

# **BACHELOR THESIS**

## Mental illness in entertainment programs:

How may the portrayal of mental illness in TV Series affect adolescent viewer's behaviours and attitudes?

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this thesis is to investigate how the portrayal of mental illness in TV Series may influence the behaviours and attitudes of adolescents. Media effect theories are used to explain how viewers can be influenced by TV Series, specifically taking the impact of individual differences in the viewer and content properties of TV Series into consideration. The potential psychological processes occurring in adolescent viewers are outlined and applied to TV Series which depict characters with mental illness. The TV Series *Skins* will be used as an example throughout. Here, the portrayed protagonists engage in dysfunctional behaviours and attitudes. The analysis of the processes behind media effect demonstrates that the way characters and their behaviours are portrayed plays an important role to estimate the effect on behaviours and attitudes. This research shows how overly dramatic and sensational portrayals of characters with mental illness might have unintended consequences, such as the imitation and learning of dysfunctional behaviours and attitudes by adolescents. Finally, possible guidelines for the portrayal of mental illness in TV Series targeted at adolescents are discussed.

Keywords: media effect, imitation, observational learning, narrative persuasion, identification



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## 1. Introduction

There is substantial theoretical and empirical evidence that the exposure to television can influence viewers' behaviour, cognitions and attitudes (e.g. Bandura, 2001; Strasburger, Jordan & Donnerstein, 2010; Hartley, Wight & Hunt, 2014). As adolescence is a crucial period for the development of behavioural, cognitive and attitudinal patterns that are important for well-being and mental health (WHO, 2019), it is vital to prevent exposure to television programs from influencing adolescents' development negatively. Whereas the aim of educators and psychologists is to positively influence the developmental process of children and adolescents (WHO, 2019), the aim of the majority of entertainment formats in television is to promote enjoyment in the viewer (Morris, 2006). Importantly, the content of formats aimed to be entertaining still conveys information to the audience and therefore has the potential to shape them in various ways. The thesis focuses on media effects on the individual level, called micro-level-effects. Micro-level-effects can be defined as “the deliberate and non-deliberate short and long-term within-person changes in cognitions (including beliefs), emotions, attitudes, and behavior that result from media use” (Valkenburg, Peter & Walther, 2016, p.50). As adolescents are still in the process of development, they are theorized to be especially vulnerable to be influenced by media content (Strasburger et al., 2010).

Although it is established that television has the potential to influence adolescent viewers both positively and negatively, the specific processes and factors that explain the impact are still unclear (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Cohen (2001) emphasized the importance of two different factors that are thought to shape media effect. On the one hand *individual differences* in the viewer and on the other hand *content properties* of the story. Individual differences are mainly associated with dispositions in the viewer. Content properties describe narrative decisions such as topics raised, types of characters included or the kind of events that are depicted (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Psychological research on media effect often pays more attention to the relation between individual differences and media effect (Valkenburg et al., 2016). The analysis of content properties usually is more common in media and film studies, as they determine the audience's attention and interest in the narrative (Green, Brock & Kaufman, 2004). Nevertheless, it is important to consider the influence of both factors on media effect. Only a few psychological theories on media effect do take the influence of content properties into consideration (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Two relevant theories that do this will be discussed further and used in the analysis of the thesis.



An interdisciplinary approach that combines theories from different fields seems vital to investigate how the portrayal of mental illness affects viewers. One of the main processes that bridges the approaches of psychology, media and communication studies is the process of identification with media characters. Identification in narratives is described as the process of taking over the perspective of a fictional character (Cohen, 2001). It is identified as an important process in media and film studies because it is suggested to increase the audience's involvement in the story (Green, Brock & Kaufman, 2006). Besides that, identification is theorized to enhance media effect, such as attitudinal or behavioural change in the viewer (Liebes & Katz, 1990; Wilson, 1993). For that reason, the process of identification is also seen as an important process for social learning and persuasive communication. As identification increases media effect, it is important to investigate if identification with characters who engage in dysfunctional behaviours may negatively affect viewers. Due to the importance of identification in media effect research, here it will be analysed in depth and put in relation with individual differences and content properties.

This thesis theoretically investigates how the portrayal of mental illness in TV Series may affect adolescent viewers. By outlining psychological processes in relation to individual differences and content properties, mechanisms behind media effects will be clarified. A deeper understanding of these mechanisms is a necessary first step, in order to estimate possible risks that portrayals of mental illness may impose on adolescent viewers. Ultimately, the mechanisms behind media effect need to be better understood in order to inform media producers and policymakers about appropriate interventions and guidelines on the portrayal of mental illness in TV Series with adolescents as the target group.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Portrayal of mental illness in teen drama**

Fictional film is one of the most favoured forms of entertainment (Nabi, Biely, Morgan & Stitt, 2003). Since online streaming platforms such as 'Netflix' or 'Amazon Prime' have come into existence, television watching has decreased and the watching of web-series has increased (Tóth-Király, Bóthe, Tóth-Fáber, Hága & Orosz, 2017). Whereas "television watching" is mainly referred to the medium or device through which the content is consumed, the focus of "series watching" is the activity itself. The storylines of TV and online series usually revolve around the



same characters and are split into episodes, which add up to seasons that can span across years. Different from other media formats, the viewer is exposed to the same fictional world and characters over several episodes or even seasons.

Previously, TV series could only be watched in front of the TV during a certain time and at certain days. It is estimated that children and adolescents on average watch 2-3 hours of television (including web-series) per day (Cooper & Gosnell, 2018). The easy and unlimited access to TV series through streaming platforms enable viewers to watch several episodes in a row. A commonly used term among adolescents is binge watching, which is defined as the rapid watching of multiple episodes of one TV show in a row. Online platforms promote binge-watching through suggesting viewers immediately go to the next episode after finishing one (Schweidel & Moe, 2016). A survey conducted by Harris Interactive and Netflix found that 25% of viewers of a 13-episode serialized drama finished the season within two days and 50% within one week (Netflix, 2013). The developments in television enable adolescents to expose themselves to fictional worlds over longer time spans and increase repeated observation of certain characters. It is important to reexamine how such changes in media properties impact the effect television might have on viewers.

A content property which might further influence the media effect is the genre. TV series categorized in the genre *Drama* are told in a rather serious tone and focus on plots that encourage emotional reactions in the audience. Although dramas are generally portraying realistic characters and life situations, the plots are typically sensational and told in a dramatic and emotionally engaging manner (Moseley, 2015). This is because emotional involvement with narratives and characters has shown to increase media enjoyment and cause a better evaluation of fictional programmes (Brock & Livingston, 2004; Green et al., 2004). Emotional involvement includes both negative and positive emotions, which explains why viewers selectively expose themselves to dramatic or sad stories (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015).

A sub-genre of drama-series is teen-drama. As this thesis specifically focuses on adolescent audience groups, the main focus will be on the portrayal of mental illness in *teen-dramas*. Teen-dramas are drama TV Series that are specifically targeted at adolescents (Moseley, 2015). Teen-dramas are characterised by a major focus on the lives and relationships of characters that are in the same age group as their audience. Since the emergence of teen-drama in the 90's, several shows have acquired cult status among adolescents and young adults (Moseley, 2015). Storylines usually include key issues in adolescent life such as



exploration of identity and sexuality, peer pressure and popularity or parental abandonment (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015).

Additionally, a number of teen-dramas have started to include the theme of mental health issues in their plots. Popular teen dramas like *Skins* (2007-2013) or the recently released HBO TV Series *Euphoria* (2019) have focused on topics such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, substance abuse and addiction (Levine, 2019). The inclusion of mental disorders in television in the past has been criticised for portraying characters with mental illness as 'hostile' or 'dangerous'. Although such sensational portrayals increased emotional engagement, they have been hypothesized to shape and maintain negative stereotypes in society. Through representing characters suffering from mental illness free from such negative stereotypes in modern TV series such as *Skins* and *Euphoria*, it is intended to decrease discrimination (Morris, 2006). Reducing the portrayal, however, of negative stereotypes does not automatically imply a more realistic representation of mental illness. On the contrary, the representation of mental illness in fictional drama is often based on inaccuracies, exaggerations and misinformation (Morris, 2006; Fawcett, 2015).

Teen-dramas aim to be emotionally engaging (Moseley, 2015), and thus, the focus is often on the dramatic unhappiness of the character rather than on realistic conditions or opportunities for effective treatment (Costello, 2020). Instead of portraying characters with mental health issues in a self-nurturing way, promoting mental health, they are more likely to be portrayed in a self-destructive way (Costello, 2020). Actively seeking out mental health support is often depicted as unsuccessful or only occurs towards the end of the narrative (Costello, 2020). Moreover, the engagement of characters in physical exercise and its benefits for mental health is rarely depicted (Strange, 2007) and adult authority figures like educators, parents or therapists are frequently portrayed as ineffectual figures. Throughout this thesis, the TV series *Skins*, written and directed by Jamie Brittain, will be used as an example of the portrayal described above. *Skins* revolves around the life of a group of teenagers in Bristol, including three characters which struggle with mental health issues. Two of the main characters show extremely self-destructive behaviours, which can be seen as counterproductive to their well-being and mental health.

The female protagonist *Effy* is suffering from depression. Her life mainly revolves around a hedonistic lifestyle, which focuses on short term pleasure through consuming drugs and partying. Instead of expressing her emotions to others, she socially isolates herself from friends and family when feeling depressed. In order to cope with her negative emotions, Effy distracts



herself through excessive drug consumption. Effy often appears fatigued, bored and discontent. These factors are early symptoms of depression, which later in the series descends into a psychotic depression. Another female protagonist named *Cassie* suffers from anorexia nervosa, an eating disorder characterized by weight loss, food restriction and fear of gaining weight (Davey, 2014). Although she is in therapy, she regularly lies to her parents in therapy about improvements in her eating behaviours. Besides that, she is consuming drugs in an abusive way. The portrayal of both characters and their behaviours will be used as an example to investigate how the portrayal of mental illness in TV series like *Skins* affects adolescent viewers.

As the entertainment industry is competitive and commercialized, producers have an interest in creating content which leads to high popularity and positive evaluations (Morris, 2006). Storylines that include characters with mental illness are likely to be added for their dramatic appeal rather than educational purposes (Fawcett, 2015). Studies show that adolescent viewers are specifically attracted to narratives that present irreverent, taboo breaking and risky behaviours than other age groups (Valkenberg & Peter, 2013). The depiction of adolescents' risky behaviours such as drug use and violence like in *Skins* is therefore likely to receive a lot of attention and popularity among adolescents. However, especially for sensitive topics such as mental health, the impact of over dramatizing and an entertaining portrayal of mental illness may have on viewers needs to be considered.

Several online articles raised the question how such dramatic portrayal of mental illness affects adolescent viewers (e.g. Gilbert, 2019; Travers, 2019; Costello, 2020). One argument is that the inclusion of mental illness in entertainment programs can affect viewers positively. For example, viewers with similar issues may feel less alone with their problems. Additionally, it might inform viewers without mental health issues about the topic and raise awareness. The counter argument is that the overly dramatic and sensational portrayal merely provokes attention and raises emotional engagement, but does not help or inform responsibly (e.g. Costello, 2020). On the contrary, it might affect viewers negatively. Through portraying characters that do not manage mental health symptoms efficiently, teen-dramas might perpetuate the image of 'giving up' and fatalistic thinking. Although discussed in online articles, academic research on the media effect of such portrayal of mental illness in TV Series is limited.



## 2.2. Adolescents as consumers

Adolescents face a variety of challenging developmental tasks during puberty. Multiple physiological changes, the exploration of identity, the learning of social rules or achieving independence from the family contribute to increased stress experienced in adolescents (Haggerty, Sherrod, Garmezy, Rutter & Branden-Muller, 1996). The developmental period of adolescence is associated with a significant increase in rates of psychological problems such as depression and eating disorders (Graber & Sontag, 2009). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), depression is a leading illness among adolescents and suicide is the third leading cause of death in the age 15-19-year-old (WHO, 2019). Half of all mental health conditions start around the age of 14, although it is estimated that 10–20% of adolescents globally remain underdiagnosed and undertreated (WHO, 2019). Both external factors (e.g. experienced violence or abuse) and internal factors (e.g. development of negative behavioural and cognitive patterns) can increase adolescents' vulnerability to mental health problems (WHO, 2019). Besides preventing stressful events or circumstances that cause mental health problems from happening, promotion of functional coping strategies in cases of experienced stress and negative emotions are important as well (Meijer, Sinnema, Bijstra, Mellenbergh & Wolters, 2002).

Coping strategies are cognitive, social and behavioural skills used to deal with situations of ambiguity, stress or unpredictability (Bandura, 1981). Functional coping implies behavioural and cognitive activities that attempt to work on the problem whilst simultaneously maintaining a sense of well-being. Behaviours such as exercising, seeking advice or support and staying socially connected combined with positive thinking count as functional coping (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991). Dysfunctional coping is considered as less productive in resolving the problem. Cognitive strategies such as wishful thinking, worrying, self-blame or risk-taking behaviours like substance abuse or perpetration of violence only reduce stress for a short period of time (Holahan & Moos, 1991) and are empirically associated with an inability to cope with a problem (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991). Risk-taking behaviours are related to mental health in two different ways. On the one hand, they can be used as a strategy to cope with already existing poor mental health. On the other hand, the performance risk-taking behaviours can also negatively affect the mental and physical health of adolescents without previous mental health problems (WHO, 2019). Problem-focused coping strategies are generally associated with higher



well-being than passive coping strategies. Studies have shown that higher avoidance in adolescents is strongly connected to more depressive symptoms, whereas less avoidant coping strategies are related to fewer symptoms of anxiety, depression and aggression problems (Meijer et al. 2002). Due to the performance of risk-taking behaviours and dysfunctional coping mechanisms often starting during adolescence, the promotion of healthy behavioural and cognitive patterns throughout this period is essential.

Mental health promotion is supposed to enhance positive mental health through strengthening and maintaining adolescents' capacity to regulate emotions and introduce healthy alternatives to risk taking behaviour. Supportive and preventive interventions do not only get promoted by health and social care or schools, but also through the media (WHO, 2019). In light of the high TV series consumption by adolescents, psychologists are concerned that behaviours, attitudes and characteristics modeled in TV Series might influence characteristics and behaviours of the viewer in undesirable ways (e.g. Bartholow, Bushman & Sestir, 2006; Sestir & Green, 2010). Especially in a sensitive topic such as mental health and a sensitive target group of adolescents, it is important to carefully examine how mental health is promoted and what possible media effects it may have on the viewer. Representation of avoidant, passive or dysfunctional coping mechanisms and risky-behaviours might be counterproductive to the aims of mental health promotion. Promoting dysfunctional coping mechanisms might increase risk factors for the well-being of adolescents, as well as their mental and physical health in adulthood (WHO, 2019). As mentioned in the previous section, an example of the portrayal of negative coping mechanisms in characters is *Skins*. According to the WHO (2019), the behaviours of Effy and Cassie could be identified as dysfunctional coping with internal (e.g. mental health issues, identity development) and external stressors (e.g. autonomy from parents, peer pressure) faced during adolescence.

Research shows that media can have an effect on nearly every public health concern about adolescents (Hartley et al., 2014). While empirical research indicates that public health concerns such as eating disorders, aggressive behaviour, illegal drug use, alcohol consumption, obesity (Strasburger, Jordan & Donnerstein, 2010) and suicidal ideation (Da Rosa, Caye, Andrades, De Oliveira & Pilz, 2018) can be influenced by media images, meta analyses of empirical research show rather small effect sizes (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Nevertheless, theoretical research suggests that these small effect sizes of empirical research on media effect can not disprove its influence, as empirical measurements are limited to a certain number of variables and thus might exclude important mediating variables. The inclusion of mediating



variables in research models is argued to be important for an accurate estimation of research findings (Holbert & Stephenson, 2003). Based on this argument, the role of individual differences and content properties on the media effect following exposure to dramatic portrayal of mental illness will be investigated here.

### **3. Theoretical Analysis**

#### **3.1. Theories of media effects**

In order to understand how watching a TV Series can change behaviours and attitudes in adolescents, the next two sections will introduce two relevant theories in research on media effect. Both of the following theories are especially important for the analysis, as they include how specific content properties impact media effect.

##### **3.1.1. Social cognitive learning theory**

Albert Bandura's concept of observational learning is an important theory in the discussion on media effect. The general idea of Social cognitive learning theory is that individuals do not only learn through direct experiences, but also learn through the observation of models (Bandura, 2001). Whereas children mainly rely on their parents as models for observational learning, the observation of peers and media characters outside the family becomes more and more important during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Models, both in real life and television, are theorized to transmit new styles of behaviour, attitudes and cognitive skills to the viewer (Bandura, 2001). A component that influences observational learning is the frequency of exposure. Repetitive observation of behaviours can increase the likelihood of imitation (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961). Studies conducted on the imitation of aggressive behaviour, for example, found that repeated exposure to violence in the media increased acceptance and performance of aggressive behaviour (Strasburger et al., 2010). Whereas the observation of a protagonist in a movie may be reduced to short term effects, repetitive observation of a protagonist in a TV Series may have a longer lasting impact on the audience. Through depicting the same characters and their behavioural patterns over several episodes, TV series may increase observational learning from characters.



Unlike classical and operant conditioning, observational learning can occur without reinforcement (the acquisition of behaviour through direct reward or punishment to the performed behaviour). However, Bandura still integrates reinforcement in his model by the process of *vicarious learning*. Vicarious learning is the observation of positive or negative consequences towards the behaviour performed by another person (Perkins, 1968). According to Bandura (1971), viewers memorize and learn the observed reactions and associate them with the behaviour. Reactions that are perceived as positive increase the motivation in the viewer to imitate the observed behaviour or attitude (Bandura, 1971). Therefore, vicarious learning shapes motivation to perform observed behaviours. Perceived positive consequences of behaviours can lead to the recognition of the potential value of behaviours, even if it is inconsistent with previous beliefs (Slater & Rouner, 2002).

Applied to the example of *Skins*, which has been introduced in the 'background' section of the thesis, the audience member does not only observe the behaviours performed by the characters, but also the consequences of these behaviours. The previously introduced character Effy enjoys high popularity among her peers and friends. The attention and support she is receiving from others may be perceived as a positive consequence to her self-destructive behaviour shaped by her nihilist worldview. Frequently portrayed behaviour such as self isolation or drug-abuse might be ascribed potential value through attributing it to receiving attention or gaining popularity. Peer popularity and peer pressure have strong influences on adolescents (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015), resulting in the portrayal of positive reactions by others potentially having a strong impact on the evaluation of the observed behaviours.

Research has shown that adolescents rely the strongest on information received through fictional programmes if they do not have other social sources to compare the received information with. Thus, topics which are not raised in school or by parents are more likely to influence their understanding and perception of them (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015). This can be illustrated by the qualitative study of Kokesh and Sternadory (2015), that found that adolescents' perception of sexual identity and drug consumption were more shaped by fictional contents than the perception of friendships. They explained that participants might have had more information out of their real environment on friendship and thus, were less shaped by the portrayal of it in fictional content. In line with that, it is hypothesized that adults are generally more critical media consumers, because they have a greater repertoire of experiences and knowledge to compare new information with. Such repertoire of information allows them to distinguish fantasy and reality from each other (Harrison, 2000).



Children and adolescents are likely to be more influenceable by media contents, as inferences and constructs are still less established and continuously adapted to novel information (Morris, 2006). A smaller repertoire of experiences and knowledge to compare the content with increases the likelihood to believe the content to be realistic. Kokesh and Sternadori (2015) showed that adolescents evaluated the storylines and developments of characters in teen-dramas as realistic. Participants even indicated that they sometimes used social situations displayed in fiction as a guide for their own life (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015). A theory that can explain this phenomena and that is related to SCT is cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorelli, 2002). This theory states that media consumers internalize the messages transferred through the media and apply them in their real environment. Although different types of media are included in the theory, the influence of television is specifically emphasized because of its centrality in most Western cultures (Gerbner et al., 2002). According to cultivation theory, exposure to media contents changes the perceptions and beliefs of viewers about the real world.

### **3.1.2. Extended Elaboration Likelihood model**

The Extended-elaboration likelihood model applies the traditional Elaboration likelihood model in the specific context of narratives. Whereas persuasive narratives can generally be in different forms (e.g. text, visual, auditory), the focus of this thesis is on audio-visual narratives in the form of TV Series (the terms narrative and TV Series will be used interchangeably). The Elaboration likelihood model is a theory of persuasion that distinguishes two different routes of processing leading to attitude change. The *central route* includes critical message elaboration and cognitive involvement. The thoughtful consideration of the content is theorized to lead to a more resistant attitude change that is longer lasting and more likely to predict future behaviours (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984). If information is processed via the *peripheral route*, the recipient does not engage in critical elaboration of the message and evaluates the received messages based on cues such as attractiveness of the source of information or production quality of the message. Logic or quality of the information is not considered. Attitude change is theorized to be shorter lasting and less resistant to change (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984).

According to Slater and Rouner (2002), processing of information received from narratives needs to be distinguished from other forms of communication such as documentary, film or the news. Slater & Rouner (2002) argue the main difference is that narratives lead to



stronger affective involvement in the recipient. The Extended-elaboration likelihood model theorizes that affective involvement in narratives decreases the distance to the content that is required to critically elaborate received information, however (like cognitive involvement) it leads to a more resistant and enduring attitude change (Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013). Therefore, the peripheral and central routes of processing are no longer clearly separated in narratives.

One of the main components that causes affective involvement in narratives is the *identification* with characters (Moyer-Gosé, 2008). Cohen (2001) defined identification as the imaginative state in which a viewer vicariously experiences the narrative from the perspective of a character (Cohen, 2001). During the process of identification, the viewer takes over attitudes, goals and motivations of the character. Identification thus leads to cognitive, motivational and affective involvement of the viewer in the storyline (Green & Brock, 2000). Identification is not the only way a viewer can interact with characters (Cohen, 2001). Oatley (1999) classifies audience members into 'spectators' and 'identifiers'. Different to that of identification, spectatorship is a more distanced mode of reception where the audience interacts or responds to the characters while remaining their own perspective, whilst being aware of their own role as audience member (Cohen, 2001). The vicarious experience from within the identity of the character during identification leads to a more receptive and less analytical way of processing information (Rouner & Slater, 2002). According to the Extended-elaboration likelihood model, the persuasiveness of narratives can be enhanced by identification with characters (Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

### **3.2. Individual differences**

Exposure to the media affects individuals differently. Theories on media effect suggest that the differing effect can be attributed to dispositions (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Dispositions can range from the psychological or social position of the audience to personality traits or existing attitudes and beliefs (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Studies on the representation of aggression in television suggested that a tendency towards aggression (trait aggressiveness) is positively related to imitation (Strasburger et al., 2010). Similarly, research on the representation of suicide in TV Series showed that individuals with previous depressive or suicidal thoughts were more likely to show suicidal ideation after exposure (Zimmerman et al., 2018; Da Rosa et al., 2019). A popular teen-drama that received a lot of attention since its



release in 2017 is *13 Reasons Why* (Incaprera, 2017). The storyline revolves around the suicide of an adolescent girl. The series was criticized by psychologists for approaching the theme of suicide specifically for an audience of adolescents (Arendt et al., 2017), even though significant associations between fictional suicide reports and an increase in suicide attempts among adolescents have been established (Gould, Jamieson & Romer, 2003). Several studies have investigated how “13 Reasons Why” increased suicidal attempts or ideation among adolescents. A major finding is that adolescents with previous symptoms of depression or suicidality showed an increase in suicidal ideation after exposure to the show,, however, viewers without previous symptoms did not (e.g. Zimmerman et al., 2018).

A possible interpretation of these findings is that modeling of risky-behaviours is more likely to affect viewers with a previous tendency to such behaviours. These individuals are commonly described as more vulnerable to the content (Da Rosa et al., 2019). The idea of differing vulnerability in viewers can be also applied in the context of the portrayal of dysfunctional coping mechanisms and behaviours. The line of argumentation can be illustrated with the *Skins* character Cassie, who suffers from an eating disorder. Several scenes show how Cassie behaves in order to avoid eating. A viewer with a previous interest in losing weight or negative body image might be more vulnerable to imitate her behaviour. The focus on specific outcomes such as ‘suicidal ideation’ is driven by the main interest in prevention of direct behavioural responses in form of imitation. However, the viewers can be affected in other ways, which need to be considered as well.

### **3.2.1. Effect on ‘vulnerable’ individuals**

Individuals from various backgrounds might be vulnerable to the same media content, but affected in different ways (Da Rosa et al., 2019). To estimate effect size of media correctly, it is important to distinguish between the different types of media effect (Holbert & Stephenson, 2003). Based on the definition of media effect described in the introduction, media effect implies both behavioural and attitudinal, as well as short and long term effects on the viewer. Empirical research on media effect of, for example, media aggression or portrayal of suicide often focuses on measurable short-term effects on viewers. However, they do not include subtle or progressive changes in the viewer (Valkenburg et al., 2016). It is important to consider how individual differences influence the different types of media effects.



Berkowitz (1984) explains the behavioural short-term reactions to media contents with the concept of cognitive priming. According to the theory, the exposure to television images can activate related behavioural and cognitive schema in the viewer and make these salient. The exposure to media violence, for example, activates aggressive thoughts in a viewer, which can further activate related feelings and motor tendencies that are stored in the memory of the viewer. According to the theory, the activation and salience of these schemas can further influence behavioural intentions. Thus, action tendencies of the viewer are primed by the observed television images (Bushman & Green, 1990). The observation of aggression in television can become a trigger for already existing aggressive motor tendencies and therefore increase the likelihood to behave aggressive after exposure (Strasburger, Wilson & Jordan, 2009). As the images activate less schemas in individuals without tendencies toward aggressive thoughts and behaviours, exposure is less triggering and less likely to directly imitate the behavioural intentions. Individuals with tendencies towards the observed behaviour are hence more vulnerable to behavioural imitation. However, Bandura (2001) theorizes that media exposure can still affect attitudes and beliefs in the viewer.

### **3.2.2. Effect on 'non-vulnerable' individuals**

Adolescents still develop their behavioural, attitudinal and cognitive tendencies. According to Bandura's Social cognitive learning theory, which has been introduced in the first part of the analysis, adolescents can learn new behaviours, beliefs and attitudes through the mere observation of others. Bandura states that a viewer can store observed actions in their memory, which have never been performed before (Bandura, 2001). Research suggests that the observation of unfamiliar behaviour might first influence attitudes and beliefs in the viewer (Slater & Rouner, 2002; Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Attitudinal changes often precede effects on behavioural intention and *self-efficacy* (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Self-efficacy is the confidence in one's own capability to perform observed behaviours (Bandura, 2001). This also applies for behaviours which used to be feared. The vicarious experience of feared behaviours through identification can change the perception of such behaviours as less harming or risky. Especially if a behaviour is perceived as normative, potential negative consequences can be discounted on this basis (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). The attitudinal change can increase the likelihood that the viewer performs such behaviours in the future (Anderson et al., 2003). Furthermore, research



on alcohol and marijuana consumption has shown that implicit expectancies predict the use of such substances (Stacy, 1997). As adolescents are in the learning process of normative behaviours and values, frequent exposure to dysfunctional or risky behaviours in the media can increase the likelihood that observers will normalize such behaviours (Krahé, 2012).

Progressive changes in attitudes are difficult to assess in empirical research that measures short-term outcomes of media exposure, because the effects are indirect. Indirect effects occur when the influence of the independent variable (media exposure) on one variable (media effect) occurs via the influence on one or more mediating variables (Valkenburg et al., 2016). If changes in attitude are the mediating variable of behaviour, these changes will not be noticed in a study that measures behavioural imitation. Next to that, different media effect theories have established that the conditions which determine media effect are transactional (Bandura, 2001; Slater, 2007). Transactionality implies that the relation of individual differences and media effect is bi-directional. Dispositions in the audience member influence how media affects the individual, however following changes (e.g. changed attitudes or beliefs) within the viewer influence how media exposure will affect the viewer in the future (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Although viewers might not show short-term changes in behaviour, change in attitudes can precede in behavioural changes in the long-term context. Research on the behavioural influence of health messages in the media, for example, showed that attitudes and beliefs are important mediators for behaviour (Holbert & Stephenson 2003).

Overall , the content of TV Series can influence adolescent viewers in two different ways. On the one hand, observation of characters and their behaviours can reinforce pre-existing attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. On the other hand, viewers can pick up new attitudes, behaviours and create new inferences.

### **3.3. Content properties**

A factor that received less attention in psychological research on media effect are content properties. Content properties such as variants in fictional characters, their behaviours and social environments are often not taken into consideration in media effects research (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the Extended-elaboration likelihood model emphasises



how content properties shape media effect via the process of identification. As discussed in the first section of the analysis, identification is defined by the process in which a viewer temporarily takes over the perspective of an observed character - including their attitudes, goals and motivations (Cohen, 2001).

### 3.3.1. Identification

Different studies have proven that *identification intensity*, which is the degree to which one identifies with a character (Wilson, 1993), increases attitudinal and behavioural persuasiveness of media images (e.g. Liebes & Katz, 1990; Wilson, 1993). A study by Harrison (1997) investigated the relation of the process of identification with a thin media character and disordered eating symptoms after exposure. The results showed that a higher degree of identification with a character facilitated modeling of the thin models. Several studies showed that stronger identification with aggressive characters increased the imitation of aggressive behaviours by children (e.g. Huesmann, 1984). Furthermore, it has been proven that identification with a smoking character can increase smoking initiation (Titus-Ernstoff, Dalton, Adachi-Mejia, Longacre & Beach, 2008). Additionally, communication studies that focus on the effect of health messages showed that identification with celebrities that convey health messages leads to increased adoption of these (e.g. Basil, 1996). The use of media characters as models for behaviour, attitudes or beliefs may be problematic, if the portrayed characters are likely to influence the viewers negatively through e.g. enhancing behaviours or thinking patterns that might worsen mental health.

To come back to the example of *Skins*, the portrayed beliefs and worldviews of the characters Effy and Cassie promote existential nihilism, which is the belief that life is without objective meaning or purpose (Moseley, 2015). Such attitudes seem to be related to their risky behaviours and the strong focus on hedonic short term goals. These behaviours appear to function as a coping mechanism with their mental health issues. The portrayed mechanisms, however, can be assumed to be counterproductive for their well-being (WHO, 2019). Strong identification with such characters might be problematic, as it could cause viewers to internalize the attitudinal and motivational processes of the characters (Cohen, 2001).

Although the hypothesis that identification increases the association between media exposure and media effect has been established, the variables that enhance or constrain



identification with a character have not been fully understood yet (Cohen, Weimann-Saks & Mazor-Tregerman, 2018). The complex conceptualisation of identification is likely to be caused by the interdependency of influencing factors such as individual differences in the viewer and media properties. To clarify identification processes, the relation of identification and content properties will be elaborated in the following section. First, the processes in which audience members identify with characters and how these processes are facilitated through television will be discussed. Secondly, consequences of these identification processes will be explained. The TV Series *Skins* will be used here as the example. The basic assumption on which the process of identification is based on is the ability the viewer has to connect with the character (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Liebes and Katz (1990) identified two processes that promote identification:

1. Similarity (being like a character)
2. Affinity (liking a character)

The previous interchangeable use of concepts such as identification, similarity, liking and modeling have led to confusion in theories of narrative persuasion (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). According to Moyer-Gusé (2008), all these factors are interrelated and likely to increase identification intensity. Whereas Affinity for a character alone does not automatically lead to identification in the viewer, a combination of perceived affinity and similarity leads to strong identification with a character (Cohen, 2001). Although these processes can occur independently, it is important to consider how they influence each other.

### **3.3.2. Similarity (being like a character)**

Similarity is defined as the cognitive assessment of the perceived degree to which a viewer perceives him or herself as similar to the character. Although similarity itself is a distinct concept from identification, it is considered to strongly relate to identification (Cohen, 2001). Diverse theories suggest that similarity increases identification intensity (Cohen et al., 2018). This relation is probably caused by the fact that similarities facilitate the process of taking over the perspective of the character, which is required for identification (Cohen, 2001). Nevertheless, not all perceived traits and characteristics have to be similar to increase



identification. Indeed, recent research by Cohen and colleagues (2018) suggests that the perception of similarity is rather malleable and not dependent on demographic similarities. According to them, perception of similarity can range from common features of appearance, traits, values or beliefs to recognition of similar experiences.

Furthermore, they found that age is the only demographic similarity that increases identification significantly. These findings are explained by the fact that characters in the same age group are likely to have similar beliefs, traits or at least experiences (Cohen et al., 2018). As teen dramas mainly revolve around issues that are associated with the age of their target group (Moseley, 2015), it is likely that the adolescent viewer perceives similarities to the characters. Besides similarity to the character, also a general perception of similarity of the represented and real world intensifies the process of identification (Cohen et al., 2018). Therefore, the focus on realistic storylines in the genre drama facilitate higher identification processes. On the contrary, media content which differs strongly from real life experiences are likely to receive less attention and lower sense of identification (Valkenburg et al., 2016). As mentioned in the section on teen-drama in the first part of the thesis, realism implies that the storyline 'feels' real, rather than actually representing reality.

To come back to the example of *Skins*, the characters portrayed experience daily-life struggles that most adolescents experience in reality. Examples are misunderstandings with the parents, social pressure or the search for belonging and identity (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015). Besides that, there is a general emphasis on the need for independence and rebellion in adolescents. Furthermore, adult authority figures like parents, teachers or psychologists are represented as non-understanding (Moseley, 2015). Such perceptions of the world are most likely in line with those of the adolescent viewers and therefore increase the perception of similarity. Although each character has their own narrative with individual problems such as mental health issues, it is likely that viewers with diverse backgrounds will find similarities with the characters. Effy, for example, suffers from depression. Whereas her way of coping and behaving with her issues signifies her problematic mental health status, problems such as misunderstandings with parents or exploration of sexual identity are similar to the problems that are generally associated with adolescence (Haggerty, Garmezy, Sherrod & Rutter, 1996). Similarly, Cassie has difficulties with her family and peers and often feels misunderstood. Viewers that experience similar issues may perceive high similarity to her besides not having symptoms of an eating disorder like her. Besides that, viewers might perceive personality traits or physical appearance of a character as similar.



### 3.3.3. Affinity (liking a character)

Whether one perceives the character as similar is further influenced by character affinity. *Affinity* is defined as the positive evaluation or general liking of a character (Cohen, 2001). If a viewer perceives a character as sympathetic, observed similarities in the viewer become more salient. If a character is not liked by the viewer, the perceived differences become more salient in the viewer (Cohen et al., 2018). Theories on the psychological response to characters suggest that character affinity causes stronger emotional responses and empathy to the observed experiences and events, which in turn is associated with a higher degree of identification (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Next to similarity, another factor that has an impact on affinity is perceived physical attractiveness of the character. Theories in personality psychology suggest that the perception of physical attractiveness can increase how socially desirable or favorable traits of the character are perceived (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). This phenomenon is called the *halo effect*. It describes the tendency of humans to evaluate observed characteristics or attitudes of a person as more favorable, if this person left a positive impression in general. According to the halo effect, the fact that protagonists in TV Series tend to be played by thin and attractive actors (Strange, 2007) can influence the felt affinity with these characters. Whereas physical attractiveness is a common example for the halo effect, the theory generally describes the tendency that a positive impression of a person positively influences the opinion or feeling in other areas (Moore & Perrett, 2011).

Extending the halo effect to the perception of behaviours of another person, affinity with a character might lead to the positive evaluation of their behaviours. Research on the portrayal of suicide in dramas has suggested that felt affinity with characters who commit suicide could cause viewers to perceive the portrayed suicide as a heroic or romantic act (Fekete & Schmidtke, 1995). Studies on media violence showed that one of the most problematic portrayals of violence in television is the depiction of attractive perpetrators (Wilson, Smith & Potter, 2002). A possible explanation is that dysfunctional behaviours and coping mechanisms performed by admired characters might be perceived as favorable.

Referring back to the example of *Skins*, the protagonist Effy is portrayed as attractive, intelligent, mysterious and popular among her peers. The character Cassie is portrayed as



dreamy, artistic and unique. Rankings of the likability of the characters in *Skins* suggest that both characters are among the most liked characters of skins viewers (Foreman, 2017). On internet platforms such as *tumblr*, both Effy and Cassie have developed into iconic figures that are often quoted and referred to in an admiring way (e.g. [everything-effy-stonem.tumblr.com](http://everything-effy-stonem.tumblr.com); <https://oh-lovely-cassie.tumblr.com/>). Idealization of a character might cause a biased perception of their behaviours and attitudes. Psychology of persuasion suggests that both perceived similarity and affinity increase the persuasiveness of a message (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984).

This is supported by both the Extended-elaboration likelihood model and the Social cognitive learning theory. The Extended-elaboration likelihood model states that the affective and cognitive involvement with the character who transfers a message enhances the persuasiveness of the content. Features associated with affinity, such as perceived attractiveness, similarity and sympathy, increase affective involvement (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Additionally, the Social cognitive learning theory specifies that viewers' use of others as models is increased by felt affinity and similarity towards the model (Bandura, 2001). As already mentioned, there is substantial empirical evidence that the process of identification increases media effect (e.g. Liebes & Katz, 1990; Wilson, 1993). Therefore, it can be argued that felt affinity and similarity increase the likelihood that viewers are influenced by the behaviours, cognitions and attitudes of characters. This might be problematic, if the behaviours and attitudes of the liked character are risky, unhealthy or dangerous and therefore, could negatively influence the development of adolescent viewers.

### **3.3.4. Wishful identification**

A construct that can arise out of the relation between affinity and observational learning is called *wishful identification*. Wishful identification occurs when an audience member does not only look up to a character, but also develops the desire to be like a character (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Occurrence of such processes is more likely to occur in adolescents, as they are in the process of identity formation and peers, celebrities, parents or fictional characters are used to understand and construct their own identity (Harrison, 1997). The vicarious experience through identification with media characters allows adolescents to try out alternative identities. In *Skins*, identification with Effy, Cassie or Cook might cause the viewer to develop the desire to be more



like them. In order to do so, they might aim to incorporate observed traits, characteristics or behaviours into their own identity. Moyer-Gusé (2008) theorized that wishful identification can cause the adolescent to actively engage in activities that make him or her more like the character, for example, through imitating the observed behavioural and attitudinal patterns of the character. Research by Kokesh and Sternadory (2015) suggested that adolescents sometimes even purposefully try to take over traits and behaviours observed in fictional characters. They aim to integrate them into their identity and thus actively shape their identity construction (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015).

Whereas character affinity increases the likelihood of wishful identification, the relation between similarity and wishful identification is more complex. As described in the section on similarity, the perception of such is subjective and malleable and thus, not dependent on actual similarity between the viewer and the character. Although a viewer does not have a lot of similarities to the character during and before exposure, character affinity might motivate the viewer to become more similar to the character in the future. Besides that, it needs to be taken into consideration that the perception of similarity by the viewer is measured after media exposure and therefore, after the process of identification with the character. Recent research suggests that this might be problematic because the relation of perceived similarity and identification might be bi-directional (Sestir & Green, 2010). The process of identification during exposure itself might lead to the activation of observed character traits in their own self-concept. Indeed, a study conducted by Sestir & Green (2010) showed that identification with a character altered the self-concept of the viewer towards the traits of the character. Therefore, viewers might perceive themselves as more similar to the character after identification with them (Sestir & Green, 2010). While past research focused on how similarity to the character increases identification and media effect (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005) recent studies suggest that the relation of similarity and identification indeed might be more complex (Sestir & Green, 2008; Cohen et al., 2018).

In light of wishful identification, the relation of identification with characters in narratives and the psychological definition of identification becomes apparent. Freud defines identification as the process in which a child begins to associate the self with their parents and thus adopts the characteristics and behaviours observed in them (Hall & Lindzey, 1980). Freud emphasized to distinguish identification from imitation, as identification does not only entail transient copying of behaviour, but further implies a permanent acquisition of characteristics and values of the other in one's own personality (Hall & Lindzey, 1980). Bronfenbrenner's (1960) defines



identification as the motivated attempt to become like another specific person. Based on the elaborated theories, it is possible that the repetitive exposure to powerful and tempting alternative identities in TV Series leads to the internalization of these identities in the viewer, which may have long-term effects on the development of an adolescent viewer. Based on the role that affinity and similarity play, it becomes clear that the occurrence of wishful identification is dependent on the way characters, behaviours and events are portrayed.

### 3.3.5. Framing effects

The last concept that will be looked at is *framing*. In the context of mass communication, framing describes the structure or framework in which media information is placed. The frame allows media to highlight certain events and place them in a particular context (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2014). The information transmitted by the media is therefore placed in a field of meaning. Framing theory further states that the way something is represented influences how audience members process the received information (Scheufele, 1999). Differences in behavioural or attitudinal outcomes that are due to the *how* something is depicted, rather than *what* is depicted, are called *framing effects* (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2014). Although framing is mainly used in studies on the communication of political messages, the concept can also be applied to implicit messages in TV Series (Scheufele, 1999). TV Series cannot only control which facts are included, but can also decide how these are depicted. Therefore, chosen content properties shape the frame in which a topic is presented. The frame in which mental illness is presented might influence the media effects the content will have.

Entertainment media tends to portray behaviours such as aggression, illness or self-harm in a 'glamorized' way (Strasburger et al., 2010). 'Glamorization' of behaviours and their outcomes can be understood as portrayals that represent reality overly positive or less harmful than it realistically is, for example through exclusion of negative consequences of behaviours such as drug abuse or violence (Jadayer, Medlej & Jadayer, 2017). As fictional narratives are not required to be based on facts (Green, Brock & Kaufman, 2004), TV Series are not expected to show realistic consequences of behaviours. Drug abuse, violence or self-harm can be displayed, without putting attention to the effect on mental and physical health of the actors or their family and friends realistically. It has been shown that violent behaviour, which is in a justifiable and morally accepted way, can reduce inhibitions against violent behaviour (Jo & Berkowitz, 1994). Based on the example of media violation, it can be argued that the exclusion



of negative consequences for other dysfunctional behaviours may decrease risk perception as well. This can lead towards a change in the perception of attitudes and behaviours that were originally seen as threatening or uncomfortable before (Sestir & Green, 2010).

Finally, dramatic TV Series often make use of aesthetic images, music or poetic dialogues, which are supposed to beautify the viewing experience (Jadayel et al., 2017). Whereas the artistic decisions might be positively evaluated by cinematographers, the distorted representation of reality might influence how the observed behaviours are evaluated by adolescents. The aesthetic portrayal might not only decrease risk perception, but even lead to positive associations with observed events that are dangerous and unhealthy. Similar to the halo effect, which has been introduced in the section on affinity, the positive impression caused by the aesthetic portrayal might alter the perception of the depicted event itself. Although the glamorized portrayal of events might not intend to do so, it can still influence which meaning adolescent ascribe to such events. Especially considering that an emotionally involved viewer is less likely to elaborate on received information in an analytical and critical manner (Moyer-Gusé, 2008), the framing of media contents is likely to implicitly shape which meaning a viewer ascribes to the observed content.

#### 4. Discussion

The aim of the thesis was to theoretically investigate how the portrayal of mental illness may affect behaviours and attitudes in adolescents. Here, the focus was on popular teen-dramas, such as *Skins*, that portray characters with mental illness as self-destructive and ineffective in dealing with their mental health issues. The analysis showed that individuals with various psychological or social backgrounds might identify with the same fictional characters, if these are portrayed as likable, attractive and perceived as similar. Due to the phase of adolescence being characterised by identity exploration, adolescent viewers imitate observed behaviours and attitudes in order to explore alternative identities. Based on the introduced theories, a problem that becomes apparent is that the interests of the entertainment industry and educators seem to contradict each other.

Producers of popular teen-dramas aim to entertain adolescent viewers. Emotional involvement is suggested to increase enjoyment and evaluation of a TV Series. Dramatic and sensational storylines and identification with a character increase emotional involvement and thus, enjoyment. Besides that, it is in the interest of producers to create characters with whom



adolescents can identify. In fact, most producers of TV Series believe that identification with the characters is the most important aspect of a good program (Gitlin, 1994). As liking a character and perceiving the character as similar promote identification, producers have an interest in creating characters accordingly.

Precisely the tools to increase media enjoyment are also associated with a higher likelihood in the viewer to exhibit story-consistent behavioral and attitudinal intentions and thus increase media effect (Dal Cin, Gibson, Zanna, Shumate & Fong, 2007). The two folded relation of identification with media enjoyment and media effect can become problematic, if the potential influence on adolescent attitudes and behaviours is not thoroughly considered during the creation of television programs. Different from impression management in reality, audience members rely on the portrayal of the characters and their behaviours on screen. If a TV Series is framing dysfunctional and risky behaviours in a glamorized way, it is possible that the exposure to these images shape the perception of these in reality. In this context, it is especially important to consider that individuals can learn from both deliberate and non-deliberate messages. Although the depiction of certain characters or behaviours may not be intended to affect viewers, the exposure can still implicitly affect the viewer.

Educators and psychologists aim to support adolescents in the development of functional and healthy behavioral and attitudinal patterns that support their well-being. Based on the psychological processes which have been explained throughout this thesis, a strong identification with characters who are portrayed as successfully coping with mental health issues and engaging in behaviours that enhance their well-being could indeed positively influence adolescents. If the behaviours of a character are mainly evaluated based on the affinity for the character, the performance of both functional and dysfunctional behaviours can be perceived as socially desirable by the viewer. An example would be the German teen-drama *Druck* (2018). Here, characters that deal with mental health issues successfully cope with their mental illness and experience positive consequences when seeking out for help. Although the characters are still portrayed in a way that increases identification, the adaption of their behaviours and attitudes is unlikely to negatively affect the well-being of viewers. Generally, a more realistic representation of risky and dysfunctional behaviours, including negative consequences, might influence how these will be conceptualised and memorized. Although such behaviours do not have to be completely excluded from storylines, it should be ensured that they are not depicted in a glamorized way, and as such, may lead to a distorted perception of these behaviors in reality.



#### 4.1. Implications for the entertainment industry

Research that investigates how the portrayal of mental illness can influence behaviour and attitudes in adolescents is limited. However, there is substantial empirical evidence that the portrayal of suicide in television influences adolescents perception of it. Due to that, the WHO (2017) introduces guidelines for the portrayal of suicide in media. Instead of sensational depiction, media providers should represent information on suicide accurately and based on facts. It is recommended to include the psychological background of characters, so that a viewer knows how to reach out for further information and treatment of the disorder. Further, narratives which include successful coping mechanisms with mental distress and information on where to seek help prevent adolescent viewers from perceiving suicide as the solution to their problems (WHO, 2017). Similar guidelines could be useful for the portrayal of mental illness in general. Such guidelines could include the avoidance of glamorized portrayal of risky and dysfunctional behaviours or factual information on possible treatments.

Importantly, the psychological processes that occur within the viewer need to be taken into consideration when trying to implement an educational message. A commonly used method to transfer a moral message is the inclusion of *transitional characters*. These display unfavourable behaviours throughout the narrative, however model a change in attitude or behaviour at the end of the story (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Nevertheless, behaviours shown before the transition may still affect the viewer. As repetitive observation increases imitation, the behaviour that is shown throughout the TV Series may have a stronger impact on the viewer. Next to that, the behaviours observed before the transition might be stronger associated with the liked character. The process of wishful identification (which has been explained in the analysis) could cause adolescents to imitate aversive behaviours that were intended to be shocking, in order to become more similar to a character.

The conceptual analysis shows that the psychological processes occurring in adolescent viewers are highly complex. It seems unrealistic that film makers will be able to take all these processes into consideration. Additionally to guidelines, it seems appropriate to introduce interventions throughout education that provide adolescents with information on both mental health and responsible media use. Increased mental health awareness would reduce the reliance on information received from TV Series. Furthermore, helping adolescents to become



critical media consumers from an early age onwards may help them to distinguish better between reality and fiction.

## **5. Conclusion**

The conceptual analysis shows that adolescents are more likely to be influenced by the behavior of fictional characters with whom they identify with. Revised theories on individual differences suggest that having similar behavioural and attitudinal tendencies to the character influences if the media effect is directly observable or indirect and progressive. However, individuals with various backgrounds may identify strongly with the same characters. The analysis suggests that content properties strongly influence the process of identification and thus indirectly media effect. Characters that are liked and perceived as similar are more likely to be used as models. Behaviours that are portrayed as rewarding are more likely to be imitated. Theories on narrative persuasion suggest that messages transferred by a character one identifies with can be strongly persuasive, as the emotional involvement reduces critical reception. As characters of popular teen-dramas can gain cult status among adolescents (Moseley, 2015), they have the potential to persuade behaviours and adolescents in viewers. The analysis showed that the way in which characters with mental illness are portrayed in TV Series plays an important role to explain media effect. If characters with mental illness are included for dramatic purposes and mainly portrayed as self-destructive, identification with such characters could affect behaviours and attitudes in ways that contradict mental health promotion.

## **6. Limitations and future research**

There are several limitations in my analysis of the portrayal of mental illness and how it affects adolescents. First, the research on the portrayal of mental illness in teen-dramas is limited. Most literature focuses on the portrayal of mental illness in light of direct effect on mental health, such as suicidal intentions or symptoms of an eating disorder after exposure. However, this thesis focuses on behavioural and attitudinal effects in general. Thus, the majority of studies referred to were on behavioral imitation of risky behaviours in general, however, disconnected to mental illness. Whereas the theoretical analysis is based on the assumption that characters with



mental illness are portrayed as engaging in such risky behaviours, there is little empirical research establishing this relation. Furthermore, the analysis mainly focused on the sensational and dramatic portrayal of mental illness and its impact on viewers. A comparison to popular teen-dramas that portray mental illness differently may have been useful to gain an overview of potential media effects. Future research on the portrayal of mental illness in TV Series could investigate how a portrayal in line with mental health promotion would influence media effects.

Moreover, studies used throughout mainly refer to individual differences concerning behavioural and attitudinal tendencies and psychological dispositions. However, differences in personality might play an important role. Indeed, differences in emotionality, imaginability or cognitive investment may also influence the possible degree of identification intensity in individuals in general. A tendency to be more or less emotionally involved in fictional narratives may enhance or reduce media effects in general. Cognitive involvement may increase critical elaboration of contents and decrease persuasion by media contents. Whereas an exploration of these factors would have extended the scope of this thesis, future research should consider to include these in the analysis of individual differences.

Next to that, it needs to be considered that the analysis of the content properties in the teen-drama *Skins* has been reduced to the portrayal of two female characters and their behaviours. Although it is useful to apply the theories to an example, the chosen protagonists may reduce the theoretical analysis to the effect on female viewers. Whereas the examples are used in order to represent the psychological processes of the viewer in general, future research could apply the analysis to a male character. Moreover, the analysed content properties in general are reduced to the portrayal of characters and their behaviours. They do not, however, include filmic techniques such as auditory and visual effects. Filmic techniques are mainly focused on by media studies and cinematography. Nevertheless, they influence cognitive and affective processes in the viewer and hence likely to be important mediators of identification processes.

Lastly, further attention to the factors that shape identification is needed. Although psychological research on media effects includes identification as a mediating variable for media effect, definitions and assessment of identification vary strongly. Different to psychological research, media studies focus more on the concept of identification itself. As the process of identification essentially is a psychological process, combining research of both fields seems useful in order to fully understand how the portrayal of themes such as mental illness may affect viewers. Here, the need for an interdisciplinary approach becomes apparent.



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