reflective of the real lives of these groups, then a false and inaccurate image is provided to the audience.

When it comes to mental illness, as illustrated by Cohen (2019), majority of the topics related to it are so complex that in order to achieve a more balanced narrative, films would be required to be more lengthy, with less-entertaining and compelling storylines. Frank (1997) identified that mental illness within storytelling is constructed mainly in three types of narratives: restitution/cure, chaos, and quest narrative. Throughout the encoding process, the producers, and directors of the film make choices that impact the way in which a protagonist with mental illness is portrayed and, hence, perceived by the audience (Entman, 2001). Restitution or in other words – cure narrative, according to Frank (1997), depicts illness or disability as something that is acquired and needs to be overcome. Whereas, the chaos narrative implies that the life of the individual is constantly governed by the principles of uncertainty and chaos, hence there is no way this individual can potentially get any better in terms of health (Frank, 1997). Lastly, the quest narrative places the main focus on the acceptance

of mental illness and of the situation *for what it is* – a part of this narrative is the emphasis of the individual telling his/her own story and experiences (Frank, 1997).

### 2.3 Connecting the disability rhetoric to mental illness

There is a widespread view that madness or mental illness is inherently disabling –implying that the various limitations individuals experience are a result of the conditions of mental illness that they deal with (Rashed, 2019). According to the definition provided by Rashed (2019), disability consists of either physical or mental impairment that is often related to long-term limitations on an individuals' ability to perform daily activities.

At the core of the disability rhetoric is the idea that an individual with a disability should not be defined solely through this disability (Dolmage, 2014). Disability studies focus on disability as a political and cultural identity, rather than a medical condition. In his book, Dolmage (2014) elaborately discusses the concept of normativity which relates to the fact that society regards its members based on the logics of ableism and disablism. The framework of ableism and disablism will be used for the purposes of discussion within this study, as it will allow to distinguish whether the representation of mental illness focuses more on disability as negative and whether it makes explicit references towards this idea that all individuals must conform to the core ideas of normalcy.

Campbell (2012) states that at the core of ableism is the idea that all disability is to be perceived as negative and if possible, should be cured or eliminated. Individuals with disability are often looked at as burdens to society, and because of their disability are not considered to be properly human (Campbell, 2012). Kattari et al. (2018) mention that the belief that non-disabled individuals are in some way superior to individuals with a disability is what has contributed and still contributes to the prominent place ableism takes within our society. It is noteworthy to mention that this idea of ableism makes able-bodiedness as something compulsory, and as something that is demanded by cultures and therefore reinforces norms which results in the marginalization of those individuals who do not conform to the societal norms of ability, whether it be physical or mental (Dolmage, 2014).

According to Dolmage (2014), a normate culture continuously reinforces the ideas of centrality, naturality and neutrality, therefore controlling bodies through the means of using the term disablism. Disablism is defined as “a set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities” (Dolmage, 2014, p.22). A common frame used when portraying people with mental illness is the “us versus them” dichotomy, meaning that majority of the media content produced focuses on drawing a comparison between the lives of “normal” individuals and individuals with mental illness (Dolmage, 2014). As outlined by Campbell (2012), disablism is primarily concerned with perceiving disabled

individuals as the Other, as individuals that are different from the 'us' – the able-bodied. Therefore, this idea of normativity often results in construction disability and everything associated with it as entirely negative.

Research by Corrigan and Watson (2002) highlights that individuals with mental illness tend to be perceived by the wider society to be in control of their disabilities and inherently responsible for causing them. Davis (2006) emphasizes this by stating that ideological meaning is almost always attached to individuals whose lives are transformed as a result of diseases or accidents, therefore implying that they must readjust their behaviour through any means to be able to fit in within the pre-existing norms of society. This is especially true for contemporary Hollywood films that commonly use mental illness as a magnifying glass through which social, economic, or political problems become enlarged as means of critiquing societal conditions (Heath, 2019). Even though the film industry has a long history of amplifying human emotion or experience for dramatic purposes, in the case of mental illness representation, there is a certain responsibility for depicting a psychological condition of an individual as accurately and honestly as possible (Heath, 2019).

There are nine dominant models of disability that are the most prevalent within society – medical/traditional, social, identity, human rights, cultural, charity, economic and limits model (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). For the purposes of this thesis, immense attention will be placed upon two of the abovementioned models of disability – medical (traditional) and social model. These two models of disability were selected for the purposes of this research as they were mentioned the most frequently within the field of research on mental illness and disability in media. The rest of the disability models have blurry and abstract definitions that overlap with one another. To illustrate this, the human rights, identity and cultural disability model can arguably be placed under the social model of disability as they place emphasis on the misunderstandings that arise in terms of distinguishing between the disability of an individual and his/her illness, as well as the fact that an individual should not be defined by his/her diagnosis (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). Whereas, economic, limits and charity disability models all largely highlight the fact that through the medical diagnosis of an individual, he/she is perceived as something inherently disabled whether it be in terms of productivity, victimhood or limitedness (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). This brings us to the two models of disability that serve as overarching umbrella terms for the previously named models – traditional and social model of disability. The medical model depicts disability in an entirely negative manner, disability as a disease is often referred to also as the 'personal tragedy' model (Thomas & Woods, 2003).

Often disability is perceived as a tragedy in the life of the individual who has it, as well as something that should be prevented and if circumstances allow, cured. Perceiving disability as a disease leads to perceiving individuals who have, for example, a mental illness, as problems that need

to be solved and this in return, often results in absolute ignorance of the actual life of the person (Thomas & Woods, 2003). Moreover, the medical model regards disability as something fundamentally negative, therefore, placing people with disability in a position where they are perceived as problems that need to be solved. The most common stigma that arises through this is the idea that someone with a disability needs to be cured or changed to fit larger societal standards. The social model of disability, in contrast, suggests that an individual is not disabled merely because he or she has a medical condition. Rather, what makes individual disabled are the attitudes and structures present within society (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). This model is often endorsed by disability activists and emphasizes that the limitations individuals experience arises through the physical and social environments through means of prejudice, labelling, or ignorance.

These two above explained models will serve as the basis when analysing the films chosen for the purposes of this study, allowing to gain deeper insight to which model or models are used most recurrently throughout contemporary culture to address mental illness. Whereas, the notion of ableism will be used for discussion, to observe whether the films part of the sample represent individuals with mental illness in terms of being inherently disabled and not capable of making decisions themselves.

#### 2.4 Representation of mental illness in contemporary culture

Mental illness has become a concept so hegemonic that majority of society uses it without hesitation (Burstow, 2018). Throughout the past century, media depiction of mental illness has been overwhelmingly negative, therefore perpetuating some of the most damaging myths and stereotypes about mental illness (Byrne, 2009). These ideas often taken for granted regarding madness and mental illness that have already been pre-established within the Western society are further enforced through means of contemporary culture products, such as film and television (Sjöström, 2018). Since majority of the public have never been in direct contact or is not aware of personally knowing a person without mental illness, the primary source of information and knowledge about mental illness for them is media (Kondo, 2008). As mentioned by Gorman and LeFrançois (2018), the wider public assumes that individuals with mental illness have essential characteristics that distinguish them from others, therefore making them easily identifiable as mad. In fact, a survey conducted by Byrne (2009) found that the top three characteristics associated with characters in film that have mental illness are – violence (39%), weirdness (35%) and high likelihood of these individuals being murderers (30%). Heath (2019) argues that the visible distinction between the normate and the Other is fuelled by cultural and social anxieties about a member of the society who does not conform to familiar social paradigms.

More than two decades ago, research showed that most mental illness representations within media are outstandingly negative – characters with mental illnesses were largely portrayed as a threat to society and as opposing towards general societal norms (Wilson et al., 1999). Moreover, Wahl (1997) in his book called *Media Madness* outlined that vast majority of mass media content about mental illness consists of the misuse of psychiatric terminology, depiction of mental illness as impossible to overcome, use of stigmatizing language in relation to the mentally ill and, especially, the association of mentally ill with violence and criminal behaviour. Unfortunately, these representations have not changed much over time and the contemporary media still has a tendency of over-representing people with mental illness as violent, criminal, aggressive and dangerous (Pirkis et al., 2006; Heath, 2019; Harper, 2005; Harper, 2008; Kimmerle & Kress, 2013; Cutcliffe & Hannigan, 2001). Research by Rose et al. (2007) found that mentally ill people are often referred to as “insane”, “psycho”, “freak”, “disturbed”, “confused” and “scary”. The widespread of these words used in relation to mental illness leads to the process of stigmatization (Byrne, 2000). In regards, to contemporary culture, as a result of this stigma, people with mental illness are often represented as psychokillers, maniacs, pathetic sad characters, and threats to society (Byrne, 2000).

Based on previous research conducted regarding the representation of mental illness in film, the following six negative portrayals were identified:

- 1) *Dangerous member of society*. This is the most used negative portrayal of mental illness within film and depicts individuals with mental illness as aggressive and more likely to commit violent acts than other characters (Hyler et al., 1991; Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Heath, 2019).
- 2) *The rebellious free spirit*. Individuals with mental illness portrayed as eccentric and free-spirited (Hyler et al, 1991), and often with childlike perceptions of the world (Corrigan & Watson, 2002).
- 3) *Female patient as seductress*. This stereotype refers to the portrayal of females with mental illness as nymphomaniacs with seductive powers that have the potential to control me (Hyler et al., 1991)
- 4) *Narcissistic parasite*. Often individuals with mental illness are portrayed as self-obsessed and attention-seeking (Hyler et al., 1991; Wedding & Niemec, 2014).
- 5) *Zoo specimen*. The zoo specimen portrayal refers to depicting individuals with mental illness as a source of entertainment for those who are “normal” (Hyler et al. , 1991; Wedding & Niemec, 2014).
- 6) *Enlightened member of society*. Individual with mental illness is depicted as capable of creating a utopian society. Even though it is less negative than the other portrayals, it still

fosters misconceptions regarding mental illness (Hylar et al., 1991; Wedding & Niemec, 2014).

On the contrary, Ma (2017) argues that even though media portrayal of mental illness is still largely negative and contributes to the ongoing stigmatization of mental illness, there is an increasing discussion about making the media content more informative and objective. For instance, Kondo (2008) mentions that some films show the potential an individual has in terms of achieving things in life despite the mental illness. Wedding and Niemec (2014) highlight that for a positive portrayal of mental illness or disability, a film should include if not all, then most of the following elements:

- 1) *Humanizing*. The first element involves a person-first approach and gives an insight into who the character is “beyond” his or her disability.
- 2) *Dynamic*. Throughout the viewing process, viewers should be able to identify all the important aspects of a characters’ life from the film, including positive and negative traits, various relationships that the character has, as well as the environmental factors influencing the character.
- 3) *Balanced*. An emphasis should be placed upon creating a balance between a realistic portrayal of mental illness and glorification of it.
- 4) *Meaningful*. Possibly the most important elements that a film should include is a meaningful and compelling storyline about the character who transcends his or her mental illness.

Additionally, Peterson and Seligman (2004) suggest that emphasis should be placed upon evaluating individuals in terms of their individual strengths and virtues. Peterson and Seligman (2004) define virtues as the core characteristics that are highly valued by moral philosophers such as wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, and transcendence. Whereas character strengths are what define these virtues, for example, the virtue of courage can be achieved through strengths such as persistence and integrity (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In contrast, Harper (2008) states that by means of striving towards more positive and accurate representations of mental illness, a lot of other problems may arise. Often the lead character with mental illness gets reduced to a pitiable prop role that only demonstrates the growth of other characters, even if the depiction of this lead character is benevolent and positive (Harper, 2008).

Moreover, even the positive representations of mental illness are often quite stigmatized. Byrne (2000) defines stigma regarding mental illness as “a sign of disgrace or discredit, which sets a person apart from others” (p.65). In addition, Corrigan and Watson (2002) specify that people with mental illness struggle in a twofold way – firstly, with the symptoms that they have to live with as a result of their illness; and secondly, with the stereotypes and stigmatization about mental illness. Mental illness as violence or comedy are still two of the most prevalent stereotypes throughout

contemporary films (Byrne, 2009). The usage of comedic elements and satire creates a narrative within film that leads to the portrayal of the individual with mental health problems as innocent and a lunatic that cannot be trusted (Byrne, 2009). Additionally, the stereotype of a psychokiller driven and motivated by madness constitutes an entire genre of film, even though violent behaviour is not always a symptom of mental health problems (Byrne, 2009). Lastly, Byrne (2009) identifies the third stereotypical representation of mental illness in film – the pity for the individual with mental health problems. This last stereotype refers to melodramatic representation of mental illness as means of making the audience feel sorry for the individual rather than foster understanding of mental illness (Byrne, 2009).

As a result of the persistence of these stereotypes and stigmas, people with mental illness are robbed of the opportunities that define the quality of life, such as secure housing, proper healthcare and so on (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). Stigmatization occurs when individuals who live with mental illness are primarily viewed through the lens of them being different from the rest of the society, implying they are unpredictable, should be feared and excluded from society (Cohen, 2019). In 1963, Erving Goffman claimed that stigma should be perceived as a means of spoling ones' identity. Goffman (1963) identified three main types of stigma – stigma of character traits, physical stigma and stigma of group identity. The latter refers to a stigma that arises through an individual being a particular race, nation, etc.; the physical stigma refers to physical deformities, whereas stigma of character traits refers to blemishes of an individual character, such as mental disorders and so on (Goffman, 1963). The most important aspect of this is that any stigma is all about social control, therefore being a social phenomenon – if there is no society, there are no stigmas (Goffman, 1963). Similarly to the encoding and decoding model devised by Hall (1997), in order to have stigma, there must be a stigmatizer and someone to stigmatize. Thus, it is necessary to outline that this thesis will focus on whether and how these stigmas are encoded within the contemporary films about mental illness.

## 2.5 Summary

To summarize, this chapter introduced concepts that serve as the guidelines for conducting the research and exploring the representation of mental illness in contemporary film. The ever-increasing importance the media plays within contemporary society in terms of shaping our interpretive frameworks (Cohen, 2019) can have a twofold impact – it can either provide us with accurate information or completely distorted perceptions of reality. As emphasized within the encoding and decoding model devised by Hall (1997), encoding of media messages consists of careful curation of what and how everything is portrayed within films. Through making certain elements of a film more prominently noticeable, films provide a specific problem definition and interpretation

(Entman, 2001). To sum up, films have the potential of shaping our opinions of social minority groups, such as individuals with mental illness. However, according to the disability rhetoric, individuals should not be defined solely through the disability, and that disability is rather a politically and culturally constructed social identity (Dolmage, 2014). Previous research has found that mental illness within media often tends to be represented in a largely negative and stereotypical manner, therefore, leading to the wider public believing that mental illness goes hand in hand with aggression and violence. Such portrayal results in an overall perception that mental illness is something inherently negative and must be cured or eliminated by any means possible (Campbell, 2012). However, previous research also indicates that for a portrayal of mental illness within media to be positive, it needs to consist of only four elements: it needs to be humanizing, dynamic, balanced and meaningful (Wedding & Niemec, 2014). However, even the most positive representations often include a high degree of stigmatization of mental illness or other underlying stereotypical portrayals (Harper, 2008). Therefore, the goal of this study is to explore whether the representation of mental illness in contemporary film is still largely governed by stereotypical portrayal or whether there is in fact a trend towards depicting mental illness in a more accurate way.

### 3 Methodology

The following chapter will describe the research methodology applied within this thesis and outline why it was chosen as the most appropriate for the purposes of answering the research question and the sub-questions at the core of this study. Throughout the following chapter, section 3.1 provides definitions and justification of using qualitative research design, as well as the rationale for using qualitative thematic analysis. Additionally, section 3.2 gives a thorough description of the sampling process and the units of analysis chosen as part of the final sample. Section 3.3 touches upon the key concepts included in the study, as well as an operationalization of these abstract concepts. Section 3.4 elaborately explains the various steps taken throughout the data analysis. Lastly, section 3.5 provides a critical reflection on the validity and reliability of the research design.

#### 3.1 Research design

The goal of this study is to explore and gain insight into the representation of mental illness within contemporary film, as well as draw a comparison between the representation of mental illness within fictional and based-on-a-true-story films. As means of answering the research questions at the essence of this thesis, a qualitative research design was chosen as the most appropriate. Qualitative methodology allows for a systematic and subjective approach as means of highlighting and explaining daily life experiences, further on ascribing them meaning (Boeije, 2012). To be more specific, according to Williamson et al. (2018), qualitative thematic analysis is a methodological approach that allows to study the meaning encapsulated in the form of a message. Therefore, qualitative thematic analysis was chosen for the purposes of answering the following research question (RQ) and the sub-questions (Sub-RQ) at the core of this study:

*RQ: How mental illness is represented in fictional and “based on a true story” films?*

*Sub-RQ1: What are the negative ways in which mental illness is represented in film?*

*Sub-RQ2: What are the common characteristics of films that represent mental illness positively?*

*Sub-RQ3: Are there any “challenging representations” of mental illness present throughout the films?*

At the core of qualitative research is the goal to recognize and describe social phenomena in context (Boeije, 2012; Silverman, 2014). This particular qualitative research is both deductive and inductive in nature, as it primarily departs from theory. However, the analysis process remains open to allow for identification of other possible concepts and ideas that can emerge from the dataset (Bryman, 2012; Boeije, 2012). The use of qualitative methodology allows the researcher to gather and

analyse data in a way that provides rich and descriptive findings – these findings have great potential of contributing to the already existing field of academic research regarding the phenomenon explored (Boeije, 2012). Qualitative methodology is highly characterized by flexible research methodology and looking for meaning. Boeije (2012) states that at the core of such methodology is understanding social behaviour of individuals.

Since media plays a massive role in shaping the society (Chandler, 2007), it is crucial to understand how various representations present within media have the potential of affecting social behaviour of individuals within society. As this research deals with the representation of mental illness in contemporary culture, qualitative methodology was chosen as the most appropriate because it allows to draw a connection between the representation and the attitudes it results in regarding people with mental illness. Improvisation, creativity, and flexibility are important when conducting qualitative research, since analysis of qualitative data is highly interlinked with data collection itself (Boeije, 2012).

For the purposes of answering the research question at the core of this study, qualitative thematic analysis was chosen as the most appropriate type of research method. Williamson et al. (2018) define qualitative thematic analysis as “a method for studying the meaning contained in the body of a message” (p.461). In other words, it is characterized by a systematic classification procedure which involves identifying, analysing and combining qualitative data into clusters of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Figgou, 2015). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme captures an important aspect about the data related to the research question central to the study and encapsulates a pattern of meaning that is omnipresent throughout the data. Qualitative thematic analysis is an interpretative approach permitting that researcher to describe the emerging themes and topics that are considered the most meaningful for the research objectives at the core of the study conducted (Williamson et al., 2018). Using thematic content analysis will allow to identify the themes regarding mental illness that are present throughout the selected films, as well as identify which verbal, non-verbal and behavioural characteristics of the protagonists with mental illness are used most often.

### 3.2 Sampling of Films

As outlined previously, the overall goal of qualitative research is to provide a rich and detailed description, as well as understanding of how meanings and opinions are ascribed to the research topic at the core of this study – mental illness. For the purposes of this study, non-probability sampling was chosen. More specifically, a purposive or judgemental sampling technique was applied. Babbie (2010) defines purposive sampling as “a type of non-probability sampling in which the units to be observed are selected on the basis of the researcher’s judgment about which ones will be the most useful or

representative” (p.193). Purposive sampling was chosen as the most appropriate methodology as the main goal of it is to focus on specific characteristics of a population that are relevant to the research question and will best allow to answer the research questions at the centre of the study (Bryman, 2012). More specifically, criterion-based sampling was used. Criterion-based sampling implies that research units are selected as part of the sample if they meet a certain set of criteria (Boeijs, 2012). The primary source for locating films was the Internet film databases such as IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes, Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. Keyword search terms used were “mental illness or “mental disorder”, “crazy”, “psychological problems”, and “schizophrenia”. Films that explicitly did not refer to the lead character having a mental disorder, were excluded from the sample. Throughout the sampling process, various films were viewed, however, only four films were selected as part of the final sample. The four films were selected as part of the sample because the narratives used within them are mostly linear, and even though they often tend to employ dramatic elements, they are less stigmatizing than representations of mental illness in film genres like horror and thrillers. The following criteria were used when selecting the research units for the purposes of this study:

- a) Presence of a lead character with mental illness
- b) Films in English
- c) Commercial films
- d) Fit under the genre of fictional or based-on-a-true-story films
- e) Released between 2008-2020
- f) Detailed focus on the mental illness and it’s characteristics

The first criteria used when selecting the research units for this research is the necessity of having the presence of a lead character with mental illness within the film. As at the core of this research is the goal to explore representation of mental illness, the films part of the sample must include a lead character that has mental illness. If the film did not include a lead character with mental illness, it was not selected as part of the sample as it would not allow to gain any insight into the portrayal of mental illness. Moreover, the films selected part of the sample must be in English to ensure the fact that they can be understood worldwide and no translations are necessary, as translation can often imply that a figment of the media message is lost. By selecting commercial films that are in English, the research is easier to reproduce and does not involve translation of the film transcripts. Additionally, the films can be easily understood by anyone worldwide and do not require any language knowledge, other than that of English. Additionally, the study claims priority to commercial films to explore what representations of mental illness are shown to audiences globally, as commercial films have a wider audience outreach, therefore, having a larger impact on the social beliefs about mental illness. Films released between 2008 and 2020 were selected as part of the

sample as throughout this time period discussions about mental health gained a prominent place within media. 2008 was the year when the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) came into being and it marked the start to a new era in terms of raising awareness about mental illness and advocating for change. Additionally, even though the representation of mental illness in film has been stigmatizing, throughout this time period a general trend towards more accurate representation emerged (Ma, 2017). The last criterion used when selecting films as part of the sample is whether the film places detailed focus on mental illness, the characteristics of it and the lives of those with mental illness. If the film did not include this, it was not selected as part of the sample.

Two of the four films selected as part of the sample – *The Soloist* (Foster, Krasnoff & Wright, 2009) and *No Letting Go* (Rush, Silverman & Bucari, 2015) are based upon true stories of real-life events. The screenplay of *The Soloist* (Foster, Krasnoff & Wright, 2009) is based on the book written by Steve Lopez about the story of Nathaniel Ayers, a talented musician who has schizophrenia and became homeless. The second film selected as part of the sample is *No Letting Go* (Rush, Silverman & Bucari, 2015) is based upon the true story of the co-screenwriter and producer Randi Silverman about a family who is struggling to cope with a teenager who suffers from mental illness. “Based on a true story” films as a genre are largely based upon true stories that are slightly altered for the purposes of providing entertainment for the audiences, therefore allowing the spectators to discover what it would feel like to be the protagonist within the film (Bingham, 2010). Both of these films were selected as part of the sample since the main characters have a clearly indicated mental disorder, and the narrative of the film focuses largely on establishing how these mental disorders impact the individual characters’ daily lives, as well as their relationships with others. Additionally, previous research findings by Kimmerle and Kress (2013) suggest that biopics allow for audiences to acquire more accurate knowledge about mental illness than fictional films.

The two other films selected for the analysis are *Elizabeth Blue* (Dain & Sabella, 2017) and *Still Alice* (Brown, Koffler, Lutzus, Glatzer, Styler & Westmoreland, 2014) are fiction narrative films. *Still Alice* (Brown et al., 2014) is a film about a linguistics professor who is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, whereas *Elizabeth Blue* (Dain & Sabella, 2017) is a film about a young woman who is recently released from a psychiatric hospital and is trying her best to cope with various episodes of schizophrenia. Fictional films were selected as part of the sample since they have the potential of exerting a strong influence on the overall community attitudes towards mental illness due to their broad audience reach and appeal (Pirkis et al., 2006).

Additionally, as the main research question focuses on examining whether the representation of mental illness differs amongst fictional and based on a true story films, it is necessary to elaborate

on why it is important to draw a comparison between the two. As previously shown by Kimmerle and Kress (2013), the genre of a film has a significant impact on how the media text message is encoded. In other words, fictional films are often created purely for entertainment purposes, therefore, often including overdramatized representations. Whereas biopics or based on a true story films, are mostly based on real life events and therefore include portrayals that are more realistic and accurate. This being said, the present research aims to find out whether it is in fact true that the representation of mental illness is more accurate and positive in based on a true story films, rather than in fictional films.

### 3.3 Key concepts and operationalizations

To answer the research question and the sub-questions at the core of this study, the main phenomena that will be measured are “Representations of mental illness”. The representations are measured in terms of the following concepts: two models of disability – medical and the social model of disability; six negative stereotypical representations of mental illness identified throughout previous academic research, as well as by four elements that constitute a positive representation of mental illness within film. These concepts will serve as the basis to analysing the films selected for the sample. The following section provides a description of the categories created throughout the process of data analysis and the relevance of these categories to the academic literature discussed in the theoretical framework chapter of this thesis.

#### 3.3.1 Medical vs The Social Model of Disability

The theoretical framework chapter elaborately discusses the disability rhetoric in connection to mental illness. Dolmage (2014) claims that disability studies focus on disability as a socially constructed identity rather than a medical condition. As part of the disability rhetoric is the ableism or in other words, the idea of normativity. Looking at mental illness through the lens of the normativity implies that an individual with mental illness is inherently different and, therefore, less of a human than the rest of the society (Campbell, 2012). According to the ideas of normativity and ableism, an individual with a mental illness is perceived through the medical model of disability, implying that said individual with a mental illness is to be looked upon as inherently disabled by his/her mental illness.<sup>1</sup> Whereas, disablism fits together with the social model of disability, as the focus is placed upon the individual beyond his/her medical diagnosis. This is measured by analysing whether the films selected for the sample depict the characters with mental illness through the lens of the “Medical model of disability” or “Social model of disability”. Table 3.1 provided below gives definitions to these two

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<sup>1</sup> Recent advancements in medicine, in fact, include the social aspect in terms of the diagnosis of mental illness, however the literature used in this study associates the medical disability model with pathology placing focus the causes and effects of mental illness.

models of disability, moreover, giving some examples of the possible data set outcomes that fit under each code.

Table 3.1

*Disability models*

| Codes                                    | Description  | Possible data set outcomes  |
|--|--|---|
| Medical (individual model) of disability | Disability as ultimately negative and as a personal tragedy for the individual who has it, moreover, disability throughout this model is often perceived as something to be prevented and if possible, cured (Thomas & Woods, 2003). | The main character of the film is diagnosed with mental illness, and the narrative of the film places focus upon finding a “cure” for said illness.                                 |
| Social model of disability               | Individuals are not disabled by means of his/her medical condition, rather through attitudes and structures that are present within society that arise by means of prejudice, labelling and ignorance (Retief & Letšosa, 2018).      | Within film the focus is placed upon explaining the personal experience of the person with mental illness, as well as portray them as equal and independent members within society. |

### 3.3.2 Operationalization of negative representation

In order to establish whether the selected films include negative and stereotypical representations of individuals with mental illness, six different types of negative portrayals based on previous academic research findings are used – “Dangerous member of society”, “The rebellious free spirit”, “Female patient as seductress”, “Narcissistic parasite”, “Zoo specimen” and “The enlightened member of society”. As indicated in the theoretical framework chapter, the majority of previous research has found that representation of mental illness within media, specifically, film, has been largely negative and stereotypical (Hyler et al, 1991; Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Wedding & Niemas, 2014). These previous findings give an indication that the representation of mental illness has not drastically changed throughout the past 20 years and is still highly inaccurate and negative. Negative representations of mental illness in the selected films is measured by analysing which negative portrayals are used throughout the films, and in what way that shapes the character with mental illness and his/her relationship with individuals who do not have a mental illness. In other words, the aim is to distinguish if these negative portrayals somehow influence the perceptions and attitudes of other characters towards the character with mental illness. The table below (Table 3.2) provides a clear overview of the previously mentioned types of negative representations that are the most used. Additionally, the table provides possible examples under each code that might emerge throughout the data analysis process. It is necessary to mention, that there is a possibility that the characters

within the selected films can potentially be depicted through means of using one or multiple of these types of negative representations. Moreover, some films may not include negative portrayals at all.

Table 3.2

*Types of negative representations of mental illness*

| Codes                         | Description   | Possible data set outcomes   |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Dangerous member of society   | Individual depicted as aggressive and likely to commit violent acts in comparison to other characters (Hylar et al, 1991; Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Heath, 2019).        | The individual with mental illness within the film acts violently towards a family member.   |
| The rebellious free spirit    | A person with mental illness portrayed as eccentric and free spirited (Hylar et al., 1991), and often with childlike perception of the world (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). | Person with mental illness is wearing snorkelling gear to a formal facility, therefore not abiding with social conventions.                                  |
| Female patient as seductress  | Portrayal of females with mental illness as nymphomaniacs capable of seducing and controlling men (Hylar et al., 1991)  | The woman with mental illness is constantly trying to convince her partner to indulge in sexual activities.  |
| Narcissistic parasite         | Individual with mental illness portrayed as self-obsessed and attention-seeking (Hylar et al., 1991; Wedding & Niemec, 2014).   | Character with mental illness only talks to others about himself/herself and makes every conversation about themselves.                                      |
| Zoo specimen                  | Depiction of individuals with mental illness as a source of entertainment for those who are considered “normal” (Hylar et al, 1991; Wedding & Niemec, 2014).            | Individual with mental illness gets laughed at by other characters that fit with the standards of “normativity”.   |
| Enlightened member of society | Individual with mental illness depicted as capable of creating a utopian society (Hylar et al, 1991; Wedding & Niemec, 2014).   | Character with mental illness is equivalent to a spiritual guide that came to earth from another planet, therefore having deeper understanding of the world. |

### 3.3.3 Operationalization of positive representation

To identify whether any of the films include positive representation of mental illness, the units of analysis were assessed in terms of what positive elements are incorporated throughout these films as means of delivering a story that is more informative and objective. Regardless of the omnipresence of negative portrayals, Kondo (2008) highlights that film producers have begun to strive towards

creating narratives that show the potential an individual has in terms of achieving things in life despite the mental illness and therefore transcending beyond it. Wedding and Niemec (2014) highlighted that for mental illness or disability to be presented in a positive manner, a film should include at least a few, if not all the following elements – humanizing, dynamic, balanced, and meaningful. These elements will be used as codes that will measure the positive representation of mental illness within the sample of films. Table 3.3 provides the description of each of these codes, as well as possible data examples. The extent of positive representation will be measured through analysing whether any of these four elements are present throughout the films. Furthermore, presence or the therefore the lack of these elements provide an insight whether the film is created with the goal to generate revenue or educate the wider society. Table 3.3 below provides descriptions of these elements and some possible data examples.

Table 3.3

*Elements of positive representation outlined by Wedding and Niemec (2014)*

| Code       | Description  | Possible outcomes of data set  |
|------------|--|--|
| Humanizing | The first element involves a person-first approach and gives an insight into who the character is “beyond” his or her disability.  | The film focuses on the personality of the individual rather than only his/her medical diagnosis of schizophrenia.                                     |
| Dynamic    | Throughout the viewing process, both positive and negative traits of the character can easily be identified, as well as the various relationships the character has and environmental factors influencing the character. | The highs and the lows of the character are shown, as well as how the character is affected by, e.g., losing a job.                                    |
| Balanced   | An emphasis is placed upon creating a balance between a realistic portrayal of mental illness and its glorification.   | The film does not purely consist of overly dramatized scenes and provides a storyline that allows to “experience” what the individual is experiencing. |
| Meaningful | A meaningful and compelling storyline about the character who transcends his/her mental illness.   | The story focuses on the individual being successful in life regarding his/her mental illness.   |

### 3.3.4 Narrative choices

As outlined by Cohen (2019), quite often topics regarding mental health are too complex and as means of having a balanced narrative the films would have to be more lengthy, complex, and

perhaps even consist of less-compelling storylines. To determine what narratives are used within the selected sample of films, a categorization devised by Frank (1997) is applied. Frank (1997) identifies three ways in which narratives about an illness are constructed in terms of storytelling: restitution narrative, chaos narrative and quest narrative. By applying one of these narratives within film, the directors and producers select certain aspects of a perceived reality, therefore, making them more noticeable and promoting a specific definition of mental illness and its interpretation (Entman, 2001). In other words, each type of narrative has the potential to show the main protagonist with mental illness in a different light – whether it be positive, negative, or neutral representation. The definitions and examples of these three previously mentioned narrative types are provided in Table 3.4 below.

Table 3.4

*Illness narratives used in storytelling as identified by Frank (1997)*

| Code                  | Description   | Possible outcomes of data set   |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| Restitution narrative | Disability or illness depicted as acquired and something through natural desire needs to be overcome. Such narrative tells the story of someone returning to “normal” health.   | The film starts by showing what the life of the protagonist was like before he/she got depression, later successfully finding a cure for this depression (through medicine use).  |
| Chaos narrative       | The life of a person with an illness is constantly governed by chaos and uncertainty, as well as there is no way this individual can ever get “better”; the story in this case is told by someone else not the “sufferer”.                    | The protagonist of the film has schizophrenia, he/she constantly fluctuates between feeling horrible to feeling even worse and so on. He/she does not think of life ever getting better or easier. Neither of medicine used has the potential to help in any way. |
| Quest narrative       | An illness within the story is accepted, and the individual with this illness tells his/her story. Often illness is portrayed as a spiritual journey at the core of which is the idea that something is to be gained through this experience. | The narrative of the film focuses on the protagonist accepting his/her mental illness and accepting the situation for <i>what it is</i> .   |

### 3.3.5 Challenging representations

Throughout the analysis of the selected films, it is possible that other different representations emerge. These are coded as “Challenging representations” and are identified as such if they do not fit under the categories of “Negative” and “Positive” representations.

### 3.4 Data analysis

The method of analysis used in this study is thematic analysis. Bryman (2012) defines thematic analysis as the extraction of main themes from the data within the selected sample.

Before conducting the actual analysis, a trial coding was carried out on one of the film trailers available on YouTube. This was done to be certain that the concepts discussed in the theoretical framework can be identified within the films. After the trial coding proved to be successful, the actual coding process of the sample began.

Firstly, the four films were transcribed in terms of the dialogues occurring throughout them. Secondly, the films were watched again, this time with the completed transcripts of dialogues, and descriptions of relevant events and details, such as the characters verbal, non-verbal and behavioural characteristics, were noted down. After the transcripts were completed, they were manually coded with the help of Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. The coding process of qualitative data, as outlined by Boeije (2012), consists of three parts – open-coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Throughout the open-coding phase, no attention was paid to theoretical concepts, therefore, allowing to maintain a more open outlook on the data. This allowed to gain a broad but clear overview of the present and recurrent themes within the films regarding mental illness. By using open coding, it was possible to generate concepts that give a more meaningful and rich insight into the data analysed, as well as allow for more in-depth interpretation of the films. Charmaz (2006) identifies seven tips that should be considered when performing the initial coding “remain open, stay close to the data, keep your codes simple and precise, construct short codes, compare data with data, move quickly through the data” (p.49). These suggestions were considered throughout the initial stage of the analysis conducted. The focus during this initial coding phase was placed upon closely and thoroughly examining the films and coding anything that is considered useful and relevant for the purposes of answering the research question and the sub-questions at the core of the study.

The second step, axial coding, focuses on reducing the initial number of codes, as well as allows to draw connections between these codes, furthermore, combining similar codes under various themes (Boeije, 2012). Axial coding was the most time consuming and selective process of the data analysis, as the primary aim of it is to reduce the amount of codes that emerged throughout the initial coding phase. Lastly, selective coding, is the final step and allows to refine the themes that emerged

throughout the analysis so far and connect them to the theory provided within the theoretical framework (Boeije, 2012). See Appendix B for coding tree, where “T” stands for based on a true story films and “F” stands for fictional films. The data was analysed in terms of whether the representation of mental illness was positive or negative, as well as whether the character with mental illness was portrayed through the lens of a medical or social model of disability. The emerged themes were connected to the theories discussed in the theoretical framework and a general trend in terms of the representation of mental illness within contemporary film was identified. Additionally, a comparison between the representation of mental illness in fictional and based-on-a-true-story films was drawn. This aims to illustrate whether the representation of mental illness is dependent on the genre of film.

### 3.5 Validity and reliability

Atieno (2009) highlights that qualitative analysis, however, has some limitations. The biggest limitation is that the findings of qualitative analysis cannot be generalized regarding a larger population (Atieno, 2009). This is largely due to the small sample sizes and the specificity of the context involved. In addition, qualitative research is more prone to be influenced by researcher bias, therefore making the interpretation of the data more subjective than it would be if quantitative methodology was applied. In addition, examining an entire population of films involving representation of mental illness would not be feasible due to the time and resource constraints. Therefore, it is possible that the chosen sample might lead to a certain extent of external validity, since when selecting the films used as units of analysis for this research paper, their suitability was determined by keeping in mind the research question and previous theoretical findings. The small size of the sample also implies that the validity of the research overall has the potential to be affected. Additionally, Broom et al. (2009) outline that individual biography of the qualitative researcher has the potential to impact the analysis of the qualitative data. Therefore, it is possible that since my mother has been diagnosed with schizophrenia for over 20 years and has been treated negatively by the society largely as a result of misconceptions about mental illness that are omnipresent throughout media, the research outcomes might have been affected by a personal bias. However, despite this bias, being familiar with mental illness also has beneficial effects in terms of conducting the present research. For example, having more knowledge of the topic and the consequences of inaccurate and negative portrayal of mental illness allows to evaluate the representation of mental illness in contemporary film in a more critical manner than people who have no knowledge of mental illness would.

## 4 Results

As mentioned previously, the focus of this study is to explore the representation of mental illness in contemporary film, specifically, in films that are entirely fictional and films that are based on true stories. In order to do so, the present study utilizes the methodology of thematic analysis and explores in what manner do film producers portray individuals with mental illness. Additionally, it also aims to explore whether these representations are negative, positive or “challenging” to understand what potential impact they can have on the way society perceives individuals living with mental illness. For the purposes of answering the research question at the core of this study, four films about mental illness were selected – two of these films are based on true stories, and two are entirely fictional.

The following section will elaborately discuss six themes that emerged throughout the thematic analysis. The first theme, *Stereotypical representation of mental illness* addresses the ways in which individuals with mental illness are portrayed in terms of negative stereotypes. Additionally, it highlights that mental illness is portrayed as a personal tragedy throughout all of the films analysed and is presented as a problem that needs to be solved by any means possible, often resulting in the ignorance of the life of the actual individual. The second theme, *Overcoming adversity* addresses the importance of support and acceptance, as well as the various difficulties and misunderstandings that the individual with mental illness and his/her family and friends go through. The third theme, *Personal experience of individual with mental illness* reveals that few of the films attempt to portray what the individual with mental illness experiences as a result of it, and depict how different environmental factors and relationships this individual has impact his/her behaviour. The fourth theme, *Separating the individual from the diagnosis* unveils how the individual is able to transcend beyond his/her mental illness and pursue life-oriented personal gains. Additionally, this theme reveals a general trend towards a more sensitive and accurate portrayal of mental illness in the films analysed. Each of the themes have various sub-categories that provide a more in-depth explanation of the reoccurring patterns in the films analysed as part of the research.

### 4.1 Stereotypical representation of mental illness

No representation is comprehensively accurate and inevitably omits some aspects of the represented (Entman, 2001). However, if the representation of minority groups, such as individuals with mental illness, is highly stereotypical, certain expectations of how these individuals are ought to behave are created (Grossberg, 2005). Throughout the analysis of the four films selected as a part of the sample it became clear that even though there is a general trend towards depicting mental illness in an accurate and realistic manner, a lot of the negative stereotypes identified within previous

academic literature (Hyer et al, 1991; Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Heath, 2019; Wedding & Niemec, 2014) are still omnipresent throughout contemporary films.

The following sub-chapters will focus on how these negative stereotypes contribute to the overall depiction of the individual with mental illness, as well as shape the perception of others about them. Furthermore, the findings show that only one of the films addresses mental illness largely in terms of something taboo and something to not be spoken of. Additionally, an explanation of how the illnesses narratives identified by Frank (1997) are intertwining with one another throughout the films will be provided. Lastly, throughout the films mental illness was portrayed as a personal tragedy that drastically has affected and continues to affect the lives of individuals' who have it.

#### 4.1.1 Mental illness as a taboo topic

Contemporary media, especially film and television, to a large extent creates and shapes our perceptions of social reality and normality (McQuils, 2010), as well as impacts our social awareness about mental illness (Cohen, 2019). In fact, visual media such as films, is one of the primary sources of information for individuals who do not possess any prior or direct knowledge about mental illness (Cohen, 2019). However, even though widely represented, mental illness is still largely stigmatized, making it a taboo topic across the globe (Cohen, 2019). The findings show that only within one of the films – *No Letting Go* – mental illness is often referred to as a taboo topic. Whereas, in contrast, one of the fictional films, *Elizabeth Blue*, addresses the issue that mental illness in fact should not be regarded as something to not speak about. This is illustrated in the quotation below, as Elizabeth's psychologist says that "mental illness does not need to be treated like a dirty secret" (Dain, 2017). However, in *No Letting Go*, multiple times throughout the film, the mother of Tim is justifying his behaviour by stating that he has physical pain, such as a headache or stomach problems. Later, a dialogue between Catherine and her mother reveals that in fact Catherine feels like she is not permitted to tell anyone about Tim's mental state of mind. This is exemplified in the following extract from the film:

Catherine's mother: Did your friends even know what was going on with Tim?

Catherine: Not really, Mom. I don't know, I guess I just felt like I couldn't tell 'em.

(Bucari et al., 2015)

A potential reasoning behind this might be the fact that mental illness has only become a publicly discussed topic throughout the past decade, and beforehand, the media depiction of mental illness had been overwhelmingly negative (Byrne, 2009). Additionally, with mental illness there often comes a high degree of stigmatization regarding it – all throughout Western history there has always been a desire to visualize mental illness in a manner that would allow for a separation between "them"

and “us” (Eisenhauer, 2008). Moreover, media is often described as a mirror of events that are occurring in society and the world (McQuils, 2010), therefore, the less discussions present within media regarding mental illness, the less knowledge audiences gain about this certain topic (Cohen, 2019). This is exemplified in the dialogue between John and Catherine in *No Letting Go*:

John: Well, they didn't have that kind of stuff when we were growing up.

Catherine: Well, didn't you say that kid who lived down the street from you committed suicide when he was 17?

(Bucari et al., 2015)

Not only does this illustrate the lack of knowledge about mental illness a decade ago, it also emphasizes the ignorance that arises through it. The ignorance about mental illness is shown as reinforced through the cultural and societal norms which treat mental illness as a taboo topic. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that in order to diminish the stigmas and the various stereotypes that surround mental illness, an emphasis throughout the encoding process of a film should be placed upon actively acknowledging the mental illness and not being afraid to speak out about it. Additionally, the film portrays mental health as a weakness and something that needs to be punished. In fact, it is commonly assumed that individuals with mental illness are often perceived as inherently responsible for and in control of their disabilities (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). According to Corrigan and Watson (2002), society even tends to blame the individuals who have mental illness for acting a certain way that diverts from ideas of normativity. This motif is visible throughout *No Letting Go* as the family continuously refers to the need of punishing him for behaviour that does not fit societal standards, the following citation illustrates this:

Kyle: You shouldn't let him get away with acting like that. Are you gonna ground him?

Kyle: Dad, are you gonna let Tim get away with that?

(Bucari et al., 2015)

The quotations above illustrate the misunderstandings that arise when mental illness is not spoken of within a family in which someone is struggling with mental issues. As indicated by Corrigan and Watson (2002), individuals with mental illness struggle in a twofold way, and this can be seen in *No Letting Go*. Not only Tim is shown as struggling with the symptoms of his bipolar disorder, we also see him struggle with various stereotypes and stigmas present within surroundings. Heath (2019) states that often mental illness is perceived as contagious, as it is the invisible and incalculable Other that people tend to fear. Such a pattern also was presented in *No Letting Go* once Tim's younger brother learns about his medical diagnosis, he asks whether this mental illness is contagious or not.

#### 4.1.2 Curing the chaos

As identified within the theoretical framework, there are three main types of narratives when it comes to storytelling about mental illness – restitution/cure, chaos, and quest narrative (Frank, 1997). The research found that the most used narrative when portraying mental illness within contemporary film is the restitution or cure narrative which focuses on depicting mental illness as something acquired, inherently disabling and to be cured. This fits in line with the research findings of Frank (1997) which suggest that the restitution narrative is one of the most used narratives within storytelling about mental illness. Two out of the four films – *No Letting Go* and *The Soloist* – depict illness as something inherently disabling and largely negative. As a result of the stereotypes and stigmas surrounding mental illness, people are robbed of opportunities that define the quality of life such as secure housing and proper healthcare (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). Within *The Soloist* the main protagonist, as his mental illness progresses, loses his housing, music academy scholarship and ends up living in poverty on the streets of New York. Therefore, implying that all individuals with mental illness, unless cured, are bound to end up in such a way. The film also touches upon the fact somehow through the help of Lopez, Ayers would be able to become a “normal” member of society through means of taking medication. This fits in line with the restitution narrative which suggests that mental illness is portrayed as something to be cured once acquired (Frank, 1997). This is also especially evident within the based on a true story film *No Letting Go*. Even though this particular film uses a combination of the three narratives identified by Frank (1997) – restitution/cure, chaos and quest narrative – it largely focuses on finding a way for the main protagonist (Tim) to return to “normal” health through interference of therapy and medicine. The idea that Tim needs to be cured or his behaviour needs to be changed by any means possible for him be considered normal according to societal standards is present all throughout the film. It is an idea highly central to the medical model of disability as discussed by Thomas and Woods (2003). This becomes evident during a conversation Tim’s parents have with his psychologist as Tim’s father says: “there’s gotta be some medication out there that can fix all this” (Bucari et al., 2015). The quotation illustrates the belief that through a specific kind of medicine, it will be possible to “cure” Tim and return him to “normal” health. *No Letting Go* additionally allows the viewer to perceive the chaotic aspects of the life of Tim and his family (Tim’s sudden mood changes, uncertainty about whether he will get better or not), therefore, portraying mental illness as something that needs to be overcome by any means possible in order to live a “normal” life. A common representation within film involving individuals with mental illness provides a misconception that accepted medical treatments or therapy are ineffective, and instead, love has the potential to cure mental illness (Pirkis et al., 2005). Through applying the quest narrative, it shows how eventually the mental illness within the story is accepted and even healed by friendship.

Friendship as a cure is a commonly used motif within film, as individuals with mental illness become close friends and bond with each other, therefore, magically being cured from mental illness (Kondo, 2008). Based on the findings by Frank (1997), it can be argued that if the story includes aspects of the quest narrative, it should be told by the individual himself/herself, which is not the case for this specific film.

As outlined by Heath (2019), mental illness does not have one simple answer, therefore individuals with mental illness represented in film tend to break a multitude of social conventions that are by no means possible to be resolved happily in such a short span of time. Therefore, as part of a narrative choice, these individuals need to be controlled in one way or another, whether it be through punishment, medication or applying the structure of pity, as means of providing a clear resolution of the situation (Heath, 2019). This pattern is present throughout all the films analysed. In *Elizabeth Blue*, the storyline focuses on Elizabeth's journey towards attempting to tame her illness through therapy and medication, whereas in *Still Alice* her disease is portrayed as a personal tragedy which results in an overall feeling of pity towards Alice. This pattern is also present within *The Soloist* where Lopez attempts to somehow control Ayers by means of making decisions that he thinks are the best for Ayers.

Interesting to mention is that both films that are based on a true story are largely told through the experiences of others and/or narrated by another character. Based on the definition of the chaos narrative by Frank (1997), it is possible that such framing choices were made since the lives of the individuals with mental illness portrayed within these films were too chaotic to be told by themselves, hence requiring an external persona to tell these stories on behalf of them. *The Soloist* communicates to the spectator much more of Ayers' story and dedicates a large portion of the film duration to establishing the perspective of Ayers. However, the narrative remains as of second importance in comparison to the growth of and narrative surrounding Lopez, although the depiction of Ayers himself is largely benevolent and positive. Therefore, resulting in the lead character taking a pitiable prop role within the narrative (Harper, 2008). In *The Soloist*, the story of Nathaniel Ayers is narrated by a Steve Lopez – LA Times magazine journalist“ and often is told in a way that makes it seem like Ayers is just another individual with mental health problems that serves as a source of redemption for Lopez. Throughout the film this is exemplified by showing the contrasting lifestyles of Ayers – African American man with mental illness who lives on the streets and keeps all of his belongings in a shopping

cart (figure 4.1), and Lopez – a middle class, white male journalist at the LA Times who lives in a fancy apartment.



Figure 4.1. Screenshot from *The Soloist* (2009) portraying the shopping cart which Ayers uses to keep and transport all his belongings that “normate” individuals would refer to as junk

Thus, additionally highlighting a multitude of social, economic, and political problems present within society (Heath, 2019). This is a common frame used when portraying people with mental illness – the “us versus them” dichotomy, meaning that majority of the media content produced focuses on somehow drawing a comparison between the lives of “normal” individuals and individuals with mental illness (Dolmage, 2014). Furthermore, Lopez often refers to Ayers “as another great story”, “interesting story” and is generally fascinated about how such a talented man has ended up on the street. This is a great example of the notion of marginalization of those individuals who do not conform to societal norms of mental ability (Dolmage, 2014). In addition, the use of comedic elements and portrayal of Ayers as source of entertainment and amusement within the film, according to Byrne (2009), creates a representation of Ayers as a lunatic that cannot be trusted and should be pitied due to his childlike behaviour. A similar pattern is present within *No Letting Go* in which we never really get to experience what Tim is going through personally, and the narrative largely focuses on the story from the perspective of his mother, as she and the rest of the family struggle to understand what is going on.

#### 4.1.3 Negative stereotypical portrayals

According to previous research by Kidd (2016), narratives within films have to be created in a way to provide the audience with a complete story in a short period of time, and the use of archetypes are key components in terms of establishing a connection between the audience and the protagonists within films. However, if the film depicts these archetypes in combination with stereotypical representation of mental illness, a false and inaccurate image is provided to the audience (Kidd, 2016).

Unfortunately, all four films analysed included negative stereotypical representations of mental illness identified by Hyler et al. (1991), Corrigan and Watson (2002), Heath (2019) and Wedding and Niemec (2014).

*The Soloist*, based on a true story film, included a total of four negative stereotypes associated with mental illness – rebellious free spirit, enlightened member of society, zoo specimen and dangerous member of society. Most often used negative stereotype of mental illness within film is the association between aggression and violence with mentally ill people, implying that they are more likely to commit violent acts or act out of aggression than other characters (Hyler et al., 1991; Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Heath, 2019). *The Soloist*, makes an explicit connection between violence towards others and mental illness as a cause of this violence – Ayers becomes violent, both physically and verbally, towards Lopez as soon as he feels as if he is being perceived as insane and is to be “put away” in a mental institution and medicated. The following quotation illustrates this:

Ayers: It says that I have a schizophrenic mind. I do not! (..) I despise this city and I despise you! And if I ever see you again, I'll cut you open and gut you like a fish (Foster & Krasnoff, 2009)

However, taking into consideration the context of this violent outburst, the film emphasizes that individuals are not more likely to commit violent acts just due to their mental illness, but rather as a response to feeling disabled or misunderstood by society. Nathaniel Ayers was also depicted as a rebellious free spirit with childlike perceptions of the world and eccentric appearance. To illustrate this, Ayers is always seen wearing interesting and unconventional outfits that do not necessarily fit in with the normative standards of society (see figure 4.2 & figure 4.3).



Figure 4.2. Screenshot of Ayers from *The Soloist* (2009) depicting his unconventional appearance choices



Figure 4.3. Screenshot of Ayers from *The Soloist* (2009) portraying his dishevelled and eccentric appearance

Through cues such as eccentric clothing and dishevelled appearance, Ayers is more easily distinguishable from others, therefore making it easier to identify him as mad. As mentioned by Gorman and LeFrançois (2018), the wider public assumes that individuals with mental illness have essential characteristics that distinguish them from others, therefore making them easily identifiable as mad. In *Elizabeth Blue* and *Still Alice* often the main protagonists are portrayed with an empty emotionless facial expressions, as if they would be lost somewhere in their own heads, therefore fostering an association between a certain facial expression and mental state, to make these individuals more easily identifiable as mad (see figures 4.4 & 4.5).



Figure 4.4. Screenshot of Elizabeth from *Elizabeth Blue* (2017) representing the despair caused by mental illness



Figure 4.5. Screenshot of Alice from *Still Alice* (2014) representing how her disease reflects in her facial expression

Additionally, in *The Soloist*, Ayers was also portrayed as a zoo specimen and often used as a source of entertainment and amusement, this is the best exemplified when Ayers asks Lopez a question of whether he is flying the plane above them, even though Lopez is standing right next to him. Another scene that highlights this is when Ayers agrees to play the cello in front of an audience – the audience begins to mock and make fun of Ayers because he is different and does not fit within the expected standards of what a “normal” cello player is expected to be like. Lastly, another negative stereotype fostered within this film, is the association between madness and genius. The film depicts mental illness as a cruel price to pay while at the same time allowing Ayers to be a musical virtuoso, somehow making the audience believe that through schizophrenia Ayers is able to succeed at something that is highly valued within the “normate” society despite his medical diagnosis.

Previous research by Rose et al. (2007) found that description of individuals with mental illness commonly consists of psychiatric terminology misuse, therefore creating a largely negative stigmatized view on mental illness within broader society. The findings support this claim, and throughout the films individuals with mental illness were referred to as “freaks”, “emotionally disturbed”, “manipulative”, “stubborn”, “insane”, and “sick”. Unfortunately, such language use in relation to the mentally ill is stigmatizing (Wahl, 1997). Moreover, in *No Letting Go*, mental illness was often referred to as “just a phase” or “just a bad day”. Often individuals with mental illness within

media are portrayed as self-obsessed and attention-seeking, therefore, creating a portrayal that makes all mentally ill people come across as narcissistic parasites (Hylar et al., 1991; Wedding & Niemec, 2014). The way the dialogues between Tim and his family members in *No Letting Go* are constructed, seem to indicate that he only ever cares about himself and does not pay any attention to the lives of others. This is illustrated in the dialogue he has with his dad and brothers when they refuse to play football with him:

Tim: You never do anything I want! Why won't you stay out with me? Dad make  
Kyle help me.

Father: Tim, your brother's been playing with you all day. Now, come on, it's  
getting dark and mom made great dinner.

Tim: I'm not going in! I don't care what you say! It's not fair! I hate you all!  
(Bucari et al., 2015)

Individuals with mental illness tend to be perceived by the wider society to be in control of their disabilities and inherently responsible for causing them (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). Within film this often results in punishment or control as these are the only clear resolutions that a film can offer due to time constraints (Heath, 2019). Such portrayal is partially fostering damaging myths and stereotypes about mental illness (Byrne, 2009). If these stereotypes are repeated often enough throughout the films, there is a risk that the spectators might forget that they are dealing with images and begin to believe that these images are the reality (Grossberg, 2005; McQuils, 2010), therefore, not taking mental illness seriously.

#### 4.1.4 Mental illness as a personal tragedy

To an extent, all of the films analysed portrayed mental illness as a personal tragedy and represented it mostly from the point of the medical model of disability which regards mental illness as something acquired throughout one's life and something to be cured by any means possible. According to the medical model, as explained by Thomas and Woods (2003), individuals with a mental illness or disability are often perceived as problems that need to be solved and this often results in the absolute ignorance of the life of the actual person. This is a pattern that is clearly visible throughout both fictional and based on a true story films that were analysed. However, this portrayal was the most prominent in *Still Alice* and *No Letting Go*.

The first pattern that emerged throughout the analysis process suggests that, as previously found by Byrne (2009), often the lead character with mental illness is also represented in a melodramatic way as means of making the audience feel sorry for the individual rather than foster understanding of mental illness – by portraying mental illness as something acquired to emphasize that through mental illness the lead character has lost something. In *Still Alice*, Alice's disability within

the narrative of the film is portrayed as acquired to make the audience comprehend what Alice has lost because of this illness, for example, her memory and intellect. When Alice gets asked what she feels like herself, she says:

Alice: I've always been so defined by my intellect, my language, my articulation, and now sometimes I can see the words hanging in front of me and I can't reach them and I don't know who I am and I don't know what I'm going to lose next. (Brown et al., 2014)

Through selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more prominently noticeable within the film, a specific problem definition and interpretation is promoted (Entman, 2001). As illustrated by the quote above, throughout the encoding process of the film, emphasis was placed upon providing a story that would make the audience feel sorry for what Alice has lost as the Alzheimer's disease progresses – Alice lived the “picture perfect life” – in a beautiful and big house in New York, with a good job, a loving husband and three children. An important thing to mention is that this is also reflected in how Alice's behaviour and appearance changes as the film proceeds – throughout the first quarter of the film, the producers have chosen to portray Alice as a sophisticated and charming woman, whereas as her disease progresses, her appearance becomes more dishevelled and her facial expressions convey a feeling of inner emptiness (figures 4.6 & 4.7).



Figure 4.6. Screenshot of Alice from *Still Alice* (2014) depicting her appearance before the progression of the disease



Figure 4.7. Screenshot of Alice from *Still Alice* (2014) at the end of the film as the disease has progressed

The screenshots above illustrate that mental illness is inherently disabling and negative in terms of not only mental function, but also physical appearance of the individual. A pattern of mental illness as disabling and disruptive of what a normal life should be like is also clearly visible in the film *No Letting Go*, as we see how Tim's behaviour and relationships with his friends and family change as the mental illness further develops. In one scene, Tim's brother Kyle states “It's not fair that things used to be fine. It was fun and happy, and he (Tim) was never afraid. And now, it sucks” (Bucari et al., 2015).

The quotation above highlights that before mental illness, life for the family, as well as Tim was in some way better than it is now, therefore, portraying mental illness as something that is inherently negative and has ruined their family life. According to Harper (2008), this is a common way of constructing a narrative within film to reduce the main protagonist to the role of a sad, pitiable character that is suffering through something devastating and life changing.

Another pattern that appeared in terms of representation of mental illness as a tragedy is the portrayal of suicide as an escape from mental illness. Three of the four films analysed included scenes in which there were explicit references towards committing suicide as means of escaping the daunting reality that these individuals face because of their mental illness. This was most prominently visible in *Still Alice* – after finding out about her diagnosis, she prerecords a video for her future self giving clear instructions on how to commit suicide by taking sleeping pills before her sickness has entirely robbed her of her identity. Such representation fits under the medical model of disability and is central to the idea of ableism which suggest that individuals with mental illness are often perceived as problems that need to be solved or cured to fit larger societal standards, and if the individual does not succeed in doing so, then there is no benefit of having such an individual within a society (Thomas & Woods, 2003; Campbell, 2012). This is also visible in *Elizabeth Blue*, where in multiple scenes the main protagonist Elizabeth experiences severe visual and auditory hallucinations, specifically in one scene when she is being directly confronted by one of her hallucinations that suggests that she should kill herself because her mental illness makes her pathetic and an unworthy member of society. This is illustrated in the following quotation from the film:

Tim (hallucination): Go to the kitchen, pull out the biggest knife you can find and just do it. End this hurt.

Elizabeth: Leave me alone!

(Dain, 2017)

The quotation above captures the idea that mental illness is something inherently disabling and negative, therefore making this specific representation fit under the medical model of disability as described by Thomas and Woods (2003). In contrast, within *No Letting Go*, even though there are no explicit references to suicide, one scene in particular makes the audience believe that Tim would consider such an option. By perceiving the reaction of his mother as she enters the bathroom and sees Tim submerged under water, a feeling of uneasiness and worry is created, making the audience believe that possibly Tim was trying to drown himself. Interesting to mention is the fact that both *No Letting Go* and *Elizabeth Blue* included scenes in which the main protagonists were submerging themselves under water in bathtubs as indication of despair and misunderstanding about certain situations.

## 4.2 Overcoming adversity

The second theme that emerged throughout the analysis process addresses the various difficulties and misunderstandings that the individual with mental illness and the people close to him/her go through, as well as emphasizes the importance of support and acceptance. Throughout the analysis, this pattern was observed in three out of the four selected films – *No Letting Go*, *The Soloist* and *Still Alice*. Both *Still Alice* and *No Letting Go* largely emphasize how the medical diagnosis of the protagonists influences the people closest to them – their family. Whereas *The Soloist* places focus upon the main protagonist accepting his mental illness and being happy for the situation as it is.

In *No Letting Go* the family of Tim is struggling to understand and rationalize Tim's behaviour, which results in them seeking professional help. Not only does the film provide insight into the experiences of Tim, it also depicts the emotional toll such a situation can take on the family within which a child is diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Additionally, highlighting the importance of support and being there for the child throughout the struggles he faces. The primary challenge film producers face is creating a narrative that is capable of telling a complete story within a short period of time, as means of allowing the audience to identify and connect to the characters within the film without losing focus (Kidd, 2016). *No Letting Go* does so in a brilliantly touching manner by delicately tackling the many complex layers of mental illness. As the film progresses, the spectator is given the chance to observe how mental illness affects the family, as well as each family member individually. Even though throughout two of the films analysed – *Elizabeth Blue* and *No Letting Go* – mental illness is often referred to as a form of attention seeking or just a phase as can be seen in following quotations below:

Tim's father: Maybe it's just a phase.

Catherine: Well, if that's the case, it's the longest freakin' phase ever.

(Bucari et al., 2015)

Carol: You always lied to make me look like the bad person. When it was always  
you just looking for attention. (Dain, 2017)

Based on the quotation from *No Letting Go*, it can be argued that the film portrays mental illness as just a phase, however, in fact, the mental illness is depicted as a drawn-out process – including both good and bad moments of the main protagonist. When assessing which out of the three narratives identified by Frank (1997) are present within the film, it becomes evident that the narrative is mostly chaotic as throughout the film it is impossible to predict whether Tim's health will ever improve or not as we constantly see him relapsing and having multiple violent and manic episodes. Likewise, the genre of a film has a significant impact on how the media text message is constructed – if the film is based on a true story, it is likely that the representation of mental illness within said film

is automatically more believable and trustworthy (Kimmerle & Kress, 2013). As *No Letting Go* is based on a true story, it fosters a more realistic and accurate representation of mental illness by allowing the audience to acquire more knowledge about bipolar disorder and the importance of family support rather than provide the audiences with overexaggerated representations. A similar pattern is also present within the film *Still Alice* in which the spectator is taken on a journey that consists of initial denial of diagnosis, acceptance of illness and then reaching out for support to family. Ignorance of mental health issues and assigning these issues to other potential factors results in a denial of the actual diagnosis, therefore, delaying treatment the individual requires. This is especially noticeable when Alice first announces that she has onset Alzheimer's disease to her husband John:

John: Honey, we all have memory lapses. That's a sign of getting older (..) Well I think that this is ridiculous. It's complete bullshit, you don't have Alzheimer's (Brown et al., 2014).

The quotation above illustrates that due to the lack of knowledge about the specific illness, Alice's husband refuses to believe that she in fact has this rare disease. Additionally, as the primary source of information for majority of the public about mental illness and diseases is media (Kondo, 2008), it can be argued that the absence of representation about Alzheimer's has led to John having a disbelief that the specific disease can possibly affect someone close to him. However, in contrast to *No Letting Go*, the film *Still Alice* also places an emphasis on how some individuals perceive a family member with a mental illness as a burden. Although all throughout the film Alice is shown surrounded by her family, only one of her daughters tries to understand and question what the illness is making Alice feel like. This is exemplified in the following quotation:

Lydia: What is it like? I mean what does it actually feel like?

Alice: Well, it's not always the same. I have good days and bad days. On my good days, I can almost pass for a normal person. But on my bad days, I feel like I can't find myself. (Brown et al., 2014)

Whereas the rest of her family seem to be distancing themselves from her as they cannot deal with the emotional pain of seeing their mother slowly "deteriorate" and lose her identity to the Alzheimer's disease. The reason behind this might be the fact that often individuals with mental illness are portrayed as objects of pity and looked upon as burdens to society, as well as because of their disability are not considered to be properly human (Campbell, 2012). However, in the film *Still Alice*, even though Alice is treated with pity in various moments throughout the film, an emphasis is placed upon the fact that despite her illness, she is described as "still Alice" (Brown et al., 2014).

Within *No Letting Go* and *The Soloist*, overcoming fear and anxiety is portrayed as a challenge for the main protagonists whether it be through family support and friendship in the case of Tim, or

through friendship as it is for Ayers. In *The Soloist*, the spectator is shown how Ayers becomes aware of his mental illness symptoms and in return gets rejected by society. This supports previous research that states that non-disabled people are often portrayed as somehow superior to individuals with mental disabilities (Kattari et al., 2018). This is also noticeable as we learn about how successful Ayers was in his past before the symptoms of the illness started manifesting themselves. Later, Ayers is rejected by society and thrown out of a well acclaimed music academy as he cannot control these symptoms anymore. This fits with the idea of perceiving disabled individuals as the Other, therefore, robbing them of opportunities that define the quality of life (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). However, Ayers does not come across as influenced by these persistent stigmas and the prominent desire within society to separate the disabled from the abled. In fact, Ayers accepts the situation for what it is – a motif at the core of the quest narrative identified by Frank (1997).

#### 4.3 Personal experience of individual with mental illness

Previous research by Pirkis et al. (2005) suggested that myths and stereotypes about mental illness are predominantly perpetuated by fictional films. Furthermore, it is common that fictional films overemphasize the unpredictability of individuals with mental illness, as well as foster the association between madness and violence (Cohen, 2019). However, the present research findings in fact show that mental illness is represented in a more overdramatized manner in films that are based on true stories. Two of the films analysed that were based on true stories – *No Letting Go* and *The Soloist* – included more negative and stereotypical representations of mentally ill as violent and emotionally explosive. In contrast, two fictional films – *Elizabeth Blue* and *Still Alice* – primarily focused on a person-first approach when telling the stories of the main protagonists. By looking at mental illness through the lens of the social model of disability, both films allow the spectator to gain insight into the personal experiences of the protagonists, as well as understand that they are disabled by means of prejudice, labelling and ignorance present within society (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). One of the films – *Elizabeth Blue* – fully transports the viewer into the mind of Elizabeth and allows the spectator to perceive the world from the eyes of Elizabeth. By showing various auditory and visual hallucinations that Elizabeth experiences, the film aims to give the spectator an insight into Elizabeth's journey towards learning how to control her mental illness. As the film progresses, Elizabeth directly confronts her visual hallucinations and tries to convince herself that they are not a part of reality, but rather a figment of her imagination. This is illustrated in the following extract from the scene in which Elizabeth is confronting one of her more violent and negative hallucinations:

Tim (hallucination): He's never going to marry you.

Elizabeth: Please stop!

Tim (hallucination): Look at yourself (..) You're a mess. You're ruining his life.

Elizabeth: Stop it you're not real!!

(Dain, 2017)

As the film involves a person-first approach, it gives the audience an insight into who Elizabeth is "beyond" her mental illness and allows us to follow her throughout her journey of confronting her schizophrenia. Wedding and Niemec (2014) would refer to this as humanizing representation of mental illness. This is further emphasized by the following passage:

Elizabeth: Do you know how scary it is when you don't know when life is real?

Sometimes I feel like I'm cursed. Like I'm living in a bad dream that I can't wake up from. (Dain, 2017)

This quote serves as proof that Elizabeth herself experiences moments of clarity in despite of her mental illness and feels as if what she is experiencing is often not reality itself. Within the film, Elizabeth is aware of her mental illness and is actively seeking out ways to cope with it. Such portrayal contradicts the misconception that mental illness is something to be overcome or cured (Harper, 2008), as it emphasizes that the first step towards getting better is accepting the situation for what it is rather than denying it.

All the films analysed portray a multitude of what can be referred to as "symptoms of mental illness" including physical, behavioural characteristics, as well as visual and auditory hallucinations experienced by the protagonists with mental illness. *Still Alice* was the only film analysed that depicted the physical symptoms of a mental illness. Similarly, as the film *Elizabeth Blue*, *The Soloist* gives insight into the mind of Nathaniel Ayers by showing how the mental illness first started manifesting itself in the form of auditory and visual hallucinations, as well as increase in anxiety and paranoia. As a result, a balanced and dynamic representation of mental illness is achieved. By revealing both positive and negative traits of the character, as well as the different influences the environmental factors and relationships have on the character, a balance between realistic portrayal and glorification of mental illness is achieved (Wedding & Niemec, 2014).

Both fictional and based on a true story films focused on the behavioural characteristics of the main protagonists with mental illness. The most used characteristics to depict these individuals were found to be verbal aggression and threatening, paranoia, violence, frantic and erratic behaviour, as well as overall restlessness. Additionally, throughout the analysis it was discovered that all of the protagonists with mental illness experienced a large array of negative emotions as either a result of their illness or as a result of the prejudice and labelling related to their medical diagnosis. These negative feelings included loneliness, feeling misunderstood by, and excluded from society, anxiety

and feeling guilty for having a mental illness. In one of the films, *Still Alice*, the main protagonist even stated that:

Alice: I wish I had cancer.

John: Don't say that.

Alice: No, I do. I mean it. I wouldn't feel so ashamed. When people have cancer, they wear pink ribbons for you and go on long walks and raise money.

(Brown et al., 2014)

As the quote above illustrates, Alice feels shame about her diagnosis, especially if people surrounding her pity her for the cognitive decline she is experiencing as part of the progression of the disease. In fact, individuals with mental illness often tend to be portrayed to be in control of their disabilities, as well as inherently responsible for causing them (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). However, the representation within this film challenges such a portrayal by emphasizing the fact that Alice feels ashamed for something she has no influence over. Yet, the findings also show that regardless the omnipresence of negative representation, a general trend towards portraying mental illness in a more accurate manner and separating the individual from the medical diagnosis was observed. The following sub-chapter will elaborately discuss the positive and challenging representations that were identified throughout the analysis.

#### 4.4 Separating the individual from the diagnosis

As shown in the sub-chapters above, the films analysed consisted of some negative and stereotypical portrayals of mental illness, however, a general trend towards a more accurate and realistic representation was also observed. Previous research by Wedding and Niemec (2014) suggests that a film offers a positive and realistic portrayal if it includes if not all, then most of the following elements – humanizing, dynamic, balanced and meaningful representation of the individual with mental illness.

When it comes to fictional films, the emphasis tends to be placed upon creating an entertainment value, whereas, based on a true story films are created more for educational than entertainment purposes (Kimmerle & Kress, 2013). As expected, the genre of the film indeed had a significant impact on the construction of the message of said films. However, contradictory to the findings by Kimmerle and Kress (2013), the present analysis shows that in fact fictional films were more focused on providing the most accurate and sympathetic depiction of mental illness. Even though all four films analysed include the four elements of positive portrayal of mental illness, within some films these elements are more prominent than in others. The two fictional films – *Elizabeth Blue* and *Still Alice* – selected as part of the sample focus their narratives largely around telling the story

from the point of view of the individual with the mental illness. This is a humanizing representation of mental illness as it consists of a person-first approach and provides insight into who the character is beyond the disability (Wedding & Niemec, 2014). Additionally, the film *The Soloist* shows the audience Ayers' personal gains in terms of being able to develop a friendship with Lopez and facing own fears throughout the development of this friendship. By portraying Ayers in a balanced and dynamic way, the audience can identify both positive and negative traits of Ayers, as well as reflect on how the main character is influenced by various environmental factors. This is evident within film as a large emphasis is placed upon the feeling of freedom Ayers feels when he is out on the streets playing the cello. Additionally, the film succeeds at creating a balance between a realistic portrayal and glorification of mental illness – the audience is being confronted with the more soft side of Ayers, as well as the more emotionally explosive side of him, therefore, leading to a representation that is balanced. Both *Elizabeth Blue* and *The Soloist* include surreal and expressionistic images in the form of montages. In *The Soloist* surreal and colourful visuals are shown which are meant to give us a sense of how the music Ayers' listens to visualizes itself in his mind in the form of colours and patterns that change with the tempo of the music (figure 4.8 & figure 4.9).



Figure 4.8. Screenshot of Ayers from *The Soloist* (2009) representing how the world around him shuts off when he hears music



Figure 4.9. Screenshot from *The Soloist* (2009) representing how Ayers' mind visualizes music

Similarly, in *Elizabeth Blue*, as the storyline reaches its climax at the end, the audience member is faced with the truth of the situation – that all throughout the film the audience has been seeing something that has merely been a figment of Elizabeth's imagination – her lover Grant. This is illustrated in the following figures 4.10 and 4.11 below.



Figure 4.10. Screenshot of Elizabeth from *Elizabeth Blue* (2017) at the beginning of the film having a conversation with her fiancée Grant



Figure 4.11. Screenshot of Elizabeth from *Elizabeth Blue* (2017) at the end of the film representing how Grant was just a figment of her imagination

According to Wedding and Niemec (2014), such expressionistic images are a powerful tool for conveying the interior of a characters' psyche to an audience, therefore, leading to a more empathetic and realistic representation of what it is actually like to live with a mental illness.

Moreover, another positive pattern in terms of representing mental illness was noticeable throughout the films analysed – portraying the individual beyond his or her mental disability. At the core of the disability rhetoric is the idea that an individual with disability should under no circumstances be defined solely through this disability (Dolmage, 2014). *Still Alice* is a great example of how despite the medical diagnosis, the main protagonist still tries to remain as true as possible to herself, and this is clearly emphasized in her inspiring speech at an Alzheimer's Association event:

Alice: Our strange behaviour and fumbled sentences change other's perception of us and our perception of ourselves. We become ridiculous, incapable, comic (..) And like any disease it has a cause, it has a progression, and it could have a cure (..) But this is not us, this is our disease (..) But for the time being, I'm still alive. I know I'm alive. I still have people I love dearly. I still have things I want to do with my life (Brown et al., 2014)

Within her speech, as can be seen above, various stigmas surrounding mental disabilities are highlighted. By means of highlighting the fact that the disease one is diagnosed with does not define the individual, the film successfully conveys the idea that disability is a political and cultural identity, rather than a medical condition (Dolmage, 2014). Similarly, the film *The Soloist* places an emphasis upon the fact that treatment, whether through therapy and medication or both together, cannot and should not be forced upon an individual with mental illness unless he or she decides themselves that they find it necessary. This can be perceived as a challenging representation of mental illness as it highlights the importance of what the individual wants rather than enforcing the individual to undergo psychiatric help without his own consent. A scene in which Lopez and a social worker of a community centre for homeless people illustrates this the best:

Lopez: I want you to help him because he's sick and he needs medication and you have a team of doctors here. Tell them to sit down with him. Isn't that what you're supposed to do?

David Carter: Nathaniel's made it quite clear he's not ready to speak to a psychiatrist.

Lopez: Force him.

David Carter: Force him?

Lopez: Tell him to do it. Tell him he can't play his instruments until he sits down with a shrink.

David Carter: That's not what we do here.

Lopez: What you do here is fucked.

(Foster & Krasnoff, 2009)

As the dialogue extract above illustrates, the film portrays a conflict between the medical and social model of perceiving disability. The social model of disability emphasizes that an individual is not disabled by the means of his medical diagnosis, but rather through the attitudes, such as Lopez's, that are present within society and arise through means of prejudice and ignorance (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). Whereas the medical model perceives disability as something negative that needs to be cured or controlled by interference of medicine (Thomas & Woods, 2003). The quotation illustrates Lopez's perception of Ayers as incapable of making decisions for himself, as well as in need for medication for him to behave in a "normal" manner. In contrast, the community centre employee David Carter states that Nathaniel Ayers cannot be forced to begin psychiatric treatment until he decides to do so himself.

Just as the films part of the sample attempt to portray individuals beyond their medical diagnosis, the films also try to emphasize the importance of separating the individuals from their mental illness. In *No Letting Go*, a psychologist explicitly outlines that: "it's kind of important that you separate the illness from Tim" indicating that a person is so much more than just his diagnosis. In order to achieve a humanizing representation of mental illness, it is necessary for a film to provide insight to the audiences of who the character is beyond his illness (Wedding & Niemec, 2014), and *No Letting Go* explicitly refers to this as can be seen in the previously mentioned quotation. Likewise, in *Elizabeth Blue*, this pattern is noticeable in a conversation Elizabeth has with her psychologist:

Elizabeth: I do want to get better. And stay better and not feel afraid anymore.

Dr. Bowman: That's a very good start Elizabeth. The fact that you desire to get well means you're a fighter and that you're not going to let the illness overcome you.

(Dain, 2017)

Based on this dialogue extract from the film, it is possible to conclude that the main protagonist herself is willing to transcend beyond her mental illness and strive towards living a life that is not overshadowed by her mental illness. As highlighted in previous research by Kondo (2008), this is at the core of representing mental illness in a positive manner. Such positive portrayal is also visible in *No Letting Go* as the film largely focuses on the importance of support from friends and family, as Tim faces his fears at the end of the film and decides to perform again in front of an audience, hence, transcending beyond his mental illness. Yet, all throughout the film, whether it be through his behaviour or things he says to others, his attitude largely comes across as hateful and filled with anger. This portrayal can foster the misconception that all individuals with mental illness are dangerous members of society since they are more likely to act out violently towards others.

However, it is important to outline that even though Tim is often portrayed as violent, the film never shows Tim hurting anyone physically. His mother described him as follows:

(..) his eyes change. Like he becomes a different person. He's irrational and he misinterprets everything we say. Sometimes he can get violent (..) But he has never hurt anyone. And I don't think he would. (Bucari et al., 2015)

Such representation can be perceived as challenging to pre-existing negative stereotypes, because even though it includes some elements of violence and aggression, it does not portray Tim as capable of committing any violent or harmful acts towards other individuals. A similar pattern emerges within *Elizabeth Blue* when Elizabeth's doctor explicitly asks her whether she believes she could hurt someone else or herself, hence implying that she is mentally capable of doing so. To which Elizabeth replies with a continuous and confident "no" (Dain, 2017). In fact, throughout the whole film she is never portrayed as violent, therefore combatting this stereotypical representation that an individual with mental illness is automatically more likely to behave aggressively than an individual that fits the standards of normativity.

## 5 Conclusion

At the core of this research was the aim to explore how mental illness is represented in fictional and based on a true story films. By thematic analysis, the present research has provided a deep and rich insight into the different portrayals of mental illness within contemporary film. The thematic content was guided by theories surrounding contemporary media and disability studies, as well as already pre-existing previous research done regarding mental illness representation.

### 5.1 Addressing the research questions

The findings of the present study suggest that, in fact, there is a general trend towards representing mental illness within contemporary film in a positive and realistic manner as was argued by Ma (2017). Through addressing the various difficulties and misunderstandings that the individuals with mental illness go through, as well as by emphasizing the importance of support and acceptance, the films strive towards diminishing the social divide between the “us” and “the Other”. Such representation is crucial as it aims to familiarize the wider society with the idea that individuals with mental illness are not disabled as a result of their diagnosis, but rather through attitudes and structures present within society that arise by means of misunderstandings. Not only do all the films delicately tackle the many complex layers of mental illness, they also provide insight into the experiences of the individuals with mental illness, as well as the emotional toll such situations can take on the people close to them. As argued by Wedding and Niemec (2014), through revealing both positive and negative traits of the characters, the films achieve a balance between realistic portrayal and glorification of mental illness. Two of the films analysed, *Elizabeth Blue* and *The Soloist*, offer the most empathetic and realistic representation of mental illness, as they include surreal and expressionistic imagery that serves as a powerful tool for conveying the interior of a characters; psyche to an audience. Based on this, the audience can imagine what it is like to live with a mental illness on a day to day basis. Moreover, the findings suggest that all films include a representation of mental illness that focuses on portraying the individual beyond his or her mental disability.

Yet, even though there is a general trend towards representing mental illness in a more accurate and less dramatized manner, the contemporary films selected as part of the sample still to some extent include stereotypical portrayals of mental illness. Three out of the four films analysed depict mental illness as something inherently negative and disabling, therefore, further reinforcing the stigmatization and stereotyping surrounding mental illness. The analysis showed that contemporary films, in fact, include negative stereotypes previously identified by– zoo specimen, enlightened member of society, narcissistic parasite (Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Heath, 2019; Hyler et al., 1991; Wedding & Niemec, 2014). Likewise, to an extent all the films portrayed mental illness as a

personal tragedy, therefore, placing an emphasis on the medical model of disability. According to Thomas and Woods (2003), looking at mental illness through the lens of the medical disability model implies that said disability is to be by any means prevent or cured once acquired. The research found that the most used narrative when depicting mental illness within contemporary film is the restitution or cure narrative which focuses on depicting mental illness as something acquired and inherently disabling as was suggested by previous research of Corrigan and Watson (2002). Through representing mental illness as acquired, three out of the films give the impression that through mental illness the individual has lost something, and his/her life has tremendously changed as a result. Additionally, two out of the four films presented a restitution or cure narrative by depicting that mental illness is somehow cured or controlled in one way or another, whether it be through medication or applying a structure of pity. This is a common representation as previously stated by Pirkis et al. (2005), suggesting that accepted medical treatments or therapy are often ineffective, and instead, mental illness can be cured or tamed through friendship. Additionally, the findings of the present research suggest that in one of the films mental illness was regarded as a taboo topic and something to not be spoken of. Corrigan and Watson (2002) argue that society even tends to blame the individuals who have mental illness for acting a certain way that diverts from ideas of normativity. This motif is visible throughout *No Letting Go* as the family continuously refers to the need of punishing him for behaviour that does not fit societal standards. Lastly, suicide portrayed as an escape from mental illness is another pattern that emerged when exploring the negative ways in which mental illness is represented in the selected sample of contemporary films. Even though none of the films analysed used this narrative as a concluding element of the film, multiple times throughout each film explicit references were made towards suicide being a solution to mental illness.

Furthermore, a sub-question of this thesis aimed to discover whether there are any challenging representations of mental illness within contemporary film. Within two of the films, even though the characters are often acting out in a violent manner verbally or being frantic in terms of their behaviour, they are never shown as physically harming themselves or other members of society. This contrasts previous findings by Hyler et al. (1991), Corrigan and Watson (2002) and Heath (2019) that suggest that individuals with mental illness within media are depicted as more likely to commit violent acts in comparison to other characters without mental illness. Such representation can be perceived as challenging to pre-existing negative stereotypes as it does include some behavioural elements that can be perceived as violent and aggressive, it does not portray the individuals as capable of committing violent or harmful acts towards others. Another challenging representation, according to the findings of this study, is a conflict between the two opposing views of social and medical model of disability. This is clearly depicted in one of the films, *The Soloist*, in which the attitudes of others are

presented as the reason behind what disables an individual within society, rather than the individual being disabled by the means of his medical diagnosis. The film additionally addresses the importance that treatment, whether through therapy, medication, or both, should not be forced upon the individual with mental illness. Moreover, in terms of positive representation of mental illness, two of the films analysed included the portrayal of individuals beyond their medical diagnosis which is at the core of the ideas expressed by Dolmage (2014) and Campbell (2012). Through making narrative choices that depict the main protagonists in a humanizing, dynamic, balanced and meaningful way, the films allow to gain much deeper insight into both positive and negative personality traits of each protagonist despite their mental illness. Such portrayal, as suggested by Ma (2017), leads to more informative and objective representation of mental illness overall and those who have it. To add to this, three out of the four films analysed show the potential an individual has in terms of achieving things in life despite mental illness as suggested by previous research of Kondo (2008). Whether it be through overcoming a fear, developing social skills and forming friendships, or transcending beyond ones' diagnosis, the films part of this analysis showed the importance of separating individuals from their medical diagnosis.

Lastly, the main research question at the core of this study asks whether the portrayal of mental illness differs amongst fictional and based on a true story films, considering that previous academic research claims that based on a true story films are more realistic and truthful than fictional films. Furthermore, previous research also suggested that fictional films often depict individuals with mental illness as violent and unpredictable members of society (Cohen, 2019). As expected, the genre of the film indeed had a significant impact on the construction of the message of said films. However, in contradiction to the previous findings by Kimmerle and Kress (2013), the findings of this research paper suggest that, in fact, mental illness is represented in a more accurate manner within fictional films. By balancing between a realistic portrayal and glorification of mental illness, *Elizabeth Blue* and *Still Alice*, convey a representation of mental illness that aims to foster understanding, rather than depiction of mental illness in an overdramatized and entertaining way. Although, both fictional and based on a true story films included a mixture of positive and negative representation, the based on a true story films included far more negative stereotypical representations of individuals with mental illness than fictional films. Two of the films analysed that were based on true stories – *No Letting Go* and *The Soloist* – included more negative and stereotypical representations of mentally ill as violent and emotionally explosive. Another interesting finding of the present study shows that both films based on a true story are largely told through the experiences of others or narrated entirely by another character. In contrast, two fictional films, *Elizabeth Blue* and *Still Alice*, are primarily focused on a

person-first approach when telling the stories of the main protagonists, therefore, allowing to gain more insight into the experiences and feelings of the main protagonists with mental illness.

## 5.2 Implications of the Findings

The findings of the present study have societal implications. Firstly, this paper found that even though there is a general trend towards representing mental illness in a more accurate and positive manner, contemporary films about mental illness still largely consists of a vast majority of negative stereotypical representations. Since media is often referred to as the mirror of society that serves as a reflection of reality (McQuils, 2010), it is important to understand that this media reality may often be further from reality than we believe (Van der Spuy, 2008). By means of making specific narrative choices, directors and producers have the power to actively participate in shaping and framing our perception of the world, as a result, affecting how the world we live in functions and is interpreted (Van der Spuy, 2008). As shown in this paper, through further reinforcement of negative stereotypes and stigmas associated with mental illness, contemporary films shape the values, beliefs and attitudes towards individuals with mental illness across the globe. Additionally, as the films analysed often imply a connection between mental illness and violent behaviour, it is possible to conclude that contemporary films perpetuate the long-standing myth that any individual with mental illness is a potential threat to society. Whilst on the other hand, even though the films analysed include a lot of negative stereotypes, they also try to represent the individuals beyond their mental illness and emphasize the importance of support from family members and friends. However, as highlighted by Heath (2019) even attempts of depicting characters with mental illness in a positive manner often result in reducing the role of the main protagonist to a pitiable prop that allows to demonstrate the growth of other characters. Therefore, these findings and the implications of these findings contribute to the theory of the potential effects media content encoding can have on the audience in terms of the perception that is created regarding a minority group, which in this specific paper, are individuals with mental illness.

Regardless of the fact that a vast majority of previous research has been conducted on the negative representation of mental illness within film, very little attention has been dedicated to exploring the positive representations, as well as exploring whether the portrayals of mental illness differ per genre of film. The findings about differences and similarities amongst fictional and based on a true story films about mental illness contribute to the representation theories of mental illness, as well as counter-argue the previous findings by Kimmerle and Kress (2013) suggesting that fictional films are representing mental illness in a less accurate and more dramatic manner than based on a true story films. Additionally, previous research suggests that films about mental illness rarely include

characters of ethnic minority that have mental illness (Harper, 2008). This thesis supports this claim, as only one out of the four films analysed has a lead character who is of an ethnic minority.

### 5.3 Limitations

This research aimed to illustrate that media representations of mental illness have to be accurate and realistic in order to diminish the various stigmas and stereotypes surrounding mental illness. The biggest limitation of the current study is the small sample size. Due to formal restrictions and time constraints, the sample only consisted of four films. Therefore, the sample is not representative of the whole population of films. To provide more generalisable and meaningful insight into the topic researched, a larger sample should be analysed. By analysing more contemporary films, a richer and deeper insight into the representation of mental illness could have been provided. Additionally, even though the research units of this study included both fictional and based on a true story films and allowed for drawing a comparison between the portrayal of mental illness among these films, it did not dive deeper into exploring whether the representation of mental illness differs amongst other genres of film. Thirdly, the research did not take into account the various social, cultural and political factors that could have influenced the way film producers and directors constructed the representation of mental illness. Moreover, another limitation of this research is the use of purposive criterion-based sampling methodology. Since such methodology implies that research units selected as part of the sample must follow the criteria established beforehand, it was not considered suitable to study films that did not fit all of the said criteria. Research was limited to studying contemporary films and films that have not yet been researched as means of providing new insightful findings about the topic at the core of the study. Lastly, since one of the criteria used when selecting the films was the necessity of these films being in English, a vast majority of films in other languages were overlooked and therefore, the results provided in this study largely represent the way in which producers and directors from America choose to portray mental illness. Perhaps if films in other languages were included as part of the sample, different findings would have emerged. Additionally, it is necessary to address the theoretical choices made at the beginning stages of the present study. By creating a framework that largely focused on identifying negative stereotypical portrayal of mental illness and a few elements of positive portrayal, a certain portion of other potentially important findings regarding mental illness was emitted. Therefore, if the framework would be constructed in a way that is more open to the emergence of new concepts and ideas out of the data set, the outcomes of the study would have allowed to learn even more insightful information about the representation of mental illness in contemporary film.

#### 5.4 Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this research illustrated that representation of mental illness within contemporary film is still largely dominated by stereotypical and stigmatized portrayal, however, it showed that in fact fictional films attempted to portray mental illness in a more accurate and realistic manner. Future research on the topic at the core of this study is highly desirable and even necessary, as it contributes to raising awareness about mental illness and diminishing the stigmas surrounding it. Moreover, through conducting similar research on various genres of contemporary films, it would be possible to understand to what extent the genre of the film has an impact on the way mental illness is portrayed. Additionally, future research could be conducted about how the audiences are influenced by certain representation of mental illness, for example, by organising focus groups and having an active discussion with the participants about how watching a certain film has made them feel about mental illness.

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## Appendix A: Film overviews

### Film 1: Elizabeth Blue (Dain & Sabella, 2017)

The film tells a story of a young woman, Elizabeth, who is recently released from a psychiatric hospital and is trying her best to cope with various episodes of schizophrenia. The film is made from the perspective of Elizabeth's reality, or what reality is according to her. She is shown leaving the psychiatric to move in with her fiancée, Grant. As the film progresses, the spectator is shown the multiple struggles Elizabeth is going through and at the very end it turns out that all along Grant has just been a figment of Elizabeth's imagination and a coping mechanism she has developed after the death of her father.

### Film 2: Still Alice (Brown et al., 2014)

Alice has it all – she is intelligent, has a great family and an amazing career as a linguistics professor. However, soon she starts to experience various memory loss moments and gets diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's disease. As the disease progresses, we see her life crumble apart – she is not able to be a professor anymore, the disease is also taking a toll on her family members. The film takes us on a journey of disease progression and the impacts it has on the individual state of mind, as well as the importance of family support.

### Film 3: The Soloist (Foster, Krasnoff & Wright, 2009)

This film is based on the book written by Steve Lopez in 2010 about the story of Nathaniel Ayers, a talented musician who has schizophrenia and became homeless. The narrative of the film is largely constructed from the point of view of Lopez who is a LA Times journalist and accidentally meets Ayers. By getting to know Ayers more and more, Lopez decides to begin writing columns about Ayers and how from being a Julliard student he ended up living as a homeless man. Throughout the film the two men form a friendship, that goes through its highs and lows.

### Film 4: No Letting Go (Rush, Silverman & Bucari, 2015)

This film is based upon the true story of the co-screenwriter and producer Randi Silverman about a family who is struggling to cope with a teenager who suffers from mental illness. Tim is not like other children – he is socially anxious, awkward and often quite hostile towards others. The film takes the spectator on a journey together with Tim's family members as they try to understand and help Tim with what he is going through.

# Appendix B: Coding Tree

