

Exact or exaggerate: Portrayal of psychological disorders in Tamil cinema

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66856/ijmrd.2026.13.3.13353>

Abstract

Movies have always been a powerful tool to portray and influence the way people perceive things in the society. Movies act as a mirror, facilitating audiences to understand the complicated issues in the society. Tamil cinema has always been a platform to address and create awareness on societal realities. Tamil cinema has increasingly depicted characters facing psychological challenges. But there remains an uncertainty to the extent the psychological disorders and symptoms are portrayed. This study attempts to investigate the portrayal of psychological disorders and symptoms in cinema and analyse the accuracy of its portrayal. On analysing 10 Tamil films (Anniyan, Chandramuki, Spider, Psycho, Three, Pasaga-2, Naan Sigappu Manithan, Galatta kalyanam, Netrikann and Ratsasan) the study highlights the varied depictions of the psychological disorders. Results revealed that 3 movies have portrayed the psychological symptoms exactly and 7 movies have exaggerated the symptoms. The study concluded that exaggerate portrayal of the psychological symptoms and disorders in movies tend to influence and leads to misinterpretation of the symptoms and disorders among the people. On the contrary, more accurate portrayals that reflect the reality of psychological disorders seem to generate less interest and curiosity among audiences.

Keywords: Exact, exaggerate, psychological disorders, Tamil cinema

Introduction

The Tamil film industry has filmed various genres, beyond mere romance and actions. By exploring the complexities of mental health, cinema has the potential to enhance public awareness, deepen understanding, and cultivate empathy for individuals living with psychological disorders. The depictions of psychological disorders in cinema can challenge the misconceptions, stigmas and foster the communication about mental health conditions among general public (Acharya, *et al.*, 2014) ^[1]. Few films portrayed the characteristics of mental health issues blended with comedies to address sensitive topics.

Certain cinematic depictions tend to exaggerate the symptoms of mental health conditions. Few studies have also suggested that, such exaggerated portrayal have evoked negative reactions, including fear, rejection, mockery, and ridicule, (Stuart, 2013). Media often shows mental illness in a way that is not true to life. They make people with health issues seem violent or crazy. This is not what most people with illness are like. Studies have shown that most people with health problems are not violent. The way media shows them makes people think wrong things about mental illness. Media also does not show how people get treatment for illness. They do not show what mental health professionals, like psychiatrists and therapists do. They do not show that people can get better with the help. This means media only shows part of the story. They do not show that many people can manage their illness and live normal lives. Mental illness is part of a person, should not be all that people think about when they think of that person. We need media to show illness in a more realistic way. This will help people understand illness better and not be afraid to get help when they need it. Mental illness is an issue and media can help by showing it in a fair and honest way.

Prevalence of Psychological disorders

Twenty percent of people have some mental problem that needs help from mental health professionals (Hans & Sharan, 2021). In India around, fifteen percent of the people have health issues (Math, 2010) ^[3]. These issues include anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, substance use problems and neurodevelopmental disorders. Depression is a mental health condition where people feel sad and hopeless all the time and they do not enjoy things they used to like. A lot of people die because of anxiety or depression in India; it is three and a half percent of all deaths (Meghrajani *et al.*, 2023) ^[4].

Review of Literature

Egyptian films spanning from 1923 to 2015, focusing on portrayals of mental and psychological disorders. Researchers compiled a list of 42 movies featuring characters with such illnesses, from which they analyzed 13 selected films in detail. The study has been uncovered a predominantly unfavourable depiction of mental illness, depicting those afflicted as socially unacceptable and distinct from the norm. Depictions differed by film genre, with comedies exaggerating aspects of mental illness, while dramas delved into more profound but still objectifying representations (Mitry, 2016) ^[6]. The films have the potential to transform public perceptions, challenge misconceptions about mental illnesses and those affected by them, and promote inclusivity within society (Ramamurti *et al.*, 2009). Critics frequently scrutinize cinematic depictions for their unrealistic portrayal of psychiatric disorders, the negative stereotypes they propagate, and the perpetuation of myths surrounding mental illness (Aracena, 2012) ^[7].

Research Objective

To investigate whether exact or exaggerate of portraying Psychological disorders in Tamil cinema.

Methods

Ten Tamil films (2005 to 2021) featuring characters with psychological disorders have been selected for review. The selected movie names are Pasanga - 2, Netrikann, Galatta Kalyanam, Anniyan, Chandramuki, Psycho, Naan Sigappu Manithan, Three, Ratsasan and Spider. These movies were chosen because they received critical acclaim during their time and were widely recognized by the audience.

Analysis

Comparative analyses of the symptoms portrayed in Tamil cinemas mentioned above substantiate to ICD- 11.

Discussion

Exact Portrayal of Symptoms of Psychological Disorders in Tamil Cinema:

Pasanga 2:

The children from this movie depicts notable challenge in maintaining focus on tasks that lack high stimulation or frequent rewards, along with difficulties in organization and susceptibility to distraction. There is an abundance of motor activity and struggles with maintaining stillness, particularly noticeable in structured environments (Classrooms) that demand self-control of behaviour. They react immediately to stimuli without careful thought or consideration of potential risks and consequences.

On considering the International classification of Diseases (ICD 11, 2022), the children in the film met the criteria for the diagnosis Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, combined presentation with the persistent symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity, for more than 6 months.

Netrikann

The Doctor (Villain) from this movie has prolonged, concentrated, and heightened state of sexual arousal, evidenced by behaviours involving the imposition of physical harm on an individual without their consent. The antagonist has acted upon these thoughts.

On considering the International classification of Diseases (ICD 11, 2022), the antagonist in the film met the criteria for the diagnosis Coercive sexual sadism disorder.

Galatta Kalyanam

The female protagonist of this movie exhibits symptoms such as engaging in conversations with an imaginary man, actively listening and responding to his words, and experiencing a relationship with him, all of which persist over an extended period of time.

Disruptions in various cognitive functions such as thinking (delusion- existence of the imaginary man), perception (auditory hallucinations and visual hallucinations) are persistent for a longer period, (ICD-11, 2022). Thus, she was diagnosed with Schizophrenia.

Exaggerate portrayal of Symptoms of Psychological disorders in Tamil cinema:

Anniyan:

The protagonist character embodies three distinct identities, each with unique traits: one as a fearful everyman, another

as a romantic lover, and the third as a ruthless killer who punishes others for their crime. The movie suggests that the individual seamlessly transitions between these identities without conscious awareness. Those identity shifts cause significant impairment in individual's life.

This film depicts a character with dissociative identity disorder, characterized by a disturbance of identity, where several separate personality states are evident, transitioning into a killer in either of the exhibited identities, perpetuating misconceptions about the disorder among the audience.

Chandramuki

The female lead in this film displays distinct characteristics, experiencing two different personality traits attributed to spirit possession. During episodes of the antagonist's personality emerging, she lacks memory of prior events, attempts to harm others, and endeavors to rebuild lost relationships. The movie depicts her attempting to inhabit the persona of the antagonist as the spirit overtakes her.

Dissociative identity disorder is defined by a disruption of identity, wherein there are multiple distinct personality states present. Personality state encompasses its unique way of experiencing, perceiving, conceptualizing, and relating to oneself, the body, and the surroundings (ICD-11, 2022). The movie depicts characters with such traits and incorporates elements of spirit possession and a desire to harm others. It exaggerates the characteristics of the disorder within a fictional narrative.

Psycho

The antagonist in this movie demonstrates behaviors including harming, torturing, and killing individuals, disregarding rules and regulations, lacking empathy, displaying cruelty and physical aggression, and exhibiting indifference to the suffering of others. On the flip side, he lived a commendable life as the founder of an organizations where his traits went unnoticed by others. This film tries to portray the Dissocial Personality Disorder. Individuals with such personality traits often encounter challenges in their daily lives, yet the antagonist in the portrayal manages to navigate both sides effectively. The depiction exaggerates the disorder to extreme levels, which may not be the case in all instances. The individual has been portrayed as Psycho killer.

Naan Sigappu Manithan

The film portrays a protagonist grappling with narcolepsy, a sleep disorder marked by uncontrollable sleep episodes, particularly during moments of intense emotional stimulation. These episodes typically last 15 to 20 minutes, during which the protagonist remains aware of their surroundings but unable to move. Interestingly, the character finds relief from these episodes when immersed in water.

This film tries to portray Narcolepsy, a sleep disorder which is characterized by excessive daytime sleepiness, uncontrollable urges to sleep, occasional sleep paralysis, hypnagogic hallucinations, and automatic behaviors, as classified by ICD-11, 2022. These symptoms often interfere with the affected individuals' ability to effectively carry out their daily routines. But this film has exaggeratedly portrayed a person with Narcolepsy to a hero.

Three

The protagonist in the film exhibits signs of profound sadness, intense anger, frequent crying spells, and struggles with everyday tasks. He also displays behaviors such as harming his friend and dog. The film also depicts instances where the protagonist interacts with and responds to voices and visions of individuals who aren't physically present, indicating hallucinations.

The movie attempts to portray Bipolar Affective Disorder, characterized by episodes of mania marked by euphoria, irritability, or increased energy, as well as symptoms of depression such as prolonged sadness and loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities (ICD-11, 2022). The film does not depict these symptoms of the disorder accurately.

Ratsasan

The antagonist in the movie has Werner Syndrome, which is a genetic condition which leads to premature aging. He feels rejected by society, particularly because of unrequited love from a girl. From this rejection he resorts murdering girls of a similar age. The film depicts him as a psychotic killer.

Spider

The antagonist from this movie seeks pleasure from sorrowful sounds of others, enjoying the act of causing people to cry. To fulfill his interests, he indulges into extreme actions, such as committing murders and concealing the victims within newly constructed buildings. He even dismembers the bodies, making identification impossible. The character deliberately avoids conforming to societal norms and regulations while leading ordinary life on the surface.

The film portrays an antagonist with Dissocial Personality Disorder, a condition characterized by difficulties in daily functioning. However, the character in the movie successfully navigates both sides of their life despite these challenges. The depiction exaggerates the disorder to an extreme degree, which may not accurately reflect every case of Dissocial Personality Disorder.

Conclusion

The present study has found that most of the portrayal of disorders have exaggerated depiction in Tamil Film and might create a false image for the public leading to bad attitude towards a client to whom they belong. Most of the clinical characteristics of mental illnesses, including etiologies, symptoms, treatment, management, and rehabilitation and recovery have been misrepresented. Hence, the film might be misinformed the general public resulting in false beliefs, which may further contribute to the stigma and social exclusion of such clients. Therefore, the present study presents the need to portray an accurate depiction of psychological disorders in Tamil films to enhance understanding about mental illness and to reduce stereotypes leading to transformative change and to increase the empathy, acceptance and social inclusion.

Limitations

The study merely analyzed the Kollywood films and was centered towards the portrayal of psychological disorders

and symptoms in Tamil cinema rather focusing on the treatment plans of those disorders and symptoms.

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