

From Violence to Instability: Malaysian Film/Drama Students' Perspectives on Mental Health Misrepresentations in Screen Narratives

Nor Mazlina Ghazali^{1*}, Nur Hanis Fakhurul Nizam¹, Syarafina Abdullah¹, Aina Razlin Mohd Roose¹, Muliana Mohamad Taha¹, Azzahrah Anuar¹

¹Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

***Corresponding Author:** Nor Mazlina Ghazali, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

Abstract

This study examines the development of scriptwriting guidelines for films and dramas with mental health themes, focusing on the perspectives and experiences of drama students in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study explores how students perceive mental health representation in screen narratives and identifies key principles for ethical and responsible storytelling. Two research objectives guide the inquiry: (1) to examine common misrepresentations of mental health issues in films and dramas and (2) to identify prevailing stereotypes associated with mental health portrayals. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with student participants engaged in film, theater, and drama education. The findings indicate that drama students view media narratives as powerful tools for raising public awareness and fostering empathy, but warn that misrepresentations frequently arise from oversimplification, emotional exaggeration, and symbolic ambiguity. Students identified key stereotypes, including fear-based narratives linking mental illness to violence, superficial visual clichés, and character tropes defined by social isolation. To combat this, the study proposes a student-centered framework for scriptwriting that emphasizes evidence-based research, professional medical consultation, emotional authenticity, and the rejection of commercialized stereotypes. These findings contribute to film and drama education by providing a structured guideline to empower students in producing socially responsible, nuanced, and clinically accurate mental health narratives. Future research is encouraged to include a broader participant base, including mental health practitioners, to further refine these guidelines.

Keywords: guidelines, film, drama, mental health, misrepresentation, stereotype

How to cite this article: Ghazali NM, Nizam NHF, Abdullah S, Roose ARM, Taha MM, Anuar A. From violence to instability: Malaysian film/drama students' perspectives on mental health misrepresentations in screen narratives. *Int J Drug Deliv Technol*. 2026;16(77s): 77-88. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.77s.10

This study focuses on the development of practical guidelines for scriptwriting in films and dramas with mental health themes, specifically for film and drama students in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). It examines key issues surrounding the portrayal of mental health, including common misrepresentations, prevailing stereotypes, and the role of empathetic representation in shaping audience understanding. The participants comprise film and drama students, as well as lecturers who are also practicing scriptwriters, allowing for insights from both educational and professional perspectives. Grounded in scriptwriting theory and collaborative model frameworks, the study emphasizes that effective and responsible mental health storytelling emerges through structured writing processes and collaboration between creative practitioners and subject-matter experts, such as mental health professionals, to produce narratives that are accurate, ethical, and socially meaningful.

Although contemporary films and dramas increasingly feature characters with mental health

issues, inaccurate portrayals remain a persistent issue. Such misrepresentations can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, such as associating mental illness with violence or implying that recovery is simple without appropriate treatment. According to Ghazali et al. (2021), society gains a better understanding of individuals struggling with mental illness through films and dramas, which often depict their challenges in coping and adjusting to societal expectations. Ghazali's study also suggests that future research should explore the impact of watching films or dramas featuring mental health themes on viewers' self-development (Ghazali et al., 2021). Characters with psychological disorders often captivate and intrigue audiences, but when it comes to mental illness, narratives frequently lean on inaccurate portrayals. This fosters public perceptions that risk undermining and dehumanizing individuals who live with these conditions. For over a century, horror media has relied on mental illness as a simplistic explanation for the actions of deranged villains. This approach not only reflects poor storytelling but also reinforces harmful stigmas surrounding mental health, psychiatric institutions,

From Violence to Instability: Malaysian Film/Drama Students' Perspectives on Mental Health Misrepresentations in Screen Narratives

and the field of psychiatry itself (Mill, 2024). This is also supported by Wahl (2003), who effectively illustrates in detail the many ways false perceptions of mental illness, propagated by the media, shape how even the most enlightened among us perceive the world around us. The absence of clear, research-based guidelines for screenwriters contributes to these problems. While some filmmakers consult mental health professionals, many rely primarily on personal interpretation or sensational elements to capture audience interest. Participants in the study further noted that films and dramas provide a platform for increasing public awareness of mental illness. As technology advances, political and economic leaders have used cinema to influence and shape public perspectives, whether for personal agendas or for societal benefit. Although audiences can learn from what they see on screen, it is essential that content accurately represents the realities of mental illness. Ultimately, the success of films and dramas is determined by the quality of their content. In Malaysia, FINAS actively organizes script-writing workshops; however, none specifically focus on mental health issues. As a result, the researcher aims to bridge the gap between cinematic creativity and psychological authenticity by developing guidelines to help screenwriters craft accurate, empathetic, and engaging stories about mental health.

There are two (2) objectives in this study such as (i) to understand the common misrepresentations of mental health issues in films or dramas and (ii) to understand the common stereotypes of mental health issues in films or dramas.

Research questions consisted; (i) what are the most common misrepresentations of mental health issues in films or dramas and (ii) what are the common stereotypes of mental health issues in films or dramas.

Literature Review

In this context, a script organizes and systematizes the foundational elements of a conceptualized work, such as characters, setting, time, scenes, and interviews. It structures the beginning, middle, and end of a project, thereby establishing the essential framework of an activity under development (Melo et al., 2021). Additionally, scripting acts as a compilation that synthesizes and gathers elements to be put into practice during the project's execution. Thus, this type of text can be understood as a step-by-step outline of an initial idea, which will take shape and fulfil its purpose (De Andrade & De Camargo, 2022)

Research suggests that media portrayals often reinforce stigma and contribute to misconceptions

about mental health. Scholars observe that characters with mental illness are frequently depicted as violent, unpredictable, or socially isolated, which skews public perceptions of actual mental health conditions. Ghazali et al. (2021) support this, noting that while some participants reported gaining a better understanding of mental illness after watching films or dramas, six participants expressed uncertainty about their ability to explain mental health concepts. These participants mentioned that, with the support of complementary reading materials, they could explain some aspects of mental illness they observed in media portrayals. The study findings suggest that viewers who engage with films or dramas about mental health may improve their ability to describe characters with mental illness through these portrayals (Ghazali et al., 2021).

Research indicates that when films portray mental illness with empathy and nuance, they contribute to awareness, foster acceptance, and reduce stigma. For instance, shows like *BoJack Horseman* and films such as *Silver Linings Playbook* offer thoughtful insights into mental health challenges, generating positive public discussions. Additionally, a study by Ghazali et al. (2021) found that most participants reported gaining awareness after watching films or dramas depicting mental health issues. They noted a greater understanding of how individuals with such conditions may act and behave, providing them with a deeper, more empathetic perspective.

Current studies underscore the need for clearer frameworks to guide screenwriters in mental health storytelling. Mental health professionals stress that writers would benefit from improved access to guidelines and collaborative networks, which could help them balance creative freedom with ethical responsibility. Based on previous findings, participants emphasized that society should watch films or dramas focusing on mental health to promote awareness and education (Ghazali et al., 2021). Participants also suggested that such films be made available in multiple languages, present mental health themes clearly, and that characters be portrayed accurately without always associating mental illness with criminality. They also advocated for stories that offer hope or are inspired by true events.

Moreover, participants noted that the film industry should approach this theme with greater openness and thorough research to enhance the accuracy and quality of the portrayal. By conducting research, producers and writers may gain a deeper understanding of mental illness, resulting in films that are both informative and educational for the audience (Ghazali et al., 2021).

From Violence to Instability: Malaysian Film/Drama Students' Perspectives on Mental Health Misrepresentations in Screen Narratives

Theories on scriptwriting suggest that collaboration between creative professionals and subject-matter experts leads to richer narratives. Case studies demonstrate that when directors or writers involve mental health advocates, the result is more realistic and impactful storytelling. The literature strongly supports the collaboration between scriptwriters and subject-matter experts, particularly in creating authentic narratives about mental health.

Dalley and Walden (2022) argue that realistic storytelling on complex topics, such as trauma and psychological conditions, emerges when creative professionals engage experts to deepen their understanding of lived experiences. This collaboration helps avoid stereotypes and oversimplified portrayals, significantly increasing viewer empathy and credibility while aligning narratives with current mental health insights.

Additionally, Jim Kooler (2021) emphasizes the importance of depicting common mental health challenges, such as anxiety and stress, with subtlety and accuracy instead of sensationalism. Kooler highlights that such collaborations enable writers to balance engaging drama with realistic, multifaceted representations of mental health, providing audiences with opportunities to see themselves in the characters. Creative decisions informed by experts transform these narratives into a public service by demonstrating coping mechanisms and emphasizing the accessibility of support. These collaborative methods not only enhance storytelling but also shape public perception by promoting empathy and awareness around complex issues through familiar characters and relatable plots. This shift has contributed to the broader acceptance of mental health discussions in mainstream media, ultimately supporting viewers' understanding of mental health in a more informed and meaningful way.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore how drama students in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) perceive and interpret the representation of mental health in films and dramas. This qualitative research design is highly suited for the inquiry, as it allows for an in-depth, nuanced exploration of students' critical awareness regarding media tropes and the creative challenges they face when developing sensitive narratives. By focusing on the lived experiences and academic insights of these students, the research captures the specific educational needs required to transition from stereotypical media consumption to responsible scriptwriting production.

Using a purposive sampling technique, the study targets undergraduate or postgraduate students who are actively enrolled in drama, or film-related courses in Malaysia. The inclusion criteria require that participants have direct experience with coursework involving scriptwriting, character development, or dramatic analysis where mental health themes were explored. Data are collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which provide a flexible yet rigorous framework for students to discuss their recognition of visual clichés, ethical concerns in storytelling, and practical expectations for creative guidelines.

The collected interview data are analyzed using thematic analysis to systematically identify, code, and organize recurring patterns of meaning regarding media misrepresentations and character stereotypes. This analytical process directly informs the primary output of the study: a set of comprehensive, research-based scriptwriting guidelines tailored specifically for drama students. This guideline serves as a structured educational tool, empowering the next generation of screenwriters to reject fear-based tropes, consult psychological evidence, and construct ethically responsible, clinically accurate mental health narratives.

Results and Findings

Descriptive Analysis

The data shown that there were 15 male participants (48%) and 16 female participants (52%) consisting of students from Cinematography and Drama/Film programs. The data shown that there were nine (9) participants aged 21 (29%), nine (9) participants aged 22 (29%), 10 participants aged 23 (32%), 1 participant aged 24 (3%), and two (2) participants aged 25 (7%). All of the students had taken the Script Writing course in Year 1, Semester 1. The data shown that 13 participants (42%) were Year 1 students, 9 participants (29%) were Year 2 students, and 9 participants (29%) were Year 3 students.

Table 1
List of Participants

Descriptive Information	Frequency	Percent (%)
<u>Gender</u>		
Female	16	52
Male	15	48

From Violence to Instability: Malaysian Film/Drama Students' Perspectives on Mental Health Misrepresentations in Screen Narratives

Age		
21 years old	9	29
22 years old	9	29
23 years old	10	32
24 years old	1	3
25 years old	2	7
Year of Study		
Year 1	13	42
Year 2	9	29
Year 3	9	29

Films/Drama Used Mental Health Theme

Several films and television dramas have foregrounded mental health-related narratives in ways that contribute to public understanding of psychological distress and well-being. *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) presents a psychological drama that depicts the severe consequences of substance addiction among four individuals, emphasizing obsession, dependency, and progressive mental health deterioration. The film illustrates how addiction disrupts reality perception, interpersonal relationships, and personal identity. Similarly, *The Substance* (2024) employs body-horror elements to examine societal preoccupations with youth, beauty, and perfection, highlighting issues of identity disturbance, self-worth, and the psychological ramifications of extreme attempts to conform to social expectations.

Daily Dose of Sunshine (2023) is a Korean drama situated within a psychiatric care setting that portrays the experiences of mental health patients and healthcare professionals. The series provides nuanced representations of depression, anxiety, trauma, and recovery, while emphasizing empathy, professional mental health care, and stigma reduction. *Memento* (2001) explores psychological functioning through the narrative of an individual with anterograde amnesia, examining themes of memory loss, identity formation, grief, and the subjective nature of reality, thereby raising questions regarding self-awareness and coping processes.

In the context of adolescent mental health, *Weak Hero* (2022) addresses school violence and bullying, focusing on psychological resilience, emotional regulation, and the long-term impact of chronic victimization on adolescents’ mental and emotional development. *Only God Forgives* (2013) is a psychological crime drama that explores guilt, violence, repression, and moral conflict, reflecting unresolved trauma and emotional detachment within dysfunctional familial relationships.

The drama *Forgive* centres on psychological processes related to forgiveness, guilt, and emotional healing, emphasizing intrapersonal conflict and the resolution of past trauma. *Parasite* (2019) examines mental health through a social psychological lens by depicting class disparity, economic stress, and moral ambiguity, demonstrating how socioeconomic pressure influences behaviour, psychological well-being, family dynamics, and ethical decision-making.

Finally, *Euphoria* (2019) presents an explicit portrayal of adolescent substance use, depression, anxiety, trauma, and identity-related concerns, offering insight into contemporary youth mental health challenges. Likewise, *13 Reasons Why* (2017) focuses on adolescent psychological distress, particularly depression, bullying, trauma, and suicide, highlighting the psychological consequences of peer interactions, stigma, and inadequate social support, while underscoring the importance of awareness and accountability.

Table 2
Summary of list of Films/Dramas used Mental Health Theme

No.	Name of Films/Dramas	Year
1.	Requiem for A Dream	2000
2.	The Substance	2024
3.	Daily Dose of Sunshine	2023
4.	Memento	2001
5.	Weak Hero	2022
6.	Only God	2013
7.	Forgive Us All	2025
8.	Parasite	2019

From Violence to Instability: Malaysian Film/Drama Students' Perspectives on Mental Health Misrepresentations in Screen Narratives

- | | | |
|-----|---------------|------|
| 9. | Euphoria | 2019 |
| 10. | 13 Reason Why | 2017 |
-

Qualitative Analysis

Research Objective 1: *To understand the common misrepresentations of mental health issues in films or dramas*

Student Perspectives

In relation to the research objective of understanding common misrepresentations of mental health issues in films and dramas, several interrelated themes emerged from participants' responses. First, participants emphasized the role of films and dramas in raising awareness and public education about mental health. Student One (1), Student Two (2), Student Three (3) and Student Four (4) highlighted that media narratives serve as important platforms for delivering mental health messages and increasing public awareness. However, their responses also implicitly suggest that when awareness-driven portrayals lack depth or accuracy, they may oversimplify complex mental health conditions, contributing to partial or misleading representations. They mentioned as below;

"Emphasises mental health issues as a means to raise awareness and deliver important messages to audiences."

Student One (1)

"Highlights the role of mental health topics in increasing public awareness."

Student Two (2)

"Focuses on films and dramas promoting awareness and understanding of different mental health conditions."

Student Three (3)

"Stresses the entertainment industry's role in spreading awareness about the seriousness of mental health issues."

Student Four (4)

The second theme concerned learning from multiple perspectives and enhancing social understanding.

Student Five (5) and Student Six (6) noted that exposure to diverse life experiences through films and dramas allows audiences to view mental health issues from various perspectives. While such diversity can broaden understanding, participants' insights indicate that selective or unbalanced perspectives may reinforce stereotypes or dominant narratives, thereby misrepresenting the lived realities of individuals with mental health conditions. They mentioned as below;

"Mentions learning from different perspectives across all walks of life, contributing to personal and public awareness."

Student Five (5)

"Highlights the opportunity to view mental health issues from various perspectives and gain meaningful learning experiences."

Student Six (6)

Empathy, emotional engagement, and representations of lived experience formed the third theme. Student Seven (7), Student Eight (8) and Student Nine (9) emphasized that emotionally engaging narratives can foster empathy and raise awareness of mental suffering. Nevertheless, participants also implied that dramatized or emotionally exaggerated portrayals, while impactful, risk misrepresentation by prioritizing emotional intensity over psychological accuracy, potentially leading audiences to develop distorted perceptions of mental disorders. They mentioned as below;

"Emphasises that well-produced films can increase empathy and awareness among society."

Student Seven (7)

"Focuses on the audience's ability to emotionally connect with characters and understand the seriousness of mental disorders."

Student Eight (8)

"Highlights emotional complexity, psychological depth, and how narratives help audiences understand others and themselves."

Student Nine (9)

The fourth theme highlighted the use of narrative style, metaphor, and artistic representation in conveying mental health experiences. Student Nine (9) and Student 10 discussed the use of nonlinear

From Violence to Instability: Malaysian Film/Drama Students' Perspectives on Mental Health Misrepresentations in Screen Narratives

storytelling and metaphorical imagery to reflect psychological fragmentation. Although these techniques can effectively symbolize internal psychological states, participants' views suggest that heavy reliance on abstract or symbolic representation may confuse audiences or obscure clinical realities, thereby contributing to misinterpretations of mental health conditions. They mentioned as below;

"Discusses the use of nonlinear narratives and multiple perspectives to reflect psychological fragmentation."

Student Nine (9)

"Focuses on the use of metaphors in films related to mental illness and the need for audience attention to interpret them."

Finally, the theme of accuracy, stigma, and responsible representation directly addressed misrepresentation concerns. Student 11 and 12 emphasized the difficulty of portraying mental illness accurately and the prevalence of misconceptions in media portrayals. Their responses underscored the importance of ethically responsible and realistic character portrayals to avoid reinforcing stigma, misinformation, or harmful stereotypes. They mentioned as below;

"Points out the difficulty of expressing mental illness and clarifies misconceptions about its nature."

Student 11

"Emphasises the need for accurate character portrayal that aligns with and addresses mental health stigma."

Student 12

Overall, the findings indicate that while films and dramas play a significant role in raising awareness and promoting empathy, misrepresentations often arise from oversimplification, emotional exaggeration, symbolic ambiguity, and inaccurate portrayals. These factors highlight the need for careful storytelling and responsible representation to ensure that mental health narratives contribute to informed public understanding rather than perpetuating misconceptions. They mentioned as below;

Expectation of script for mental issues theme in film/drama

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of accuracy, research, and evidence-based representation in mental health-related scripts. Student 13 highlighted that honest scriptwriting grounded in real psychological facts is essential to prevent misinformation, noting that portrayals of conditions such as depression should be based on actual symptoms rather than imagination. Similarly, Student 10 stressed that scripts should be informed by accurate research and factual knowledge, ideally through consultation with professionals such as doctors or psychologists, to avoid unrealistic or misleading symptom portrayals. Student 14 echoed this view, emphasizing that theatre and drama addressing mental health require thorough research to ensure accuracy, particularly when depicting sensitive issues such as substance use or mental illness. Student Four (4) further underscored the need for practical and realistic portrayals, cautioning against exaggerated or falsified depictions of conditions such as bipolar disorder for commercial appeal. They mentioned as below;

"Emphasises honesty and fact-based portrayal of mental illnesses"

Student 10

"Advocates for research and consultation with professionals"

Student Seven (7)

"Highlights the importance of research in theatre and drama"

Student 14

"Calls for practical, realistic portrayals without exaggeration"

Student Five (5)

A second major theme concerned the avoidance of stigma, stereotypes, and misinformation. Student 11 highlighted the ethical responsibility of scriptwriters to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes, particularly the inaccurate association between mental illness and violence. Student seven (7) similarly criticized portrayals that exaggerate or misrepresent symptoms, while Sylvia rejected commercialized depictions that perpetuate stigma. Student 12 emphasized the importance of sensitivity and common sense in scriptwriting, noting that messages and actions presented—especially in content accessible to children—should align with

From Violence to Instability: Malaysian Film/Drama Students' Perspectives on Mental Health Misrepresentations in Screen Narratives

accurate mental health knowledge and relevant legal considerations. They mentioned as below;

“Warns against stigma and stereotypes, especially linking mental illness to violence”

Student 13

“Criticises unrealistic symptom portrayal”

Student Seven (7)

“Rejects commercialised, stereotypical depictions”

Student Five (5)

“Emphasises sensitivity, common sense, and legal awareness”

Student 12

Participants also discussed the role of symbolism and artistic expression in conveying mental health narratives. Student one (1) noted that mental health issues are often communicated through symbolic imagery, such as butterflies representing freedom. While acknowledging the value of such creative approaches, Student 10 emphasized that symbolic representations should still be accompanied by honest explanations to ensure that audiences do not misinterpret the intended psychological meaning. This suggests that artistic expression must remain grounded in psychological accuracy to prevent misrepresentation. They mentioned as below;

“Highlights symbolism (e.g. butterflies representing freedom)”

Student One (1)

“Supports honest explanation even when using symbolic approaches”

Student 10

“Characters are portrayed as messy in appearance and dressed in gloomy clothing.”

Student 6

Another theme highlighted the importance of emotional truth and audience interpretation. Student nine (9) advocated for mental health scripts that reveal emotional truths without imposing definitive conclusions, allowing audiences to gradually uncover meaning and engage critically with the narrative. Drawing on concepts such as the

Rashomon Effect, Student nine (9) suggested that presenting multiple perspectives can encourage viewers to reflect on subjective truth. Student seven (7) similarly valued storytelling approaches that show lived experience through narrative development rather than explicit labelling, enabling audiences to understand a character's mental condition organically. They mentioned as below;

“Advocates for revealing emotional truth without forced conclusions”

Student Nine (9)

“Values storytelling that shows lived experience rather than explicit labelling”.

Student Seven (7)

Finally, participants emphasized the responsibility of scriptwriters and performers in shaping public understanding of mental health. Student one (1) stressed the need for proper preparation and research by both writers and actors when portraying mental health issues to avoid negative misrepresentation. Mathew positioned scriptwriters as key agents in conveying information and influencing audience perceptions, while Student 12 highlighted ethical accountability toward vulnerable audiences, including children. Collectively, these perspectives underscore the professional and moral obligations of those involved in media production. They mentioned as below;

“Stresses the need for preparation and research by writers and actors.”

Student One (1)

“Positions scriptwriters as key agents in shaping public understanding”

Student 13

“Highlights responsibility towards vulnerable audiences, including children”

Student 12

Overall, the findings indicate that effective mental health representation in films and dramas requires research-based accuracy, ethical responsibility, and emotional authenticity. While symbolism and creative storytelling are valued, they must be supported by psychological evidence and professional consultation to ensure responsible representation, minimize stigma, and promote meaningful audience engagement.

From Violence to Instability: Malaysian Film/Drama Students' Perspectives on Mental Health Misrepresentations in Screen Narratives

Research Objectives 2: *To understand the common stereotypes of mental health issues in films or dramas*

Stereotype of Mental Health Issues In Films or Dramas.

Thematic analysis revealed five key themes underlying stereotypes of mental health in films and dramas. The first theme, social isolation and loneliness, reflects the tendency to depict mental illness as synonymous with social exclusion and lack of support, as highlighted by Student 10. This narrow framing overlooks the varied social experiences of individuals with mental health conditions. They mentioned as below;

“Mental illness is stereotypically depicted as loneliness, lack of friends, and absence of social support.”

Student 10

The second theme concerns the misrepresentation of communication and hidden struggles. As noted by Student 10, mental health difficulties may not always be externally visible, and oversimplified portrayals fail to capture the complexity of internal psychological experiences. They mentioned as below;

“Individuals with mental health issues may communicate normally, which can mask their difficulties and challenge stereotypical expectations.”

Student 10

The third theme focuses on the harmful association between mental illness and violence. Both Student 13 and Student Five (5) emphasized that fear-based portrayals linking mental illness to criminality or danger reinforce misinformation and contribute to public fear and discrimination. They mentioned as below;

“Mental illness is linked to psycho-killers or serial killers in films, reinforcing fear and misinformation.”

Student 13

“Reinforces concern that mental health is wrongly associated with violence, making individuals appear dangerous.”

Student Five (5)

The fourth theme addresses visual and cultural stereotypes in media representation. Student 14 observations highlight the frequent use of repetitive symbols—such as dark weather, substance use, and self-harm—to signify depression, particularly within ASEAN media contexts. These visual shortcuts risk reducing complex conditions to simplistic and culturally constrained imagery. They mentioned as below;

“Depression is frequently portrayed using clichés such as rain, drugs, and self-harm, particularly within ASEAN media contexts.”

Student 14

The final theme relates to social media influence and the “trending” narrative surrounding mental health. Student 10 perspective suggests that the normalization and commodification of mental health discourse online may blur the distinction between genuine psychological distress and performative claims, thereby reshaping stigma and public perception. They mentioned as below;

“Social media may contribute to mental health being treated as a trend, where some individuals claim mental health issues without clinical basis, potentially reshaping stigma and public understanding”

Student 10

Overall, participants agreed that mental health stereotypes in films are shaped by oversimplified narratives, fear-based portrayals, repetitive visual symbolism, and social media influence. These factors contribute to misconceptions, reinforce stigma, and affect how communities perceive individuals with mental health issues.

Common Stereotypes of Mental Health Issues in Films or Dramas

Participants further identified specific stereotypes commonly associated with characters experiencing mental health issues. Student Four (4) noted that such characters are frequently portrayed as introverted, withdrawn, or unusually quiet. Student 15 similarly observed that individuals with mental health conditions are often depicted as having poor or underdeveloped social skills, reinforcing simplistic personality-based stereotypes. They mentioned as below;

“Some stereotypes I recognise in films or dramas about mental health are that characters are often portrayed as introverted or very quiet.”

From Violence to Instability: Malaysian Film/Drama Students' Perspectives on Mental Health Misrepresentations in Screen Narratives

"One reason this genre is viewed as stereotypical is that some communities still treat mental health issues as a joke and do not take them seriously."

Student Four (4)

"Characters are portrayed as having low social skills."

Student 15

Another recurring stereotype involves social marginalisation and victimisation. Student Four (4) highlighted that characters with mental health issues are often portrayed as being bullied, reinforcing the idea that such individuals are perpetual victims within social environments. They mentioned as below;

Visual and behavioural stereotypes also emerged as prominent indicators of mental illness in films and dramas. Student Six (6) observed that characters are commonly shown as untidy, dishevelled, and dressed in gloomy or dark clothing, using appearance-based cues to signal psychological distress.

"Characters are portrayed as messy in appearance and dressed in gloomy clothing."

Student Six (6)

Societal attitudes were identified as a key factor in perpetuating these stereotypes. Student Four (4) noted that some communities continue to treat mental health issues as a joke or do not take them seriously, while Student Five (5) attributed this problem to narrow-mindedness and a general lack of awareness or understanding within society. They mentioned as below;

"Some communities still view mental health issues as a joke and do not treat them as serious."

Student Four (4)

"Attributes this to narrow-mindedness and ignorance within society."

Student Five (5)

Finally, Student Six (6) highlighted a lack of empathy and recognition of individual differences in mental health portrayals. He noted that people often compare levels of suffering, adopting attitudes such as "I survived worse," without acknowledging that

each individual's experiences and struggles are unique. They mentioned as below;

"Highlights how people compare struggles and overlook the fact that each individual's situation is unique."

Student Six (6)

Overall, participants identified that stereotypes in mental health portrayals arise from simplified personality traits, fear-based narratives, visual symbolism, and social marginalisation, reinforced by societal ignorance and lack of empathy. These representations fail to reflect the diversity, complexity, and individuality of real-life mental health experiences, underscoring the need for more nuanced, accurate, and responsible portrayals in films and dramas.

Discussion

The development of comprehensive mental health storytelling guidelines for Malaysian film and drama students is increasingly critical in light of the high prevalence of psychological distress among university students in Southeast Asia. Recent studies report that symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress affect a substantial proportion of students, with prevalence rates reaching 42.4%, 29.4%, and 16.4% respectively (Muda & Raphaie, 2025). These figures highlight the vulnerability of young audiences who frequently consume media content and may rely on films and dramas as informal sources of understanding about mental health. This reliance is compounded by a systemic lack of formal psychological literacy within public and private university curricula, positioning entertainment media not merely as recreation, but as a primary, unregulated textbook for emotional health.

The findings of this study reveal that mental health narratives are often shaped by exaggerated emotions, violent resolutions, or simplified portrayals of recovery, which risk reinforcing stigma and misinformation. In this context, inaccurate or sensationalised portrayals are not merely artistic shortcomings but have real social consequences, potentially intensifying fear, self-stigma, and reluctance to seek professional help among students who already face psychological challenges. Furthermore, irresponsible depictions of self-harm or acute psychological crises can trigger the "Werther effect"—or copycat behavior—among vulnerable student populations, transforming an ungrounded creative choice into a direct public health hazard (Subramaniam et al., 2022).

From Violence to Instability: Malaysian Film/Drama Students' Perspectives on Mental Health Misrepresentations in Screen Narratives

Cultural sensitivity emerged as a crucial consideration in both the study findings and the broader literature, particularly within the Malaysian sociocultural context. Cultural factors such as the fear of “loss of face,” strong family expectations, and close-others stigma significantly influence how mental health issues are perceived and addressed (Muda & Raphaie, 2025). Participants in this study consistently emphasized that mental health storytelling should reflect local values, interpersonal dynamics, and cultural norms rather than relying heavily on Western narrative frameworks. In Malaysia's collectivist society, an individual's psychological distress rarely exists in isolation; it deeply impacts the extended familial and communal network, a dynamic that local scripts must capture with nuance rather than resorting to oversimplified familial rejection.

Without culturally grounded representation, films and dramas may unintentionally portray mental illness in ways that conflict with local beliefs, thereby deepening shame or misunderstanding. For instance, popular Malay-language dramas frequently slip into spiritual moralizing, wherein clinical conditions like depression or schizophrenia are narratively framed as a deficiency in religious faith or spiritual discipline (Razali et al., 2018). Consequently, the proposed guidelines must incorporate an awareness of Malaysia's multicultural demographic landscape, including ethnic, religious, and generational differences, to ensure that mental health narratives resonate authentically and promote understanding rather than alienation.

The findings further suggest that fictional media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of mental illness, particularly in contexts where mental health education remains limited or stigmatized. As noted by Kamal et al. (2020), audiences often form their understanding of mental health conditions based on cinematic representations rather than clinical or educational sources. This study echoes that concern, as participants identified recurring stereotypes such as portraying individuals with mental illness as violent, unpredictable, or morally flawed as deeply embedded within popular narratives. This observation aligns with a summative content analysis of local media reporting, which concluded that individuals experiencing psychiatric conditions are overwhelmingly depicted as dangerous perpetrators or offenders rather than victims of an illness requiring treatment (Hanafiah & Van Bortel, 2015; Ali et al., 2024).

Such portrayals not only distort public understanding but may also influence how individuals interpret their own symptoms or those of others. Therefore, storytelling guidelines for film

and drama students must explicitly address the social impact of narrative choices, encouraging responsible depictions that prioritize accuracy, empathy, and contextual understanding over shock value or dramatic convenience. Students must be trained to dismantle the classic “madman” trope, replacing it with character who maintain agency, multi-dimensional personalities and relatable everyday conflicts.

In addition, the findings highlight the potential of films and dramas to function as powerful educational tools when mental health themes are handled with care and depth. Previous research demonstrates that media narratives incorporating nuanced character development and avoiding simplistic stereotypes can significantly improve mental health literacy and reduce stigma (Ghazali et al., 2021; Goodwin et al., 2021). Participants in this study similarly stressed the importance of portraying specific mental health conditions clearly, illustrating coping strategies, and depicting realistic help-seeking behaviours. Crucially, showing the realistic mechanics of therapy such as a student consulting a registered campus counselor or clinical psychologist—demystifies the professional intervention process, effectively lowering the barrier to care for real-world student viewers.

These approaches align with narrative pedagogy, which emphasizes emotionally engaging storytelling as a means of bridging theoretical knowledge and lived experience (McAllister, 2015). For film and drama students, integrating educational intent into storytelling does not diminish creative expression; rather, it enhances narrative credibility and emotional resonance while fostering meaningful audience engagement. By shifting the dramatic focus from the shock of the symptom to the courage of the recovery journey, student filmmakers can cultivate an aesthetic of hope that actively combats public defeatism regarding mental illness.

Finally, the study underscores the necessity of interdisciplinary collaboration in the development of mental health-themed scripts. Participants repeatedly emphasized that responsible storytelling requires consultation with mental health professionals, including psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors, and relevant academic experts. This aligns with existing scholarship that advocates for cross-disciplinary partnerships to ensure ethical, accurate, and constructive portrayals of mental health and treatment processes (Tenzek et al., 2023). This collaborative paradigm mirrors recent policy-level shifts in Malaysia, such as the media-led initiatives spearheaded by the Communications and Multimedia Content Forum of Malaysia (Content Forum) and the National Centre of Excellence for Mental Health (NCEMH), which

From Violence to Instability: Malaysian Film/Drama Students' Perspectives on Mental Health Misrepresentations in Screen Narratives

emphasize cross-sectoral co-creation to establish ethical boundaries (Mahmood et al., 2026).

Embedding such collaborative practices within formal storytelling guidelines can support students in navigating complex psychological themes with confidence and responsibility. In the Malaysian film and drama education context, these guidelines can serve as a pedagogical framework that balances creative freedom with social accountability, ultimately contributing to more informed, empathetic, and culturally sensitive mental health narratives that positively influence public discourse and well-being.

Conclusion

In the context of films and dramas education in Malaysian Higher Education institutions, this study emphasises the growing significance of responsible mental health representation in films and dramas. The results show that although issues related to mental are becoming popular in modern media, misrepresentations are still common. These include the romanticisation of psychological suffering, common linking of mental illness to violence, and the simplifying of recovery processes. These portrayals run the risk of perpetuating stigma and creating false public perceptions of mental health issues. As media narratives plays a significant role in influencing societal understanding, the need for responsible storytelling becomes increasingly critical.

The study also demonstrates that accurate and empathetic portrayals require a structured and research-informed approach to scriptwriting. When developing characters and narratives, participants emphasise the important of carrying out in-depth research, speaking with mental health professionals and precisely identifying psychological conditions. A key strategy for ensuring authenticity and ethical sensitivity in storytelling is collaboration between creative practitioners and subject-matter experts. In addition, attention must be given to the well-being of performers and audiences, recognizing that narratives involving psychological distress may have emotional impacts beyond the screen.

Ultimately, the development of comprehensive guidelines for scriptwriters can serve as a valuable framework for film and drama students in crafting narratives that balance creativity with social responsibility. By promoting accurate, empathetic, and research-based portrayals, these guidelines can contribute to reducing stigma and encouraging more informed public conversations about mental health. In the long term, responsible storytelling within visual media has the potential not only to enhance narrative quality but also to foster greater awareness,

understanding, and compassion toward individuals experiencing mental health challenges.

Acknowledgement

This research was funded by UNIMAS under P Ramlee Grant, Grant No. UNI.F04/PRC/86586/2025

References

- Ali, S. M. M., Fakhruddin, W. F. W. W., Adnan, W. N. a. W., & Azizan, E. A. (2024). DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF NEWS REPORTS ON PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS IN MALAYSIAN ONLINE NEWSPAPERS. *Journal of Nusantara Studies (JONUS)*, 9(2), 371–401. <https://doi.org/10.24200/jonus.vol9iss2pp371-401>
- Dalley, T., & Walden, C. (2022). Effective collaboration between creative professionals and mental health experts: Case studies and narrative impact. *Psychology and Media Journal*, 14(2), 101–115.
- De Andrade, M. D., & De Camargo, R. a. A. (2022). Approaches to the script genre: concept, characterization and pertinences. In *Seven Editora eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.56238/pacfdnsv1-026>
- Ghazali, N. M., Aden, E., Anuar, A., Yahya, F., & Zulkifli, A. N. (2021). Exploring the use of films/dramas in giving awareness towards mental illness in society. *International Journal of Public Health Science (IJPHS)*, 10(3), 704. <https://doi.org/10.11591/ijphs.v10i3.20967>
- Goodwin, J., Saab, M. M., Dillon, C. B., Kilty, C., McCarthy, A., O'Brien, M., & Philpott, L. F. (2021). The use of film-based interventions in adolescent mental health education: A systematic review. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 137, 158–172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2021.02.055>
- Hanafiah, A. N., & Van Bortel, T. (2015). A qualitative exploration of the perspectives of mental health professionals on stigma and discrimination of mental illness in Malaysia. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 9(1), 10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-015-0002-1>
- Kooler, J. (2021). Writing accurate portrayals of mental health on screen (Part 1). *Creative Screenwriting Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.creativescreenwriting.com/writing-accurate-portrayals-of-mental-health-on-screen-part-1/>

From Violence to Instability: Malaysian Film/Drama Students' Perspectives on Mental Health Misrepresentations in Screen Narratives

Kamal, S., El-Gabalawy, O., Zhao, N., & MacLeod, J. (2020). Depiction of Mental Illness in Film and Association with Financial and Critical Success. *bioRxiv (Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory)*.
<https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.10.20.20215707>

Corresponding author: Nor Mazlina Ghazali
Email: gnmazlina@unimas.my

Document updated December 30, 2023

Mahmood M, Choong Thum SC, Panirselvam RR, Ng YP, Mohd Suhaimi AB, Petrus CF, Chan LF. Development and Early Implementation of the Media-Led Suicide Content Guidelines. *Crisis*. 2026 Jan 29. doi: 10.1027/0227-5910/a001048. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 41608863.

MELO, C. T. V. et al. Caderno Docente: orientações para produção do gênero documentário, 2a ed. Itaú Social, 2021.
https://www.escrevendoofuturo.org.br/caderno_virtual/caderno/documentario

Muda, N., & Raphaie, F. K. A. (2025). A multiple correspondence analysis towards understanding of public and self-stigma in mental health help-seeking among Malaysian university students. *Scientific Reports*, 15(1), 31572. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-15834-8>

Ghazali, N. M., Aden, E., Anuar, A., Yahya, F., & Zulkifli, A. N. (2021). Exploring the use of films/dramas in giving awareness towards mental illness in society. *International Journal of Public Health Science (IJPHS)*, 10(3), 704. <https://doi.org/10.11591/ijphs.v10i3.20967>

Subramaniam, M., et al. (2022). Responsible media reporting of suicide and mental health crises in multi-ethnic Asian societies: Challenges and policy implementations. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 9(4), 321–333.

Razali, Z. A., Rabi'atul, A., & Sanip, S. (2018). Mental illness portrayal in media: A summative content analysis of Malaysian newspapers. *International Journal of Business and Society*, 19(S2), 324–331. <https://www.ijbs.unimas.my/images/repository/pdf/Vol19-S2-paper11.pdf>

Tenzek, K. E., Lattimer, T. A., Heneveld, K., Lapan, E., Neurohr, M., & Gillis, S. (2023). Mediated depictions of mental health, chronic care and literacy: a narrative analysis of Randall's mental health journey in the television series, *This is Us*. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14, 1204973.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1204973>

Wahl, O. F. (2003). News media portrayal of mental illness. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 46(12), 1594–1600.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764203254615>