Analysis of Dissociative Identity Disorder Presented in Popular Movies and the Possible Impacts on Public Stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

Dissociative identity disorder (DID) is often presented in movies with the impression of danger, and its patients constantly acted as madness and crazy. With the rise of the internet, movies have become an essential communication channel, exerting a significant impact on people's understanding of the outside world. Thus, some scholars believe that movies may negatively influence people's impressions of DID since its figures have often been distorted. However, they failed to analyze in a more up-to-date and rigorous setting. Therefore, this study examined the connection between movies and DID, using questionnaires, movie analysis, and experiment in a more objective way. The paper concludes that DID is portrayed in distorted and biased ways in popular movies, and it influences the audiences to form and worsen the negative impressions toward DID and its patients, proving the expected hypothesis. Specifically, through movie analysis, the study found that movies still dramatize and associate the DID characters with violent behaviors, despite the movies give out some correct information in terms of the symptoms for DID. Moreover, by looking at the differences between pre- and post-screening surveys, people's impression of DID is generally negative. The willingness to get in touch with DID patients has gone down after watching DID-related movies. However, because the study only specifically examined nine participants in Dalton Academy, it is still a crucial task to extend such related research in a greater context, including a more diverse and generalizable population, further helping to understand and find ways to improve the social environment for DID patients and other mental disorders.

Keywords: movie, media, mental disorder, dissociative identity disorder, stereotype

1. INTRODUCTION

DID is a prolonged psychopathological state commonly triggered by a traumatic event [1]. The negative reinforcement of DID in the movies, as the commonly misunderstood mental disorder, may further mislead the public's beliefs and worsen DID patients' living conditions. Dissociative identity disorder (DID) often appears in movies with prominent characteristics. However, the DID patients' images often connected with violence. With the lack of accurate and objective knowledge of DID, these stereotypes might become a stigma which may negatively influence the life of DID patients.

This paper mainly studies what images presented in films about DID are stereotypes and how these stigmas impacted viewers. This research topic is theoretically and practically significant since it builds a comparison model for DID figures that appeared in movies with the actual symptoms, identifying the stereotypes surrounding it. Moreover, it conducts an experiment to understand how movies may impact the viewers' perceptions in reality. These will help people realize the differences between the movie images and the actual conditions of DID, eliminates some public stereotypes and misconceptions.

1.1. Dissociative Identity Disorder

Diagnostic Criteria. According to the diagnostic criteria in DSM-5 [2], DID has the characteristics of: 1. At least two distinct personalities exist. 2. Amnesia occurred recurrently in everyday events, personal information, or traumatic experiences. 3. Severe distress or dysfunction due to the disorder in at least one

central living area must be present. 4. The disturbance does not belong to the regular religious or social practices, such as imaginary friend for a child is not a necessary indicator of DID. 5. The symptoms do not result from the direct physiological effects of a medication. 6. There would be no significant "gains" from having the disorder or had no history of excessive attention-seeking behavior.

Most studies state the prevalence of DID is between 0.1% to 0.2%, though some estimates as high as 3% to 5% [3]. Impacts and Suicide Risks. According to DSM-5 [2], the impacts of DID vary widely. There are above 70% of DID outpatients have attempted suicide. Moreover, it is common to have multiple suicide attempts or other self-injurious behaviors.

1.2. Film Industry

According to Kamal, El-Gabalawy, Zhao, & MacLeod [4], the movie is an essential part of U.S. culture. In 2019, the domestic box office total exceeded $11 billion.

Movies that Depict Mental Illnesses. From the film producers' and consumers' viewpoints, there is an increasing interest in depicting mental illnesses in films [4]. The average gross of films portraying mental disorders was generally more significant than the average gross of all films each year. Furthermore, the average IMDB rating for this kind of film freed each year was better than that for all movies. Therefore, some are concerned that films created a negative association of mental illnesses since they may depict the images incorrectly [4].

1.3. Stereotypes

General Overview. Stereotypes refer to the overgeneralization of beliefs about certain groups' personalities, behaviors, and attributes [5].

Stereotypical Portrayals of Mental Illnesses in Mass Media. Despite the broader perceptions toward the idea of DID, there was still almost twice as likely that people in 1996 related mental disorders with violence [6]. Many used the descriptions of "dangerous", "crazy", "worthless", and "insane" to represent mental ills.

Impacts. Mental illnesses' stigma may prevent the patients from seeking help. More significantly, the stereotypes worsen their living conditions. According to Beachum [7], nearly 70% of participants indicated an unwillingness to get in touch with a person who had a mental illness. The stigmatization of mental health issues adds to the discrimination against the patients, further negatively influencing their self-perceptions.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research design

The collection of primary data is mixed with the quantitative and qualitative methods, including questionnaires, movie analysis, and experiment. This study expected to see movies distorted DID figures and negatively promote public stereotypes.

The study's primary indicator is the DID chapter in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th Edition (DSM-5), which gives detailed information about DID's diagnostic criteria.

The questionnaire was designed and released to all populations through WeChat, QQ, and Sina Weibo. All participants would have to complete the same survey to determine the individual's prior knowledge on DID and screen for any potential prejudices that might be held toward the mentally ill in general.

The movie analysis will focus on the DID figures' characteristics in the movies, Split and Shutter Island, which have been selected from credible movie rating websites, and compare with those listed in DSM-5. A qualitative method of pre-survey examines people's first impressions, understanding, and their opinions toward DID. This survey helps to set the foundation for the further research.

In the experiment, the participants will be randomly selected from Dalton Academy, the Affiliated High School of Peking University, in China. Then they will be randomly assigned to two groups. Participants in group A will view a scene in the movie Split from 1:21:00 to 1:40:00. For group B, besides the same video clip, they will also watch a video that includes an informative and educative view of DID.

After the experiment, a post-screening survey that attempts to measure the participants' overall perceptions and understanding of DID will be assigned. The responses from pre-screening survey and the post-screening survey will be compared to get more objective results about the changes in public opinions.

2.2. Questionnaire Analysis

It is reasonable to infer that people generally know a little about DID since 56.86% of the participants are not familiar with the concept of DID. Moreover, when asking people's ways of gaining information about DID, the most mentioned way by the participants is the internet, further convincing the significance of analyzing and researching how movies may influence public opinion.

Furthermore, the most frequent mentioned words of "horrible", "pain", and "dangerous" in the question of asking the general impressions toward DID and the top

mentioned words of "insane", "burst", and "dangerous" in the question of asking their opinions toward DID figures presented in the movies show that people generally hold a negative impression toward DID and its patients.

Then, in the question about participants' understanding of the ways DID portray in the movies, only eight participants thought that the movies present DID positively, demonstrating that people generally believe that movies portray DID in a biased way. When specific portrayals were asked, the most mentioned word is "plot" in the participants' responses. For the word "plot", the participants' answered that DID presents such a picture mainly due to the need for dramatic twists and disturbances in the movies, further demonstrating the negative association that appeared in the movies.

Overall, through the responses in the questionnaire, it is reasonable to infer that the public generally holds little knowledge toward DID and has a negative understanding of DID and its images which showed in the movie.

2.3. Movie Analysis

Split and *Shutter Island* will be examined since *Split* is the most mentioned movie by the participants from the questionnaire, and *Shutter Island* is the top movie on both the rankings from *IMDB* and *Douban* by typing the keyword "dissociative identity disorder".

2.3.1 Split

Split was filmed in 2016 and is about "three girls are kidnapped by a man with a diagnosed 23 distinct personalities. They must try to escape before the apparent emergence of a frightful new 24th" [8]. It is categorized as a thriller and horror film.

Even though Kevin has 24 personalities, only some of the characters are introduced to the audiences with apparent interactions with other characters. For example, Dennis, who kidnapped the girls and trapped them into the basement of a zoo, is a pervert with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Resonating with the DSM-5, Kevin showed at least two distinct personalities in his body, from Dennis to Hedwig and over a dozen others. Each character has his or her unique personalities, experiences, and memories. They are acknowledged about other personalities' existences and able to communicate with each other.

Even though the characters resonate with some of the DID symptoms, the movie failed to reveal other essential characteristics, and it distorted and exaggerated the symptoms of DID. First of all, Kevin seems to be able to function normally in his daily life "without severe distress or dysfunction due to the disorder"

(DSM-5). Moreover, in the movie, all personalities seem to be sure of whom they are, exaggerating the chances of such circumstance. More apparently, the movie directly linked the DID patient with kidnap and murders, the illegal and violent actions. However, according to Webermann and Brand [9], they found out that there is a low connection between the DID symptoms with criminal behavior, only "3% reported having been charged with an offense". Therefore, the direct linking of criminal behaviors with the DID patient significantly produces a biased connection to the audiences.

The authenticity of patients, where Kevin formed a new personality of the beast, is also distorted in the movie. The immediate changes of the body's physical capabilities, the increase of muscles and the size of the body, are the most biased part of the movie. The primary purpose of building such a character may be that the directors want to add the intense effect of the movie to a new level, deepening the despair of the girls.

Therefore, the movie *Split* presents some accurate information about DID, yet the public image of DID present in the movie is distorted into a criminal and an abnormal person with supernatural power. It may further encourage the audiences to form a negative association between DID and violent behaviors.

2.3.2. Shutter Island

Shutter Island was filmed in 2010, introduced as "during 1954, a U.S marshal investigated a killer who had escaped from a hospital" [10]. It was categorized as a horror and mysterious film.

Resonating with DSM-5, Andrew showed two distinctly different personalities in his body. Specifically, Andrew had a severe post-traumatic stress disorder of war (PTSD), resonating with the comorbidity possibility of DID. However, he did not receive any treatment and failed to properly fulfill his family responsibilities, which led to his wife's mental disorder and killed their three children. Andrew collapsed after discovering children's bodies and killed his wife. Unwilling to face the cruel reality, Andrew produced another righteous personality of Teddy.

Even though the description for Andrew fits with some symptoms presented in DSM-5, *Shutter Island* is still present DID patients exaggeratedly. First of all, Teddy's amnesia is not a usual type: Whenever he finally realized his real identity, he will begin another loop of forgetting his real-self. Moreover, the film stressed "dangerous and violent" impressions with mental illness patients throughout the film since the setting was at an island with prisoners who were mentally ill, which gives the viewers an impression of DID patients as being violent.

Overall speaking, *Shutter Island* presented some accurate information about DID. But in the movie, the impressions of DID patients were frequently related with violence and danger, which creates a misleading association.

2.4. Experiment

For group A, despite no participant believe that the movie conveys accurate information about DID and its patients, stating the movies exaggerating the reality and the physical capabilities of a human being, the number of participants who have negative impressions toward DID goes up after they watched the movie from 0% to 40%. Moreover, the willingness to get in touch with the DID patients had decreased from 80% to 60%. For group B, the participants generally believe that the movie distorted the figure of DID, accounting for 70% of the overall population. However, the participants still believe the images presented in the movie are correspond with what they believe a DID patient should be and the number of participants who are willing to get in touch with the DID patients had decreased from 75% to 25%. Furthermore, even though the participants think that the educational video shows the accurate side for DID and its patients, there are still 75% participants who are not willing to get in touch with them, which demonstrate that the educational videos are less influential than the movies.

In conclusion, even though the participants understand there are stigma and stereotypes exit in the movie, they still have a negative impression toward DID mainly due to the lack of channels of understanding this mental disorder in an much more influential way as the movie did to them.

3. DISCUSSION

The research concludes that the popular DID-related movies promote negative association and stereotypes for DID through using questionnaire, movie analysis, and the comparisons of the participants' responses before and after watching the DID-related movies' clips. This research provides a more up-to-date investigation on the association since it focused on the movies that have been most mentioned by the participants and occupied the top recent ranking among two popular websites in 2021. Moreover, this study provides more objective and reliable results using experimental techniques, such as random selection and random assignment.

However, limitations still exist. Firstly, since the questionnaire was released on *Wechat*, *QQ*, and *Sina Weibo*, the primary participants are teenagers on those platforms, others' opinions were ignored and weakened in the research, making the result unable to generalize into a wider population group. Also, participants may respond in a biased way because of the response bias,

making the information not objective enough. Additionally, the limited amount of time makes the research only includes the analysis of two DID movies. However, film styles vary from director to director, and a high degree of generality cannot be reached without a comprehensive study of the genre of DID. Furthermore, only nine participants from Dalton Academy agreed to participate in the research. The limited participants make the result unable to generalize to the whole population. Also, the time limit makes the screening survey only contain one clip from one movie, which is not representative of all movies with DID.

4. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the paper concludes that DID is portrayed in biased ways in popular movies, and it influences the audiences to form the negative impressions toward DID and its patients, proving the expected hypothesis. Specifically, through movie analysis, the study found that movies dramatize and associate the DID characters with violent behaviors, despite the movies give out some correct information in terms of the symptoms. Moreover, by looking at the differences between pre- and post-screening surveys, people's impression of DID is generally negative. The willingness to get in touch with DID patients has gone down after watching DID-related movies. However, because the limited samples, it is still a crucial task to extend such related research in a much greater and more rigorous context to further help to eliminate the stereotypes that DID patients have to face.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Suqi Chen.

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