Lights, Camera, Stigma? Bollywood's Depiction of Mental Health Professionals

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ABSTRACT

Cinema shapes how societies view health, illness, and care apart from entertaining us. Bollywood (Hindi Cinema) is a cultural force with a growing global reach, and it is crucial to know how it portrays the professionals responsible for mental healthcare. This study examines how Mental Health Professionals (MHPs) are represented in contemporary Hindi cinema and the implications for public trust in psychological care. The authors systematically analysed 42 portrayals of MHPs across 35 mainstream Bollywood films released between 2011 and 2024 using qualitative content analysis. Each portrayal was coded for demographic features, professional identity, narrative role, and treatment outcomes. Results revealed a consistent pattern of negative representation. MHPs were often presented as minor, unnamed characters with ambiguous professional status. They were shown as incompetent, unethical, or trivialised by supernatural and sensational storylines, rather than as credible sources of support. Psychotherapy, though depicted, was often caricatured or undermined, and treatment outcomes were typically ineffective or unclear. These portrayals risk reinforcing harmful stereotypes, trivialising professional care, and discouraging help-seeking in a country already facing a vast treatment gap. Beyond India, the findings raise critical questions about how popular media worldwide construct public perceptions of mental healthcare and contribute to stigma. This study calls for a shift towards responsible filmmaking, urging collaboration between mental health advocates and filmmakers to prevent prejudice, motivate help-seeking, and promote accurate representations that rebuild public trust.

Keywords: content analysis; cultural psychology; Hindi cinema; media portrayal; stereotypes