

RESEARCH ESSAY:

How does the show *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* use humor to educate about mental health stigma?

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Abstract

Media has been widely criticized for its exacerbation role in mental health stigma, through the often exaggerated, negative or inaccurate depiction of individuals living with a mental illness. Nevertheless, recent years have shown a proliferation of attempts—especially in television—to portray these issues in a way that audiences, critics, and even health experts have identified not only as more realistic but also more empowering and hopeful. The present research paper will focus on the musical comedy show *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019) as a case study of how a TV series can use humor to educate about mental health stigma.

Keywords: mental health, stigma, representation, humor, television, crazy

How does the show *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* use humor to educate about mental health stigma?

More than one-tenth of the global population suffers from a mental health disorder, according to the 2017 Global Burden of Disease Study (Ritchie & Roser, 2020), yet these illnesses are amongst the most stigmatized conditions (Stout et al., 2004). Link and Phelan (qtd. in Quintero Johnson & Riles, 2018) explain that social stigma occurs through discrimination, stereotyping, labeling, and other forms of exclusion that “disempower and oppresses the stigmatized person(s)” [sic] (p. 150). Furthermore, Sartorius et al. suggest that public stigma can create obstacles in the life quality of those who suffer from mental illness, including living arrangements, professional and health opportunities (qtd. in Corrigan et al., 2014), not to mention the inevitable link between mental health issues and self-harm such as substance abuse and suicide (attempts). One of the main factors that prevent people with mental health disorders from seeking professional help is stigma and, more specifically, self-stigma, which can be explained by the belief held by many cultures around the world, that needing help is “a sign of weakness” (Maier et al., 2014, p. 239). The study by Maier et al. (2014) found that portrayals of individuals with a mental illness, those seeking professional help, and therapists were directly correlated to real-life perceptions of these figures. Similarly, a 2016 study by Quintero Johnson and Riles concluded that the audience’s perceptions of mental illness are directly influenced by mass media stereotypic conceptions of it. In the study, participants described mentally ill characters as “having violent behaviors, angry outbursts, childlike behaviors, and severe symptomatology” (Quintero Johnson and Riles, 2018, p. 146).

However, in the last decade, some television shows have challenged this criticism by developing complex characters living with a diverse range of mental and neurological conditions

in a more accurate way. Some of the most notorious examples are the character depictions of individuals living with depression and unhealthy coping mechanisms in *Bojack Horseman* (2014-2020) and *Fleabag* (2016-2019), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019), the Autism Spectrum in *Atypical* (2017-), Bipolar Disorder in *Shameless* (2011-), and Dissociative Identity Disorder in *United States of Tara* (2009-2011).

The CW's musical comedy series *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019) has a much smaller audience than the previously mentioned shows, according to IMDb popularity. Nevertheless, it has been acclaimed as one of the most accurate depictions of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) in media by several critics, psychology experts, and fans diagnosed with the condition. People with BPD have trouble regulating their emotions, which impacts different areas of their lives, especially relationships. "I saw too much of myself in the overachieving, myopic Rebecca Bunch", admits Angelica Jade Bastién in an article in which she discloses her own experiences with mental health, as a person diagnosed with BPD, reflects on the representation of mental illness in the media and what the third season of the *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* meant for her while going through very similar situations than the main character. "Cinematic history has never been interested in the recovery process for madwomen, only their downfalls" and the common problem with the depiction of these characters, in her opinion, is not their behavior or the tragic outcomes, but that "they're rarely afforded grace and interiority", something that sets *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* apart. (Bastién, 2017).

Rachel Bloom, creator, writer, and producer of the show—along with Aline Brosh McKenna—, as well as leading actress, has also publicly spoken about her own struggles with depression, anxiety, and insomnia. Even though Bloom and McKenna didn't think of developing

a character with BPD when they created the show—the aim was to deconstruct romantic comedies and the underlying issues in them—they always meant to explore the humanity and deeper motivations of their main character that society would usually reduce to the sexist and stigmatized label that gives the ironic title to the show. On the surface, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* follows a successful lawyer that rejects a promotion opportunity at a law firm in New York to pursue happiness and love in the small town of West Covina, California. Nevertheless, as the story unfolds and we get to deeply know Rebecca Bunch (the protagonist) and see her going to extreme behaviors, it is clear that there is something beneath this fantasy all-is-good world that she inhabits and she brought us into. “...after a couple of seasons, we started to try and really figure out what were those underlying things, and we sent some episodes cold to a therapist. We sent them without saying what we thought [the issue] might be to get their professional opinion. And all signs really were pointing to borderline”, explained Brosh McKeena in an interview with the LA Times (Villarreal, 2017).

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend has obtained 13 awards and 32 nominations, including the 2019 Emmy to Outstanding Original Music and Lyrics for the song titled “Anti-Depressants Are So Not a Big Deal”, composed by Adam Schlesinger and Rachel Bloom and written by Jack Dolgen and Rachel Bloom. From this song’s title, the over-the-top, too-on-the-nose, absurd comedy style of the show is clear. Although it remains a musical comedy show that draws from multiple sub-genres, the tone evolves throughout the four seasons along with the main character and her mental health journey, from denial to recovery, getting more serious and emotional as it progresses without losing the comedy completely. This shifting process is illustrated by each season’s theme song.

The third season, in which Rebecca reaches her lowest point, gets diagnosed and starts to figure out how to live with BPD, captures her mental state in a confusing and contradictory theme song titled “You do/ You don’t want to be crazy”. The song explores the different connotations of the word crazy—as in angry outburst, in love, in bed, mentally ill—, sang by four ‘different Rebeccas’ in four different costumes and music genres, which end up being a music video the ‘real Rebecca’ is watching on her phone while she is in the bathroom and she expresses the audience’s confused reaction: “What?”

That theme song is later revealed to be part of a masterly crafted scene (at the climax of “Josh is Irrelevant”, the sixth episode of the third season) that brings it all together; theme, tone, conflict, and characters, portraying what it means to live with a mental health condition. The main plot of the episode centers on Rebecca discovering and dealing with her new diagnosis (BPD), while the sub-plot explores the diverse reactions of Rebecca’s friends to her suicide attempt, which happened in the previous episode. While some feel responsible and unable to find the words to show their empathy, others have become over-protective of Rebecca, especially her best friend Paula, that won’t let her alone one minute.

In the mentioned scene, Rebecca wakes up to find her girl-friends (Paula, Valencia, and Heather) sleeping on the floor outside her bedroom. She cautiously walks over them to go to the washroom and turns back to see they are staring at her like pretending to come in. She tells them she can do it on her own and shuts the door. Paula finally accepts they have to calm down as they can’t guard her 24/7, but then Valencia gasps, remembering she left her big toe-nail-clippers inside the bathroom where Rebecca is. Trying to keep calm, Paula knocks the door but there is no answer. We see on the other side, Rebecca has her headphones on and can’t hear them knocking

(meta-humor: she's watching the theme song video clip). As Rebecca doesn't answer, her friends start to freak out; Paula mentions "she never locks the bathroom door", Valencia responds "Heather's right, let's not panic" and next thing we see is Heather coming back to the scene with an ax. Valencia and Paula scream and question Heather, but then tell her to "do it" and she's just about to chop the door, when all of a sudden, Rebecca opens it in shock. "Hey girl, how was your pee?", asks Heather, hilariously trying to be casual. After they explain Rebecca they were worried and Rebecca tells them she couldn't hear them because of the earbuds, Valencia explodes in tears "we thought you were dead!". Rebecca approaches her trying to comfort her and Valencia begs "Rebecca, please, promise me you'll never do it again". Rebecca answers:

"I would love to promise you all that but I can't. The way I felt on that plane, I don't ever want to feel like that again. And now that I know what I have, I hope I can get the help that I need, but the truth is I don't know what the future holds. So I just can't promise anything to anybody, even myself."

"You know, for someone that is quote-unquote crazy, you sound pretty sane", Heather points out.

The emotional beat of the scene is broken by Darryl, Rebecca's quirkiest friend and co-worker, storming into the room fully sunburnt after driving all the way from the desert in a borrowed convertible as soon as he heard she was in trouble. Comedy, thus, becomes the 'shock absorber' of drama. Through these exaggerated comedic bits, the show succeeds at letting characters express their deep emotions and thoughts regarding mental health, without becoming a soap-opera or a documentary. Although it sometimes gives hard facts about mental health in the context of the story; such as when Rebecca's doctor explains how BPD manifests or the lyrics of

“Anti-Depressants Are So Not a Big Deal”, which tackles on the reasons why many people take these medications—“everyone is special, that’s usually the sitch but when it comes to meds, you’re such a basic bitch”—and the side effects they have, mentioning the specific name of the drugs, because as the song reveals “our lawyers won’t let us say brand names”; the show’s main focus is, instead, what it feels to live with a mental health condition or have a close relationship with someone struggling with one in order to connect emotionally with the audience and destigmatize the issue.

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend plays tribute to the real experience of mental distress by not offering a traditional closure or resolution, but a character determined to look within herself and take responsibility for her own health, wherever that may lead her. Through the eyes of Rebecca, the audience learns there are no ‘magic pills’ or ‘easy fixes’, mental health is a lifetime process and commitment with ups-and-downs but no one is ever alone in the process, as many people struggle with this.

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