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*Representing Addiction in Contemporary  
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## Introduction

From an early age, Joe has been drawn to everything related to sexuality. She narrates the story of how she turned into the titular nymphomaniac character from Lars von Trier's controversial film (*Nymphomaniac*, 2013) to a man she does not know who rescued her after she was assaulted on the street. As she led the stranger down memory lane, Joe highlighted the moments that had conditioned her to become dependent on the act of having sex. She spoke of how she had gradually become involved in increasingly dangerous sexual activities, including sadomasochistic acts and engaging in sexual activities with strangers. Her addiction had led her to have multiple sexual partners, including a married man and a man who became obsessed with her. However, as her addiction spiraled out of control, Joe's relationships and personal life began to crumble. She found herself battling emotions of guilt and shame, unable to control her impulses. Despite her struggles, she continued to seek out new sexual experiences, unable to shake her addiction.

Roxanne Vargas, an NBC reporter, tells her viewers about a young girl who is being plunged into the inescapable stranglehold of social media addiction, which turned her days into an endless string of scrolling and sleepless nights. She was overwhelmed and needed help, and thus, she joined a rehab program to start afresh. Through therapy, support systems, and emotional evaluation of the digital world she lived in, she managed to regain control of her life by setting boundaries with people online so as not to be hurt again. The journey ahead was not just about breaking free from one's smartphone; instead, it involved self-discovery intending to achieve equilibrium in a life once ruled by screens. What do this real-life teenager and a fictional movie

character have in common? Their addiction struggles. This thesis will explore how different traditional, fictional, and social media portray this subject matter.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines addiction as a compulsive, chronic, physiological, or psychological need for a habit-forming substance, behavior, or activity having harmful physical, psychological, or social effects and typically causing well-defined symptoms (such as anxiety, irritability, tremors, or nausea) upon withdrawal or abstinence; the state of being addicted; a strong inclination to do, use, or indulge in something repeatedly. Addiction comes in many forms, from the most traditionally recognized, talked about, and known ones, such as drugs, alcohol, and food, to the ones that are recently more discussed in society, such as sex, the internet, and technology in general. This thesis explores all forms of addiction and their representation in the media from a communication studies point of view.

Through an interdisciplinary approach that draws upon insights from psychology, sociology, and media studies, this research aims to shed light on the broader sociocultural significance of addiction representation within popular media while also offering critical insights into the ways in which various types of media narratives shape our understanding of this complex and pervasive phenomenon.

The goal of this thesis is to provide insight into the intricate socio-cultural ramifications of the various ways in which addiction is portrayed in different media. This work uses a strategic mixed-methods framework to explore how addiction is represented across different media forms, focusing on the intersection of film and television. This framework combines radical humanist and interpretive approaches to examine how audiences construct and receive addiction narratives. The radical humanist perspective, a qualitative research method, focuses on the media's role in shaping social understanding, exposing the ideological influence behind media portrayals of addiction.

This framework reveals the ways in which media both challenges and perpetuates stigmatizing narratives surrounding addiction. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theories of representation, the analysis addresses how addiction portrayal operates beyond a simple depiction and becomes a cultural site where meaning is generated and contested. Hall's work underscores that media representations of addiction are often influenced by ideologies and societal assumptions, thus impacting how audiences interpret and respond to addiction-related stories. Hall's concept of "signifying practices" is particularly relevant, as it highlights the process through which meaning is assigned in media. Language, visuals, and symbols within addiction narratives are examined through narrative, textual, and visual analysis to understand how these elements contribute to or detract from realistic, empathetic portrayals of addiction. Using these theories, the thesis critically evaluates the cultural and social meanings embedded in addiction portrayals, particularly in *BoJack Horseman* and *Nymphomaniac*.

Additionally, Henry Jenkins' theory of media convergence is applied to discuss the impact of cross-platform storytelling on audience perceptions of addiction. Jenkins argues that convergence encourages participatory culture, where audiences are no longer passive consumers but active participants who reshape narratives. Jenkins' ideas around "transmedia storytelling" provide a framework for examining how addiction narratives, when told across multiple media, have a broader cultural impact and engage audiences in unique, interactive ways that can transform perceptions of addiction from stigmatized to empathized, or vice versa.

The second chapter explores addiction portrayal in popular film and television through an in-depth examination of two contrasting case studies: *BoJack Horseman* and *Nymphomaniac*. These works serve as representative examples of the diverse, multi-dimensional ways addiction is portrayed in contemporary media, illustrating both the potential for empathetic portrayals and the

persistence of morally ambiguous or even dark representations. In *BoJack Horseman*, addiction is represented as both a personal and social struggle, revealing the internal and external conflicts faced by individuals who grapple with substance dependency. The series delves into the titular character's alcohol and drug addiction, presenting it as a means to cope with emotional trauma and existential despair. Through narrative analysis, this thesis examines how the show's structure and BoJack's character arc convey the cyclical nature of addiction, highlighting moments of vulnerability, self-destruction, and attempted recovery. Visual and symbolic elements, such as recurring depictions of empty bottles, dimly lit rooms, and distorted perspectives, serve to illustrate the psychological toll of addiction on BoJack and those around him. Additionally, the show portrays BoJack's relationships as another form of dependency, as he oscillates between seeking validation from others and pushing them away. These interactions reflect the complexities of addiction, particularly in how it affects not only the addicted individual but also those close to them. By examining BoJack's flawed, multi-layered character, the thesis reveals how "BoJack Horseman" challenges traditional narratives of addiction by incorporating elements of hope and redemption, even as it acknowledges the devastating impact of addictive behavior.

In contrast, Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* offers a starkly different representation of addiction, depicting sex addiction as a dark, unrelenting compulsion that ultimately leads to the protagonist's moral and psychological degradation. Unlike *BoJack Horseman*, where there is a possibility of redemption, *Nymphomaniac* presents addiction as a force that consumes and destroys. Through the character of Joe, von Trier explores the nature of hypersexuality, presenting it in a way that strips away any sense of glorification or eroticism. The film's aesthetic choices—such as its use of unfiltered, handheld camerawork and raw, dimly lit settings—underline the grim reality of Joe's compulsions. The narrative structure is non-linear, with Joe recounting her past

experiences to a stranger, Seligman, in a way that invites viewers to interpret her story not as a romanticized journey but as a cautionary tale about the consequences of unchecked addiction. The thesis argues that von Trier's approach in *Nymphomaniac* aligns with his broader cinematic style, which often eschews traditional storytelling in favor of fragmented, emotionally raw narratives that force audiences to confront uncomfortable truths. By presenting sex addiction without a redemptive arc, von Trier challenges audiences to consider the darker aspects of addiction, portraying it as a condition that alienates individuals from themselves and others. This case study highlights how addiction can be represented as either a potentially surmountable struggle, as in *BoJack Horseman*, or an insurmountable force, as in *Nymphomaniac*.

The third chapter expands the discussion of addiction by exploring the portrayal of gaming addiction in traditional media, highlighting the distinctions and overlaps between gaming and gambling addiction. This chapter examines how media portrayals shape public perceptions of gaming addiction, often framing it as a societal threat that particularly affects youth. Using framing theory, this analysis identifies recurring themes in news coverage and popular discussions surrounding gaming addiction, such as its alleged role in promoting isolation, academic decline, and even violence among young people. The chapter also considers how gaming addiction, while less overtly destructive than substance abuse, is increasingly recognized as a behavioral disorder with severe psychological and social consequences. The portrayal of gaming addiction in media is often characterized by a focus on extreme cases, such as instances where young people reportedly neglect their responsibilities or relationships due to excessive gaming. This sensationalized framing reinforces stereotypes about gamers and gaming culture, often portraying those affected as lacking self-control or discipline. However, recent shifts in media coverage have begun to acknowledge the complexity of gaming addiction, with some outlets highlighting the role of game

design in encouraging compulsive behavior. The chapter explores this evolving discourse, considering how different types of media coverage contribute to either stigmatizing or legitimizing gaming addiction as a real and pressing issue. By examining the intersection of gaming addiction with societal and cultural factors, this chapter sheds light on how media representations influence public attitudes and policy responses to this growing phenomenon.

The fourth chapter shifts focus to social media addiction, addressing the unique design features of social media platforms that encourage prolonged use and foster addictive behaviors. This chapter provides a historical overview of social media's rise and its integration into daily life, considering how platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become embedded in the social and psychological fabric of modern society. The chapter then examines how media frames social media addiction, with a particular focus on its impact on young people's mental health. Drawing on studies of digital media and psychology, this analysis explores how features like endless scrolling, notifications, and algorithms are intentionally designed to keep users engaged, often leading to compulsive usage patterns that resemble traditional forms of addiction. The portrayal of social media addiction in news and popular media is often alarmist, focusing on extreme cases where young people reportedly experience anxiety, depression, or sleep deprivation due to excessive social media use. However, some media narratives also recognize the structural factors that contribute to social media addiction, such as the business models of tech companies that prioritize user engagement over well-being. This chapter discusses the societal implications of social media addiction, considering how media representations contribute to public awareness and debates about regulatory measures to mitigate the potential harms of social media. By examining the evolving discourse on social media addiction, the chapter highlights the complex

interplay between individual behavior, technological design, and societal expectations in shaping public understanding of this contemporary form of addiction.

The final chapter synthesizes the insights gained from the previous chapters, offering a comprehensive reflection on the role of media in shaping societal understandings of addiction. This chapter reiterates that media portrayals of addiction—whether through film, television, news, or digital platforms—play a crucial role in influencing public attitudes, policy responses, and social stigmas associated with addiction. By analyzing diverse representations of addiction, this thesis demonstrates how media can either perpetuate harmful stereotypes or promote empathy and nuanced understanding. The thesis argues that portrayals like those in *BoJack Horseman* offer a more hopeful view of addiction by presenting it as a condition that can be managed or overcome with support and personal growth, while portrayals like *Nymphomaniac* serve as cautionary narratives that emphasize addiction’s destructive potential. The conclusions drawn reinforce the importance of responsible media portrayals that balance the complexities of addiction with sensitivity and realism. This chapter also considers the broader implications of these findings for media producers, policymakers, and mental health advocates, suggesting that media can be a powerful tool for reducing stigma and promoting a more informed and compassionate approach to addiction. Through its interdisciplinary approach, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how media representations of addiction influence public discourse, revealing both the challenges and opportunities for using media to foster a more empathetic society.

# **Chapter 1 – Designing a Strategic Mixed-Methods Framework for Investigating Addiction in the Media**

The theoretical framework that I chose for my work is a mix of radical humanist and interpretive approaches. The radical humanist theoretical framework is a qualitative method of research that focuses on the text and the meaning behind it. It is a media-centric critical approach that exposes the hegemonic role of media and unveils the ideological influence of medium and social relations on text. Critical theories relate to mass media's potentially harmful consequences on society or to an intrinsic lack of cultural or moral quality in the content distribution (McQuail). The critical theory also focuses on the confrontation between the text and its receiver. Theories that fall under this framework used for analysis in this thesis are Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory as well as Rosalind Gills' take on discourse theory. The interpretative theoretical framework is also a qualitative media-culturalist method that analyzes and explores cultural issues of meaning and content concerning communication processes. The interpretative theory will be used combined with a discourse analysis included in the essay *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* by Stuart Hall (1973). Narrative, textual, and visual analysis will be used to examine the representation of addiction through various media channels and types.

## **Examining Media Representations of Addiction: Literature Review and Theory**

*The Stigma of Substance Use Disorders* (Schomerus and Corrigan) is a book on stigma and discrimination faced by individuals with substance use disorders (SUD). It comprehensively

examines how this cultural mark exacerbates the challenges associated with SUD. This work examines the effect of stigma on service coverage, life opportunities available to them, as well as the extent to which they feel ashamed about their conditions both by patients and their families. At the same time, it stresses that getting over such stereotypes is essential for recovery processes. This book delves into all aspects of public disgrace related to SUDs. It suggests possible ways of reducing its impact in different settings, such as the criminal justice system and medical care delivery. Unlike other research reviews, however, this text not only compiles current knowledge but also prescribes practical steps for dealing with SUDs in future studies. In order to investigate how media representations either support or challenge stigmatization surrounding drug addiction, one could build upon these findings for writing a master's thesis on the portrayal of addiction in media; from this viewpoint, this context is essential for the case study of Bojack Horseman. It will help understand the broader social implications of media representations and develop strategies for using the media to reduce stigma.

To begin with, media framing significantly defines public understanding of various types of addictions. Media framing studies how journalists and media outlets present specific topics that affect people's perceptions about them. The most widely discussed aspect in literature is how substance addiction is presented in the press. The studies highlight the media's potential to challenge or propagate stigmatizing stereotypes. For example, previous research has identified patterns recurring in drug and alcohol addiction depictions, which often label victims as morally wrong or inherently corrupt persons. This biased portrayal contributes to more extensive societal discrimination against addiction while reinforcing the idea that it comes down to individual failing rather than a multifactorial relationship of psychological, social, and biological influences. However, there is hardly any available information concerning this phenomenon when it comes to

newer varieties of addictions, including behavioral ones. Mostly, it is hard to diagnose and treat non-substance-related behavioral addictions due to the absence of physical manifestations associated with substance addiction. Parrott et al. (2020) studied how gaming disorder was framed in the media to understand how this phenomenon legitimizes other non-substance addictions in society. A game-changer was made when gaming disorder was listed as a mental illness by the World Health Organization in May 2019; hence, the discussion about behavioral addictions has never been the same again. While some groups supported and accepted the classification, others, such as video game industry stakeholders, the academic research community, and gamers, were critical of it. This article examines how journalists framed gaming addiction in the year before WHO classified it as a mental health condition until now. In carrying out their study, Parrott et al. applied framing theory to evaluate the news media's description of gaming disorder, its causes, possible treatments, and moral assessment of the condition. The results, which are covered in more detail later in this piece, indicate that journalists were crucial in establishing gaming disorders' legitimacy as mental health conditions. Media coverage helped the public see gaming disease as a real health issue by framing it in this way, even if there are still discussions in the scientific community regarding the quality of the evidence to support this diagnosis. These media pieces highlight the intricate relationships that exist between the media, public opinion, and the changing understanding of addiction in modern society.

Stuart Hall's *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* serves as a cornerstone in communication theory, particularly for its exploration of how cultural meanings are constructed, maintained, and contested through media. Focusing predominantly on the book's first chapter, Hall's discussion of "*The Work of Representation*" provides a robust theoretical framework for this thesis, which analyzes media portrayals of addiction. His concept of

representation moves beyond the simplistic notion that media simply reflects reality. Instead, he argues that representation is an active process where meaning is created through a complex system of language, signs, and images. “We give things meaning by how we represent them — the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce” (Hall 5). This idea is crucial to understanding media portrayals of addiction, as Hall establishes that these portrayals are not neutral or objective depictions but are infused with ideological perspectives. For example, news articles and television programs about addiction are often laden with cultural assumptions and power dynamics that shape how the public perceives both people with an addiction and addiction itself. “Cultural meanings organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct, and have real, practical effects” (Hall 3). In the first chapter of *Representation*, Hall examines the process by which language and images are used to produce meaning, emphasizing that meaning is not inherent but constructed through social practices. “Representation connects meaning and language to culture. It is the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture” (Hall 15). It highlights the ways in which addiction is defined and communicated to the public. Hall’s discussion reveals that media narratives about addiction often serve to reinforce certain ideologies, such as the stigmatization of addicts or the framing of addiction as a personal failure rather than a social issue. These narratives, consequently, do not merely reflect societal attitudes toward addiction; they actively shape and reinforce them.

Furthermore, Hall’s work is particularly valuable for this thesis because of his focus on the political nature of meaning-making. He argues that the production of meaning is permanently embedded in power relations. In the context of addiction, this is evident in how various forms of addiction (e.g., substance abuse vs. gaming addiction) are portrayed differently in the media, often depending on the social status or demographic characteristics of those affected. For instance, media

portrayals may criminalize substance addiction in certain communities while framing gaming addiction as a moral or psychological issue in others. This highlights the role of representation in negotiating power and shaping public perceptions of what is considered “normal” or “deviant” behavior. “Representations are not just about reality, but help constitute the very world we experience and inhabit” (Hall 25).

By applying Hall’s theory, this thesis can critically assess how news headlines construct narratives around gaming addiction. The ideologies embedded within these portrayals can shape societal responses to addiction, from criminalization and punishment to medicalization and rehabilitation. Additionally, his work is pivotal in contemporary discussions about inclusion, diversity, and equality, which are also relevant to the portrayal of addiction in the media. For example, media representations often vary depending on the demographic being discussed—racial minorities, women, and economically disadvantaged individuals are frequently portrayed in more negative or stereotypical terms, reinforcing harmful societal norms. This speaks to Hall’s argument that representation is inherently political and tied to power dynamics. His framework allows this thesis to explore how media narratives about addiction can marginalize certain groups while privileging others, ultimately shaping public discourse in ways that reflect broader social inequalities.

This timeless work of literature provides an essential theoretical foundation for analyzing media portrayals of addiction. By focusing on the active process of meaning-making, the ideological nature of media narratives, and the power relations embedded in representation, Hall’s work offers valuable tools for examining how addiction is portrayed in news headlines and television programs. Precisely, the first chapter’s insights into how language and images construct

meaning will guide the analytical section of this thesis, enabling a nuanced critique of how media shapes public understanding of addiction, people with an addiction, and appropriate treatments.

Examining the subject of addiction within the framework of media and cinema provides a profound understanding of how society views and interacts with complicated behavioral problems. The idea of hypersexuality, which is frequently discussed in relation to sexual addiction, is one such field of study. This examination of the literature will look at the dominant theoretical frameworks that influence how hypersexuality is understood and portrayed in popular culture, especially as it relates to Lars von Triers' *Nymphomaniac*. This essay will provide a more sophisticated comprehension of the pathologization and representation of sexual conduct in modern society. A range of theoretical stances have been taken in the study of hypersexuality, often known as sexual addiction. The article *Debating the Conceptualization of Sex as an Addictive Disorder* by Drew A. Kingston, which critically evaluates the prevalent pathophysiological concepts applied to hypersexuality, is a valuable reference for this subject. Three primary models are identified in the article: addictions, impulse control disorders, and obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD). Essential questions about the addiction model's application to hypersexuality are brought up in the aforementioned article. One of the main criticisms is the inclination to generalize a single descriptive model to all people who exhibit hypersexual behavior without taking into account individual differences and the intricate interactions between biological, psychological, and social factors. Furthermore, the paper draws attention to the conceptual difficulties with the addiction paradigm, namely the complexity of defining normal and addictive sexual conduct in a society that is culturally varied and changing quickly.

The vast majority of the social media literature now in publication concentrates on the psychological aspects of social media addiction susceptibility. On the other hand, research on how

social media addiction is depicted in the media is still noticeably lacking. Outi Lundahl bridges this gap in her work *Media Framing of Social Media Addiction in the UK and the US* by comparing how social media addiction is portrayed in the two countries. Lundahl investigates how the problem of social media addiction has been depicted over time in both contexts using a longitudinal, mixed methods framing study. The results show that social media addiction is becoming a more considerable public health risk in both cultures. The study also reveals a change in the way that media addiction is framed. Although it was first described as a personal mental health problem, there is a growing consensus that media addiction is addictive, and there is also growing criticism of the insufficient policies that have been put in place.

Multiple types of methods of analysis were applied in this work. The first was semiotics, or visual semiotics, which is the study of representations, images, signs, and visuals. To find and decipher the intricate visual clues in *BoJack Horseman*, it is essential to apply the study of signs and codes. Discourse analysis, which looked at text and language to support claims that the aforementioned show and other case studies from various media outlets accurately and optimistically portrayed substance addiction, was the second form of analysis that was employed. Narrative analysis, more precisely structural narrative analysis, was the final category. Looking at *BoJack Horseman* and *The Nymphomaniac* through a narrative lens has allowed the author of this paper to deepen the breakdown of the portrayal of addiction and its potential origins and peripeteia of those who suffer from it. Combining those methods will allow readers of this thesis to understand the discussed matter deeper while also providing diverse examples supporting the initial hypothesis.

Henry Jenkins' theory of media convergence offers a compelling framework for examining how addiction is represented across different media platforms. Media convergence, according to

Jenkins, refers to “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences” (Jenkins 2). This theory emphasizes how the blending of old and new media enables stories to travel across different channels while audiences are no longer passive consumers but active participants who engage with and reshape narratives. When applied to addiction representation, media convergence can facilitate a multi-dimensional approach that challenges stigmatizing portrayals, invites diverse voices into the conversation, and promotes more nuanced and empathetic public discourse.

Media convergence enables multi-dimensional storytelling by allowing narratives to unfold across various platforms, each offering a unique perspective on the issue of addiction. Jenkins argues that convergence “alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences” (15). This flexibility can be especially beneficial for complex social issues like addiction, where different aspects—medical, social, psychological, and personal—need to be explored in depth. By using various platforms, such as television series, documentaries, podcasts, and social media, media producers can present a more holistic view that extends beyond the limitations of a single medium. For instance, a television drama could depict the personal struggles associated with addiction, while a companion podcast might delve into the scientific understanding of substance use disorders, and a website could provide resources for those seeking help. This cross-platform approach addresses the call for “new forms of storytelling which can explore the complexity of social issues” (Mittell 28) and allows for richer, layered narratives that challenge oversimplified media representations of addiction.

The role of audience participation, a central tenet of Jenkins’ concept of “participatory culture,” is another critical factor in the representation of addiction within a convergent media environment. Participatory culture transforms audiences from passive consumers into active

contributors who “play a role in shaping the flow of media content” (Jenkins 3). This dynamic is particularly relevant to addiction representation, where individuals with lived experiences can contribute user-generated content, such as social media posts, YouTube videos, and blogs, which share personal recovery stories or advocate for change. Research indicates that user-generated content has the potential to shift public perceptions of addiction by humanizing those affected and challenging prevailing stigmas. As Buchanan notes, “social media platforms have become important spaces for people to share their recovery journeys and to advocate for policies that reduce stigma and support harm reduction” (67). These participatory practices can counterbalance the often negative portrayals found in traditional media, providing alternative narratives that present addiction as a complex medical and social issue rather than merely a moral failing.

Media convergence also provides opportunities to challenge and reshape stigmatizing narratives about addiction. Traditional media often perpetuate stereotypes that depict individuals with substance use disorders as morally compromised or dangerous, which contributes to public stigma (Room 145). However, convergence culture enables the distribution of diverse perspectives across platforms, disrupting these conventional representations. Jenkins argues that “convergence alters the logic by which media industries operate and by which media consumers process news and entertainment” (11), allowing for alternative voices and stories to emerge. For example, grassroots campaigns such as “Faces of Recovery” utilize social media to share real-life stories of people who have overcome addiction, thereby reframing it as a condition that can affect anyone and demonstrating that recovery is possible (McGinty et al. 137). By challenging dominant narratives, these campaigns invite the public to reconsider their views on addiction and support more empathetic and inclusive representations.

Interactive engagement is another significant aspect of media convergence that can be leveraged for advocacy and support. Jenkins emphasizes that convergence encourages more interactive forms of communication, where the boundaries between content producers and consumers blur (95). This interactivity can be especially beneficial in the context of addiction, where online communities and support groups provide spaces for individuals to share experiences, seek advice, and offer mutual support. Merolli, Gray, and Martin-Sanchez found that “online support networks can significantly reduce the stigma associated with addiction by fostering open discussions and promoting harm reduction strategies” (102). Such digital spaces extend beyond the limitations of traditional media, offering a more inclusive approach to addressing addiction. Online forums, social media groups, and mental health apps can create supportive environments where individuals affected by addiction can connect with others who understand their struggles, thus reducing feelings of isolation and fostering a sense of belonging.

The concept of transmedia storytelling, where different parts of a narrative are distributed across multiple platforms, aligns with Jenkins’ idea of convergence culture and offers a valuable tool for comprehensive addiction representation. Transmedia storytelling allows different facets of addiction to be explored in depth, catering to diverse audience preferences and enhancing the impact of the narrative. Jenkins describes transmedia as “a strategy that integrates multiple texts to create a coordinated experience across different media platforms” (95). This approach can be particularly useful for depicting the multifaceted nature of addiction, which encompasses biological, psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. For instance, while a fictional drama series might focus on the personal impact of addiction, a companion documentary could provide an in-depth look at scientific research on the topic, and a podcast could feature interviews with experts and individuals in recovery. Such multi-platform engagement supports health

communication goals by presenting addiction as a complex and multi-layered issue, thereby countering simplistic or sensationalized media portrayals (Scolari 590).

Lastly, the viral nature of convergent media offers powerful tools for advocacy campaigns that aim to reshape public perceptions of addiction. Jenkins highlights that “content that achieves viral success spreads across media platforms, reaching a wide audience and often sparking significant social change” (204). In the context of addiction, viral campaigns like #RecoveryMovement or #EndTheStigma utilize social media to amplify messages of hope and promote conversations about addiction. Research on digital activism shows that such campaigns can effectively mobilize communities and raise awareness about social issues, leading to shifts in public attitudes and even influencing policy changes (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 10). By using convergent media to reach diverse audiences, these campaigns can break down stigma, educate the public, and advocate for more compassionate and informed approaches to addiction. Jenkins’ media convergence theory provides a robust framework for enhancing addiction representation in the media. It supports multi-dimensional storytelling, encourages participatory culture, and facilitates the challenging of stigmatizing narratives. Media convergence can play a critical role in fostering a more nuanced and empathetic public discourse on addiction by promoting interactive engagement, transmedia storytelling, and viral advocacy. This multi-faceted approach enriches our understanding of addiction and opens new avenues for advocacy, education, and support in ways that traditional media alone cannot achieve.

### **The History of Addiction**

It is essential to include the historical context of addiction when discussing addiction more broadly, particularly in relation to its representation in the media. The article “*History of the Concept of*

*Addiction*” by Peter E. Nathan, Mandy Conrad, and Anne Helene Skinstad offers a comprehensive analysis of how addiction, particularly alcohol addiction, has been conceptualized over time. Spanning 12,000 years of history, the text highlights the shifting perspectives on addiction, oscillating between moral, social, and medical viewpoints. This evolution is traced through ancient religious and philosophical frameworks, which have influenced modern psychiatric approaches, such as the classifications outlined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). Alcohol intoxication and dependency were recognized as far back as ancient civilizations. In societies like those of ancient China, Egypt, and Greece, alcohol consumption was common, and overindulgence was often viewed with moral disapproval. Religious texts, including the Hebrew Bible, the Koran, and various Buddhist teachings, denounced drunkenness, associating it with sin or moral failure. This early framing of alcohol use as a moral issue laid the foundation for later discussions on whether addiction is a question of personal weakness or a broader social or psychological problem. During the Middle Ages, alcohol continued to play a significant role in daily life due to the scarcity of clean drinking water. Theological figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin saw moderate alcohol consumption as acceptable, even divinely sanctioned, but condemned excessive drinking as sinful. Such views reflected a general European consensus at the time that drinking in moderation was part of a healthy social life, while addiction or dependency was viewed as a moral transgression. This religious framing persisted until the Industrial Revolution when increased emphasis on productivity began to change social attitudes toward alcohol.

The late 18th and 19th centuries marked a turning point in the conceptualization of addiction, as pioneers like Philippe Pinel in France and Benjamin Rush in the United States laid the groundwork for the medicalization of addiction. Rush, often considered the father of American

psychiatry, argued that alcoholism was a medical disease rather than a moral failing, and he established the first American institution dedicated to the treatment of alcoholics. His perspective shifted the discourse away from moral condemnation and toward medical intervention, emphasizing the need for humane treatment of addiction. German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin, a central figure in modern psychiatry, expanded on these ideas in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by classifying mental disorders, including addiction, with an emphasis on biological and genetic causes. Kraepelin's influence shaped psychiatric views on addiction throughout the 20th century, and his work, along with that of Eugen Bleuler and Sigmund Freud, played a key role in the development of later psychiatric diagnostic tools, such as the DSM. Freud's views, although less influential in the long term, introduced psychological dimensions to addiction, particularly regarding unconscious dependencies formed during childhood. The rise of temperance movements in the 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in the United States, reflected societal concerns about the negative social and moral impacts of alcohol consumption. These movements, often religiously motivated, linked alcohol use to social ills such as domestic violence and economic instability. The temperance movement culminated in the Prohibition era (1920–1933), which sought to eliminate alcohol consumption through legal restrictions. However, Prohibition's failure to effectively reduce alcoholism reinforced the need for a deeper understanding of addiction as a complex social and medical issue, not merely a legal one. The founding of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in 1935 marked another significant development in the treatment of alcohol addiction. AA introduced a spiritual model for recovery, asserting that alcoholics are powerless over their addiction and must rely on a higher power for help. This approach, alongside E.M. Jellinek's *Disease Concept of Alcoholism* in the 1960s, further reinforced the view that alcoholism is a

disease. Jellinek's work categorized alcoholism into different types based on varying degrees of physical, psychological, and social impairment, helping to shape modern conceptions of addiction.

The evolving understanding of addiction is also reflected in the development of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). The first edition of the DSM (1952) classified addiction alongside personality disorders, reflecting a stigmatizing view of addiction as a moral failing. DSM-III (1980) marked a major shift toward a more atheoretical, descriptive approach, requiring physiological symptoms like tolerance and withdrawal for a diagnosis of substance dependence. This approach carried through into DSM-IV, which emphasized the biological underpinnings of addiction while also recognizing behavioral aspects. The most recent edition, DSM-5 (2013), moved further toward a neurobiological understanding of addiction. It posits that all substances taken in excess activate the brain's reward system, underlining addiction's basis in brain chemistry and cognitive functions. This shift toward a biological model reflects broader changes in both psychiatric practice and societal views, moving away from moralistic interpretations of addiction and recognizing it as a complex condition influenced by genetic, psychological, and social factors.

### **The Science of Addiction**

We can distinguish between two types of addiction: substance-related and non-substance-related addiction. Both are recognized within the field of addiction research but differ considerably in their triggers, manifestations, and effects on the individual. "Addictive behaviours supersede healthy and self-care related behaviours. Addiction also affects neurotransmission and interactions between cortical and hippocampal circuits and brain reward structures, such that the memory of previous exposures to rewards (such as food, sex, alcohol, drugs, and the internet) leads to a

biological and behavioural response to external cues, in turn triggering craving and/or engagement in addictive behaviours” (Zhang et al.) Substance addiction, traditionally associated with the use of alcohol, drugs, or nicotine, involves a physical dependence that leads to withdrawal symptoms and profound effects on the body's neurochemical systems. This type of addiction is characterized by the compulsive use of substances that alter brain chemistry, mainly by affecting neurotransmitters such as dopamine, which reinforces the addictive behavior. In contrast, non-substance addictions such as gambling, pornography, internet use, or compulsive shopping do not involve an external chemical agent but instead are characterized by behaviors that become compulsive and maladaptive behavior. In these behavioral addictions, the brain's reward systems are activated in a similar way to substance addiction, often leading to a psychological dependency that can be just as disruptive to a person's life. Non-substance addictions are often driven by the pursuit of immediate gratification and lead to cycles of behavior that are difficult to control despite the absence of physical withdrawal symptoms.

From a neurobiological perspective, both types of addiction involve the mesolimbic dopamine pathway, often referred to as the brain's “reward circuit.” However, while substance addiction typically leads to more direct changes in brain chemistry due to external substances, non-substance addiction leads to similar changes through the repetition of behaviors that activate this reward circuit. This has led to a debate in the scientific community about the classification and treatment of these addictions, with some researchers advocating for a unified approach to both addictions, given their shared mechanisms.

From a psychological perspective, substance addiction is often viewed through the lens of dependence and tolerance, where increasing amounts of a substance are required to achieve the same effect. Non-substance addictions are often analyzed in terms of their effects on cognitive

processes such as decision-making, impulse control, and emotion regulation. Despite these differences, both types of addiction can lead to significant impairment of daily functioning and quality of life, necessitating comprehensive treatment approaches that address the underlying psychological and neurobiological factors.

According to the article “The Psychology of Addiction” (Svanberg), understanding the psychological dimensions of addiction requires a multifaceted approach that examines how cognitive processes, brain function, and developmental context contribute to the disorder. Cognitive-behavioral theories assume that addiction is significantly influenced by perceptual and decision-making disorders. People suffering from addiction often exhibit impaired executive function, which is characterized by deficits in planning, impulse control, and risk assessment. These cognitive impairments lead to a tendency for immediate gratification that overshadows the long-term negative consequences. The article highlights the critical role of reinforcement learning in addiction, in which the brain’s reward system, particularly the mesolimbic dopamine pathways, is engaged by substances or behaviors that provide immediate gratification, creating a strong urge to repeat the behavior despite harmful consequences. Neurobiological research highlights how addiction alters brain structures, such as the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for higher-level executive functions, and the limbic system, which regulates emotional responses. These changes impair the individual’s ability to exert self-control and regulate their emotions, making it difficult to resist the compulsive urge to engage in addictive behavior. Furthermore, the article emphasizes the importance of early life experiences and environmental influences for the development of addiction susceptibility. Adverse childhood experiences, such as trauma or neglect, and sociocultural factors, including peer pressure and socioeconomic conditions, can significantly impact an individual’s risk of developing addictive behavior. This comprehensive understanding

of addiction requires an integrative treatment and prevention approach that combines cognitive-behavioral interventions with strategies aimed at addressing neurobiological vulnerabilities and mitigating environmental risk factors. By considering the interplay between cognitive deficits, neural changes, and environmental influences, the article advocates for a holistic perspective in the treatment of addiction, aiming to develop more effective and individualized interventions that address the underlying complexities of the disorder.

### **From the addicts' point of view**

In recent years, the conversation surrounding addiction has expanded, with more people who struggle with addiction stepping into the spotlight to share their personal stories. This shift has led to a broader understanding of addiction as a complex, multifaceted issue rather than simply a moral failing. Individuals with lived experiences have become powerful advocates, often appearing in media to break down stigma and provide nuanced perspectives. Their contributions can have a profound impact on public perception, as media depictions of addiction can both challenge and perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

According to advocacy groups, media plays a critical role in shaping societal attitudes toward addiction. In the past, people with substance use disorders were often depicted in highly stigmatized ways, seen as criminals or morally weak. However, as personal testimonies from addicts become more prevalent, this narrative has begun to shift. Media platforms have increasingly offered space for those affected by addiction to discuss their experiences, humanizing the issue and helping to reduce stigma (Mothers Against Addiction). By hearing directly from addicts, audiences are better able to grasp the realities of addiction, which often include intense psychological and emotional struggles. Research has demonstrated that media exposure to

personal stories of addiction can significantly influence public attitudes. For instance, studies show that when addiction is portrayed with empathy and depth, people are more likely to view it as a public health issue rather than a personal failing. This approach fosters a more supportive environment for those struggling with addiction, encouraging them to seek help and reducing the isolation that stigma creates (Addiction Group). The portrayal of addiction in pop culture and the media has evolved to present more realistic depictions, particularly in shows and films that engage with the mental and emotional toll addiction takes on individuals. While scholars continue to contribute valuable research on addiction, personal testimonies provide a dimension of lived experience that academic studies cannot fully capture. When addicts share their stories, they often provide insight into the daily challenges of recovery, the social stigma they face, and the complex factors that contribute to their struggles. These narratives are crucial for fostering a more compassionate and understanding public discourse around addiction. Moreover, they highlight the importance of responsible media portrayals, which can either perpetuate or challenge harmful stereotypes (Better Addiction Care).

Incorporating both academic research and personal testimonies in discussions about addiction allows for a more holistic understanding of the issue. Personal accounts of addiction offer a powerful counter-narrative to the sensationalized or overly simplistic depictions that sometimes dominate media representations. The inclusion of addicts' voices in media has the potential to reshape societal views on addiction, providing a more accurate picture of the challenges and triumphs that come with recovery. Thus, when considering the representation of addiction in the media, it is essential to prioritize the voices of those who have experienced it firsthand. Their stories provide depth and nuance, helping to dismantle stigma and promote a more informed public understanding of addiction as a complex and profoundly human struggle.

In *The Urge: Our History of Addiction*, Carl Erik Fisher presents a compelling case for why the testimony of individuals who have lived through addiction is vital in any discussion about how addiction is represented in the media. Fisher, who has experienced addiction firsthand, challenges the simplistic narratives that often dominate public discourse, highlighting how media portrayals frequently reduce addicts to one-dimensional stereotypes, such as criminals or morally corrupt individuals. Instead, Fisher provides a nuanced understanding of addiction, drawing upon both his personal experiences and his expertise as a psychiatrist to emphasize the complex interplay of mental health, trauma, and social factors that contribute to addiction. He writes, “The real stories of addiction are far messier than the neat, cautionary tales we often see in films and news reports” (Fisher 15). This observation reflects the problematic nature of media representations, which often fail to capture the full complexity of the addict’s experience.

By sharing his own story, Fisher offers an alternative to these harmful stereotypes, emphasizing the importance of empathy and understanding when it comes to addiction. He notes, “Addicts are often portrayed as lost causes, people who have chosen their path, but the reality is much more nuanced, involving issues of mental health, trauma, and societal pressures” (Fisher 42). His perspective, as both an addict and a medical professional, challenges the stigmatization that dominates much of the public’s perception of addiction. Rather than viewing addicts as individuals who have made poor choices, Fisher urges readers to consider the broader context in which addiction occurs, including factors such as socioeconomic conditions, mental illness, and the influence of trauma.

This focus on the addict’s testimony is particularly important in light of the ways media often simplifies addiction for dramatic effect. Films, television shows, and news reports tend to highlight extreme cases or frame addiction as a personal failing, reinforcing a moralistic view of

the issue. Fisher critiques this approach, arguing that it fails to address the systemic and psychological complexities that contribute to addiction. As he points out, “Media narratives about addiction are often shaped by what is most sensational or easily digestible for the public, but this comes at the cost of the addict’s humanity” (Fisher 68). His work underscores the need for media to move beyond these narrow portrayals and engage with the lived experiences of those who struggle with addiction.

Fisher’s testimony is also a powerful reminder of the importance of including addicts’ voices in discussions about addiction policy and treatment. By sharing his own journey, Fisher demonstrates that recovery is not a linear process, nor is it simply a matter of willpower or morality. He writes, “The road to recovery is long and fraught with setbacks, but the media often portrays it as a quick fix, with addicts either overcoming their addiction completely or succumbing to it entirely” (Fisher 91). This binary approach to addiction ignores the complexities of recovery and reinforces unrealistic expectations about what it means to overcome addiction.

Moreover, Fisher’s insights highlight the role that empathy plays in shaping public attitudes toward addiction. He emphasizes that understanding addiction requires more than just scientific knowledge or medical expertise; it requires listening to the stories of those who have experienced it firsthand. “There is no one-size-fits-all approach to addiction,” Fisher argues, “and the most effective treatments are those that take into account the unique circumstances of each individual’s experience” (Fisher 120). His argument serves as a call to action for media producers, policymakers, and the general public to consider the diverse and often painful realities of addiction when crafting narratives or policies related to the issue.

*The Urge* makes a compelling case for why the testimony of addicts should be central to any discussion of addiction, particularly when it comes to media representation. Fisher’s personal

and professional insights reveal the deep flaws in the way addiction is often portrayed in popular culture, and his call for a more empathetic and nuanced understanding of the issue is both timely and necessary. As he writes, “To truly understand addiction, we must listen to the voices of those who have lived it” (Fisher 156). This simple but profound statement encapsulates the core message of *The Urge*: that addiction is not a moral failing or a simple matter of choice but a complex and deeply personal experience that deserves to be understood in all its complexity.

## Chapter 2 – Representing Addiction in Contemporary Film and Television

Addiction is a deeply complex and multifaceted issue, frequently portrayed in media in ways that shape societal understanding and attitudes toward those who suffer from it. Representations of addiction, particularly in popular culture, play a significant role in how individuals and communities perceive both the condition itself and the potential for recovery. This thesis examines the portrayal of addiction in two distinct works of fiction: Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* and the animated series *Bojack Horseman*. These works, while vastly different in style and tone, both explore the nature of addiction in ways that challenge common assumptions about its portrayal in media. *Nymphomaniac* presents a raw and unflinching depiction of sex addiction, stripped of any glorification or sensationalism, instead focusing on the painful consequences of compulsive behavior. In contrast, *Bojack Horseman* offers a nuanced portrayal of substance addiction, where addiction is shown not as a final, destructive force but as a condition that, while devastating, holds the possibility of healing and redemption. By comparing these two vastly different representations, this thesis seeks to highlight how addiction can be portrayed in complex and diverse ways, challenging traditional narratives and opening up discussions about the potential for recovery and the human capacity for change.

### Case Study: *BoJack Horseman* – The Hopeful Representation of Addiction

Out of various famous television productions of the last decade whose topics touch on sensitive and relative issues, *BoJack Horseman* emerges as a compelling case study, offering a nuanced and multifaceted exploration of addiction within the context of contemporary culture. *BoJack*

*Horseman* is an American animated show for adults created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg and distributed on Netflix; it was released on August 22, 2014, and ended on January 31, 2020. It holds a distinctive spot in the world of TV dramas by examining the intricacies of contemporary life through fusing aspects of comedy, existential drama, and satire. The narrative framework of *BoJack Horseman* encompasses a tragicomic portrayal situated within an alternate reality where humans and anthropomorphized animals inhabit Hollywoo together (originally Hollywood, the name is changed in the show after the D is stolen from the sign by a dog character named Mr. Peanutbutter). The show revolves around its title character, BoJack Horseman. He is a former star of a fictional 1990s sitcom, *Horsin' Around*, which followed a young bachelor horse attempting to raise three orphaned human children. "What makes BoJack unique among comedic protagonists is his capacity to be both a cartoonish heel and a flawed, dramatic antihero who has to cope with the havoc he wreaks upon his own life." (McDonnell, 2018) At the beginning of the animated series, BoJack is planning a powerful comeback to fame with a tell-all autobiography written by ghostwriter Diane Nguyen. She becomes one of the most influential figures in his life as the show unravels together with his former lover and agent, Princess Carolyn. Simultaneously, the horse battles with his many addictions, traumas, mental health, and harmful habits deeply rooted in his childhood that followed him into adulthood. Through its innovative narrative structure and rich character development, *BoJack Horseman* delves into the psychological depths of addiction, offering viewers a window into the internal struggles and external consequences that accompany addictive behaviors. Through the application of textual analysis and communication studies approaches, this study explores the complex portrayal of addiction in the production. It illustrates its consequences for audience perception and the conversation surrounding addiction in society. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how addiction is constructed and

communicated within popular media through a nuanced exploration of character narratives, visual symbolism, and thematic motifs.

A recent study has concluded that “In the past decade, several rigorous reviews have concluded that exposure to alcohol content in marketing and the media increases risk of drinking among youth ranging in age from young adolescent to young adult.” (Jackson et al., 2018) Other researchers have shown, however, that media portrayals of addiction have the power to both challenge and reinforce prevalent preconceptions and stigmatizing attitudes about the condition, thus impacting public opinion and policy responses. In this regard, *BoJack Horseman* stands out as a television series that rejects oversimplified moralizing stories in favor of a complex and sympathetic depiction of addiction that connects with viewers on a deep emotional and cognitive level. “Public stigma plays a significant role in shaping how we perceive individuals with substance use disorders. Media reports often frame addiction as a moral failing rather than a medical condition” (Schomerus and Corrigan 37) What the show does exceptionally is that it portrays multiple characters with different life stories and a variety of struggles, giving real-life people accurate on-screen representations of issues such as depression and substance abuse. *BoJack Horseman* creators set a new standard for television series by portraying the correlation between addiction struggles and mental health neutrally and realistically while adopting a more widely approachable format – animation. By making most of the main characters look like colorful animals, the show deludes the seriousness of the mental health discussion tone while adamantly addressing complex topics.

## **BoJack and his substance dependency**

Addiction is shown as a central theme throughout all seasons of *BoJack Horseman*. The series examines various kinds of dependencies and how they impact a person's life and relationships, such as, but not limited to, alcoholism, drug, and sex addiction. The audience first meets BoJack in the opening episode of season one, when he introduces himself and confesses to being intoxicated during an interview. From the outset, the audience recognizes that his addiction problems are intrinsically linked to his daily existence and persona. Throughout the series, the protagonist's substance dependence is described as a coping method for his ingrained emotional problems, which include feelings of purposelessness, loneliness, and self-doubt. Drugs of all sorts, shapes, and forms, as well as alcohol, have become normality and reality for him as well as those around him. Especially at the beginning of the series, those close to the horse protagonist downplay his destructive habits, such as mixing medicinal pills and vodka for breakfast in a blender, because he seems to be functioning well in his twisted ways.

Already from the second episode, the viewers start to begin to understand the motives behind such lavish use of stimulants. The part of his life in which Horseman is a depressed, unemployed former big star alcoholic is essential to his portrayal and how the audience sees him, somehow loving and hating this broken horse at the same time. The protagonist has had a complicated and difficult childhood, an argument constantly expended throughout the series. The show paints a story of an incidental encounter between Beatrice Sugarman, an heiress to the Sugarman Sugar Cube Company, and Butterscotch Horseman, a working-class alcoholic and failed novelist. They accidentally get pregnant and have BoJack, whom they psychologically abuse throughout his whole life, blaming him for their failed marriage and unhappiness. He would eventually inherit and internalize generational trauma and prejudices from them unwillingly. The

TV show unravels the root of his trauma and substance abuse in an unchronological order throughout its duration. During the shows final season, the horses first contact with alcohol is shown in a series of flashbacks.



**Figure 1:** BoJacks first time getting drunk (*BoJack Horseman*)

The protagonist has been exposed to alcohol since the approximate age of six. In episode one of season six, the audience sees BoJacks parents unconscious in the living room, presumably because they have had too much to drink. As a small child, BoJack spots a bottle of vodka on the ottoman, picks it up, and has a sip. After that, he collapses onto his mother’s lap and goes to sleep. It seems like this is the only way he feels he can connect to them; by repeating their destructive patterns, he hopes to gain his parents’ acceptance and love. In the same episode, BoJack, aged ten, walks in on his father having an affair with his secretary, and in order to keep his young son’s mouth shut, the abusive father tricks him into drinking a Jack and Coke. The young horse wakes up; he is scolded by his father and told, “I think your mother would be very disappointed in you (...) Maybe it’s best if we both just forgot about everything that happened tonight.” (*BoJack Horseman*) The protagonist’s father used alcohol to trick his son into not revealing his affair,

effectively worsening and conditioning his addiction further in life through a trauma bond. This, along with many similar situations, is portrayed to be the reason for the flawed characters' dependency on alcohol and later drugs.

An important storytelling aspect of the show's depiction of addiction is BoJack's relationship with Sarah Lynn – a child star from his 90s show *Horsin' Around* who grew up to be a problematic product of her Hollywood environment. She was dismissed on set as a little girl and, at only a couple of years old, got accidentally drunk on BoJack, and his hairdressers smuggled vodka he kept in a water bottle in his dressing room. This is an analogous narrative event to the one mentioned previously in the horses' childhood. It highlights the vicious dependency cycle passed down from one figure of authority to a child over and over again until one person takes definitive action to get better. BoJack Horseman was supposed to be a role model for Sarah Lynn and instead duplicated the same abusive behavior his parents have shown towards him. Because of the lack of empathy and compassion shown to Sarah Lynn during her formative years in the entertainment industry, she grew up to be an insecure addict pop star who was thought to be well behind her prime, already in her thirties. She, too, was acting out in order to get the right type of attention she was lacking in her life. The show excels at the realistic depiction of addiction and how hard it can be to quit destructive coping mechanisms from the very beginning of the story. In season one, episode three, the protagonist explains that he accompanied his young former costar to a rehab facility, which she quit the next day because she was not ready nor eager to get help. BoJack describes himself as a 'before rehab' type of friend. This is how the production indicates to the audience that the character isn't ready to take accountability for his actions and go to a similar institution. His journey of battling addiction is far from over. Sarah Lynn smartly uses the horse's sentiment against him and convinces him to let her stay at his house and enables her to

party, take drugs, and drink with strangers she has invited. He tries to take on a parental role and guide her on the right path, but by no means is he an authority figure, especially given his own substance abuse problems. He offers her one of his TV awards as a gift, and she pawns it off in order to get more money for drugs. When the horse finds out, he confronts her, and after a fight escalates, the two end up having sex together. Such a morally questionable depiction of their relationship serves to further the narrative about the devastating effects of addiction and unresolved traumas in both aforementioned characters. After Horseman tries to take the woman to rehab again, she just leaves his house and “I guess I’ll just move out and find one of the billion people who will let me party at their house. (...) I’m at a place right now where I never need to grow as a person or rise to an occasion because I can constantly just surround myself with sycophants and enablers until I die tragically young.” (*BoJack Horseman*) The writers have used this quote as a foreshadowing of further events and represent as accurately as possible the thought process inside an addicted person’s head. The show’s makers had always agreed on the probability of Sarah Lynn’s death, depending on how long the show would run. They debated over several seasons for her demise, but ultimately, they decided that season three was the appropriate one. They aimed to gradually reveal her narrative more while keeping the audience slightly surprised.

One of the protagonists’ first benders on the show was used to further the narrative about Bojacks irresponsible choices and entangling and enabling other addicted people in his dangerous behavior. In season one, episode eleven of *BoJack Horseman*, the depiction of addiction is closely interwoven with the narrative’s visual fabric. Through the use of striking imagery, such as shabby settings and disheveled characters, the episode conveys the toll that substance abuse takes on both individuals and their surroundings. For instance, the depiction of cluttered and unkempt living spaces serves as a strong visual metaphor for the chaos and decay caused by addiction. In addition,

the episode's color palette is carefully orchestrated to evoke mood and emotion, with vibrant hues symbolizing moments of fleeting euphoria amidst a backdrop of darker, somber tones reflecting addiction's underlying despair. This interplay of colors serves to accentuate the cyclical nature of addictive behavior and the constant struggle for control.

Furthermore, the episode uses visual cues to underscore the mental turmoil of the characters grappling with addiction. The application of distorted or fragmented images in moments of intoxication effectively conveys the disorientation and detachment from reality that accompanies substance abuse. Equally, sobering moments are often depicted with a severity and clarity that highlights the contrast between the highs and lows of addiction.

To do justice to *BoJack Horseman's* representation of addiction, one cannot fail to mention an episode called *That's Too Much Man*. The show's pivotal episode explores the convoluted interactions among addiction, celebrity culture, and existential sorrow. BoJack and Sarah Lynn set off on a hedonistic adventure driven by drugs and revelry as they battle their individual demons. This spiral into maximum indulgence is a microcosm of the larger social pressures and psychological weaknesses that befall people caught up in the spotlight. The episode skillfully examines the psychological foundations of addiction, shedding light on the self-destructive behaviors' cyclical nature and the obsessive search for escape. The story confronts the effects of the former costars' reckless abandon as they descend more and deeper into the abyss of substance misuse, building to a terrifying climax of Sarah Lynn's tragic overdose. The episode's narrative framework and visual symbolism further highlight the depth of its theme, with fragmented perceptions and distorted reality mirroring the characters' turbulent inner worlds. The horse continues to have blackouts throughout the episode and completely loses track of time.

With each chronological jump, the characters look worse and dirtier, and even they are unable to tell the difference between fiction and reality, a common theme in BoJack's benders. The episode forces viewers to face the harsh realities of addiction and the fleeting nature of fame by juxtaposing periods of happiness with sobering reminders of mortality. "I think when we first pitched this episode, Netflix was nervous because they felt like, after this episode, BoJack had to get sober. Story-wise, we weren't ready for that...he definitely *should* get sober, but lots of people come this close to death and don't necessarily take the steps they need to take in order to get better." (Framke) This installment within the series serves a dual function: it operates as a narrative device to advance the developmental arcs of the principal characters, whose trajectories are characterized by inherent flaws and tumultuous endeavors toward achieving sobriety. Moreover, it functions as a cautionary tale by offering viewers a stark portrayal of the profound ramifications associated with the extremities of addiction. Through its depiction of the character's descent into the abyss of substance abuse and the subsequent fallout, the episode serves as a didactic platform urging audiences to contemplate the harrowing realities and potential consequences inherent in the throes of addiction.

In the later seasons of BoJack Horseman, a discernible escalation in the main character's struggle with dependency unfolds, portraying a development characterized by an increasing consolidation of addictive behavior. Throughout the story, BoJack Horseman repeatedly finds himself in dangerous situations in which he almost miraculously escapes dire consequences due to the precarious circumstances. This recurrent pattern of narrowly escaping the consequences of his actions creates a sense of invincibility, fostering a dangerous complacency towards his addictions. The accumulation of these near misses gives BoJack a misguided belief in his ability to avoid the repercussions of his self-destructive tendencies. This delusion, coupled with an increasing

disregard for the severity of his addiction, pushes him further down a path of recklessness and denial. The insidious nature of addiction becomes apparent as Bojacks perception of his own resilience becomes distorted, leading to a dangerous cycle of escalating addiction and diminished self-awareness.

### **Bojack's inability to be alone**

Within the narrative framework of BoJack Horseman, the titular equine protagonist emerges as a complex character whose struggles with addiction transcend substances and involve a profound dependence on interpersonal relationships and validation. The show emphasizes the complex social dynamics between people and the dangers of emotional dependence. It does so by highlighting the multifaceted aspect of Bojacks addiction. At the center of the main character's dependence on people is his relentless pursuit of validation and affection from others, fueled by an insatiable desire for external approval and closeness. Throughout the series, Bojacks interactions with various characters, such as Diane or Princess Carolyn, are characterized by a palpable yearning for acceptance and approval as he seeks solace in the fleeting moments of connection his relationships offer him. Whether it's his tumultuous friendships, tense family dynamics, or fleeting romantic entanglements, Bojacks thirst for emotional intimacy serves as the driving force behind his relentless pursuit of human connection.

BoJack Horseman's nuanced interpersonal connections, particularly with Todd Chavez, provide an engaging look at his inability to function without others and the ramifications it causes. The horse battles addiction in many forms throughout the series, including drug, alcohol, and validation-seeking. One of the most recurring motifs, nonetheless, is his addiction to people—especially to those who provide him a sense of camaraderie and serve as a diversion from his inner

anguish. Todd Chavez, who is first shown as a sweet and innocent character, gets mixed up in Bojacks wild world. The boy finds himself at the actors' Halloween party and is the only one left after the event dies out. Horseman's later invitation for Todd to stay at his house "for as long as he wants" is a crucial exchange that establishes the parameters of their relationship. In his own way, BoJack gradually undermines Todd's sense of self-sufficiency and cultivates a situation where Chavez is more and more reliant on him. The protagonist's need for approval and company is satiated by this dependency, which gives him direction and control over his otherwise chaotic life. He begins to feel less alone and less inclined toward self-destruction when Todd is around. But in the end, BoJack's actions poison Todd's dependency by undermining his growth and well-being on a constant basis. Horseman's addiction to people is a reflection of larger themes of escapism and the need for purpose in an empty and hopeless world. He tries to replace the emptiness inside himself by clinging to people, but this serves to feed the cycle of dysfunction and dependency. The way these interactions are portrayed in the show is a moving commentary on the difficulties of interpersonal relationships and the fallout from turning to people for comfort instead of facing one's own inner problems.

Similarly, Princess Carolyn, who is the protagonist's long-term friend, agent, and occasionally lover, and BoJack Horseman have a convoluted relationship that involves emotional dependence, manipulation, and attachment dynamics. The pink cat has a dual role in BoJack's life, both as a confidante and an enabler of his destructive tendencies. From a scholarly viewpoint, their relationship can be analyzed within the context of attachment theory, as BoJack displays ambivalent attachment patterns characterized by oscillations between wanting to be close to Princess Carolyn and separating from her. Horseman's early experiences with abandonment and abuse make it harder for him to develop stable attachments, which makes him more prone to

emotional instability and cycles of reliance. In return, Princess Carolyn plays the role of a caregiver, giving BoJack emotional support and stability throughout his turbulent life. For example, the show's later seasons present a story arc in which investigative reporters from a prominent newspaper prepare a potentially damaging exposé concerning BoJack, who has ostensibly reformed his life and assumed the role of an acting professor at a university. Despite no longer serving as his agent, Princess Carolyn exhibits unwavering loyalty and support by dedicating the entire night to assisting BoJack in identifying which of his numerous past mistakes might be the focus of the reporters' story. Her actions underscore a profound sense of duty and compassion as she endeavors to provide emotional and strategic support to the horse professor during this critical period of vulnerability and uncertainty. But BoJack frequently takes advantage of her steadfast devotion, playing on her weakness to meet his own demands for approval and company. This dynamic highlights the power imbalances that exist in their relationship, as Princess Carolyn's loyalty turns into a strength and a weakness that may be taken advantage of. Furthermore, his maladaptive coping strategy for his internalized sense of inadequacy and existential sorrow is his obsessive need for her acceptance and presence. A cycle of reliance and dysfunction is maintained by BoJack's obsession with Princess Carolyn, where he alternates between periods of sincere intimacy and detachment.

Finally, the last and arguably most important person in the horse's life is Diane Nguyen – first a ghostwriter who is supposed to capture his life in a biography, later a dear friend whom he cannot seem to let go of. The relationship between BoJack Horseman and Diane Nguyen traverses a complex process characterized by mutual understanding, emotional entanglement, and the constant struggle to reconcile their shared past with their individual growth trajectories. This analysis focuses on the poignant moments leading up to BoJack's near-death experience and

subsequent resolution, illuminating their bond and Bojacks intricacies and reluctance to relinquish their friendship. Over the course of the series, BoJack and Diane forge a deep connection rooted in their shared experiences of existential disillusionment and angst. BoJack, in particular, gravitates towards Diane as a confidante and sounding board, finding solace in her empathetic understanding and intellectual guidance. However, their relationship is characterized by tensions and unresolved conflicts that are emblematic of the broader themes of moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas explored in the series. Bojacks self-destructive tendencies and propensity for moral transgressions often strain their friendship and challenge Diane's ethical convictions and moral compass.

For example, in Season 2 Episode *Escape from L.A.* Penny, BoJacks friends Charlotte's seventeen-year-old daughter comes home from the prom they went to together. The girl tells him he is the first adult to treat her equally. She kisses BoJack and proposes to sleep with him. Despite her protestations that she is within the age of consent in the state of New Mexico, is sober, and has condoms from health class in her room, BoJack rejects her and claims she does not know what she wants. She gets angry and goes into the house with tears in her eyes. Charlotte passes by to investigate; she hears the breaking of a lamp and Penny's faint voice from inside the ship. She opens the cabin door and discovers both Penny and BoJack in bed, about to start undressing each other. The situation with Penny, in which BoJack engages in profoundly morally ambiguous actions, serves as a crucial catalyst for the ensuing conflict. When Diane, who has often positioned herself as the moral compass in Bojacks life, learns the details of this incident, she is confronted with the stark reality of his capacity for deeply troubling behavior. The confrontation between BoJack and Diane is marked by strong emotional volatility, reflecting the series' broader thematic exploration of morality, accountability, and the complexity of human relationships. Bojacks

reluctance to reveal the truth about the incident in New Mexico shows his pervasive fear of judgment and rejection and his chronic avoidance of accountability. Diane's reaction, characterized by a combination of outrage, disappointment, and disillusionment, highlights the deep ethical divide between her idealistic values and BoJack's often self-destructive actions. When BoJack is confronted with his mortality after his near-death experience, his bond with Diane becomes palpable. As can be seen in the penultimate episode of the series, he calls her both in his pre-death delusions and in real life. He leaves her a traumatizing message in which he leaves her wondering for hours after the incident whether he has really died so as not to be alone in his darkest hour. Faced with the prospect of his own demise, BoJack clings to Diane like a lifeline amidst the uncertainty of his existential journey. This poignant moment underscores the depth of their bond and his deep reluctance to let go of his connections, even in the face of mortality.

### **Redemption Arc**

To fully appreciate the complexity and brilliance of this show, it is essential to examine the protagonist's redemption arc and the hope depicted in overcoming various forms of addiction. This analysis can be effectively conducted using narrative theory. The theory of narrative structure examines how a story's narration is built. According to Tzvetan Todorov, "there are five stages that a character should go through in a story; those are Equilibrium, Disruption, Recognition, Repair the Damage and Equilibrium Again." (Adepati and Samanik) This theory was initially used in analyzing full-length films but is neither the less perfectly applicable to television series as well. Since the pace of TV shows is slower than that of movies, *BoJack Horseman's* creators took time to present an accurate representation of the characters' development regarding their mental health. "Unlike many TV representations of characters as either good or bad in black and white terms,

Bojacks' representation as a character riddled with flaws is perhaps a refreshing and realistic take on personality and development.” (Parashar) The show allows its viewers to judge Bojacks character while portraying a multilayered, troubled individual.



**Figure 2:** From the top left, BoJack shown in five narrative stages of his life. (*BoJack Horseman*)

When discussing the series' narration, one must examine its title characters' storyline. The Equilibrium stage, so the 'normal' stage in Bojacks life, was never a positive one. He grew up in a constant state of sadness and abuse, surrounded by addiction, and that is what he had known as 'normal' until adolescence. The Disequilibrium stage in which normality is disturbed by a specific event is not a simple one to analyze in terms of narrative choices regarding the horse actor. Because so much time passes between the second and the third stage of the narrative theory, Horseman hits countless rock bottoms. The antihero of this series experienced a notable period in which he abstained from alcohol, demonstrating his commitment to personal improvement and ethical

behavior. However, during his time on the set of *Horsin' Around*, a groundbreaking television production in his career trajectory, BoJack fell into patterns of addiction reminiscent of those observed in his family lineage and immediate environment. This relapse into familiar addictive behaviors underscores the profound influence of social conditioning and environmental factors on Bojacks personal development. It illuminates the enduring struggle to free himself from the cyclical patterns of addiction deeply ingrained within his familial and professional environment.

One of those low moments was seducing and almost being intimate with his former close friend's teenage daughter, Penny Carson after her family had welcomed him and let the horse live with them for months in season two. (Figure 2) Kate Purdy, the show's producer, explained that BoJack "really wants to be a good person – but seems to struggle with what it means to be good." (McDonnell) Another major event that may be classified as the disequilibrium's trigger is when BoJack and his mentee Sarah Lynn go to a planetarium after a month-long alcohol and drug 'bender,' and she dies next to him. Sarah Lynn's tragic passing has pushed BoJack into the Acknowledgment stage, which is displayed by the narrative choice of the title character going into rehab. After decades of being trapped in a cycle of destructive behaviors, Bojacks admission to the rehab facility makes him realize his profound fatigue and the compelling need for outside help. This narrative arc allows the old actor to reflect on his past traumas and marks a crucial turning point in his tumultuous journey of self-destruction. It helps push the character to conclude that he wants to stay sober after all those years of escaping his various issues through substance abuse. Ultimately, it's only a stopgap measure that makes way for the remaining plot points and the gratifying resolution of his redemption arc.

The show's fourth narrative stage, which is Solving, is where the audience sees an attempt to fix the damage caused by the disturbance. In season six, after BoJack leaves rehab, where he

spends several months, he tries to find a new purpose in life to prevent himself from falling back into his depression and substance dependency. He gets offered a position as an acting professor at his half-sister Hollyhock's school, Wesleyan University. (Figure 2) This change in Horseman's story is major as he is finally trying to make significant changes in his life, such as moving out of Hollywood and trying to find his long-lost life purpose and happiness in sobriety. This stage is critical to the purpose of the show as it gives its audience hope for things to get better. If a cynical and seemingly 'broken' persona such as BoJack can combat substance dependency and turn his life around, so can everybody else. However, the creators of the show opted for a less simple and romanticized version of events. Before the protagonist could achieve the final narrative stage, they made him hit the definitive rock bottom, which ultimately saved his life and made him face the consequences of his actions over the years. Horseman ends up in jail officially for breaking into a stranger's home while intoxicated, but even he admits that the judge was not lenient with him given his former massive, morally ambiguous scandals. This allows the protagonist to finally sober up and learn better how to be alone, however it also changes all his relationships permanently.

The final stage of Todorov's narrative theory is the new Equilibrium, which indicates that the characters in the series have finally found their new 'normal.' Season six ends with BoJack and Diane having a serious existential conversation about their life choices and happiness. (Figure 2) Miss Nguyen mentioned not trusting the 'happy feeling' for a while but eventually giving in, and it was the best decision she had made in a long time. They discuss BoJack's prison sentence for all of his wrongdoings and his taking this opportunity as a complete life restart and a chance to build his own happy future. "Structural analysis of stories concerned itself not with what narratively organized sign systems mean but rather with how they mean, and more specifically with how they mean as narratives." (Phelan and Rabinowitz) That does not mean that symbols

generally do not play an essential role in visual media analysis. However, it does indicate that in narrative theory, the goals of the plot play a more crucial role in the structural understanding of the narrative. By prolonging and showing Bojack's harsh life journey and describing his struggles in detail in the storyline, the creators of the show had an opportunity to accurately represent substance abuse issues to its viewers while still offering them hope.

### **Case Study: *Nymphomaniac* – a nonconformist interpretation of sex addiction**

A contrasting work of fiction that tackles the representation of addiction in a different, less positive, and hopeful way is Lars von Trier's movie *Nymphomaniac Vol. I*. Lars von Trier is a prominent Danish filmmaker known for his unconventional and often provocative approach to cinema. His work is characterized by a distinctive blend of narrative innovation, psychological depth, and a willingness to tackle taboo and controversial subjects. Von Trier's directing style frequently challenges traditional cinematic norms, both in terms of form and content, and often employs a raw and unfiltered aesthetic that heightens the emotional intensity of his films. At the heart of Trier's work is an exploration of complex and often disturbing themes such as sex addiction, depression, and human suffering. His 2013 film *Nymphomaniac* serves as a prime example, in which he explores the intricacies of sexual obsession and compulsion. Von Trier's portrayal of such themes is characterized by a refusal to shy away from the darker side of human nature, often leaving the viewer in a state of unease or deep contemplation and sometimes even feeling genuinely disturbed.

It is necessary to understand the movie director's style and artistic background to comprehend why *Nymphomaniac* is such a particular piece of fiction media. Lars von Trier is widely regarded as one of the most influential and divisive filmmakers in contemporary cinema,

with a body of work that continually challenges narrative conventions, aesthetic norms, and audience sensibilities. His films are often marked by their intense psychological focus, controversial subject matter, and distinctive use of cinematic techniques that deliberately unsettle viewers. Von Trier's oeuvre spans a wide range of genres, from psychological drama to avant-garde experimentation, yet his signature style remains defined by a desire to provoke, both emotionally and intellectually. One of the defining features of von Trier's cinematic approach is his rejection of conventional storytelling in favor of fragmented, nonlinear narratives. His films often exhibit a self-conscious awareness of their own artifice, breaking the fourth wall or employing metafictional techniques to draw attention to the film's construction. This can be seen in works such as *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), where the narrative structure and visual style are deliberately destabilized to evoke a sense of disorientation and emotional upheaval in the viewer. Von Trier frequently blends realism with stylization, creating films that oscillate between the brutally raw and the overtly theatrical. A notable example of von Trier's cinematic innovation is his involvement in the *Dogme 95* movement, which he co-founded with fellow Danish filmmaker Thomas Vinterberg. *Dogme 95* was a radical manifesto that called for a rejection of conventional filmmaking practices in favor of a stripped-down, minimalist approach. The movement emphasized the use of natural lighting, handheld cameras, and location shooting, with an emphasis on authenticity and spontaneity in performance. This aesthetic is evident in von Trier's *The Nymphomaniac* (2013), where the raw cinematic style serves to amplify the film's controversial subject matter, exploring themes of social deviance, mental illness, and sex addiction in a manner that is intentionally abrasive and confrontational.

An interplay between stark realism and symbolic abstraction also characterizes Von Trier's visual style. His films frequently employ unflinching close-ups and handheld cinematography,

which heighten the sense of intimacy and psychological discomfort. At the same time, von Trier's use of abstract, often surreal imagery adds a layer of symbolic depth to his work, creating films that operate on multiple interpretive levels. This tension between realism and stylization is central to von Trier's work, as he seeks to evoke visceral emotional responses while also prompting deeper philosophical reflection.

Furthermore, von Trier's films are notable for their thematic preoccupations with human suffering, guilt, and the darker aspects of human psychology. His characters are often placed in extreme situations—whether emotional, psychological, or physical—that force them to confront their own limitations and moral ambiguities. In *Melancholia* (2011), von Trier uses the impending destruction of Earth as a metaphor for depression, exploring the ways in which mental illness distorts perception and human relationships. Von Trier's exploration of such heavy, often taboo themes has made him a controversial figure, as his films frequently push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable or palatable within mainstream cinema. His cinematic techniques are also notable for their capacity to evoke intense emotional responses from his audience. His films are often structured around scenes of extreme emotional or physical suffering, with long takes, uncomfortably close framing, and a deliberate emphasis on the vulnerability of the human body and psyche. This is particularly evident in *Dancer in the Dark*, where von Trier uses Björk's performance to heighten the film's emotional intensity, juxtaposing her character's naïve optimism with the cruelty of the world around her. The film's use of music, combined with its stark visual style, creates a powerful emotional contrast that underlines the tragic trajectory of the protagonist's story.

### Visual and Aesthetic Choices in Portraying Sex Addiction

In Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* (2013), the portrayal of sex addiction is achieved not only through the narrative but also through carefully constructed visual and aesthetic choices. Joe, the film's protagonist, recounts her lifelong addiction to sex in a non-linear structure, where each encounter and relationship offers insight into her compulsions.



**Figure 3:** Joe telling her story (*Nymphomaniac*)

Von Trier employs techniques that range from symbolic imagery to minimalist framing to convey the repetitive, dehumanizing effects of her addiction. Through these elements, Trier strips away the sensuality of sex, which is so often used and exploited in Hollywood. Instead, he presents it as a mechanical, alienating act that mirrors Joe's emotional detachment. It is evident in one of the protagonist's first firm statements about herself: "It's my own fault I'm just a bad human being" (*Nymphomaniac: Vol I*). In this way, the film's visuals become an essential tool in depicting sex addiction not as something driven by desire but as a relentless, isolating force that consumes Joe's identity. Stuart Hall's visual theories, particularly his concept of encoding and decoding, offer a compelling lens through which to interpret the fishing metaphor in *Nymphomaniac* and its

relationship to addiction. Hall's theory posits that media messages are encoded by their creators with specific meanings, but audiences do not passively accept them. Instead, viewers actively decode these messages, potentially interpreting them differently based on their cultural, social, and psychological frameworks. In the context of *Nymphomaniac*, von Trier encodes the fishing metaphor with layers of meaning, using it as a visual symbol to explore the compulsive, cyclical nature of Joe's addiction. However, the way audiences decode this metaphor can vary depending on their own perceptions of addiction, sexuality, and power dynamics. For some viewers, the fishing metaphor might be decoded as a critique of predatory sexual behavior, where Joe's pursuit of men mirrors a fisherman's exploitation of nature for personal gain. For others, it could be interpreted more empathetically as a representation of Joe's internal struggle, illustrating how her compulsions trap her in a cycle of self-destruction. Hall's theory underscores the complexity of von Trier's visual choices. By encoding addiction through the fishing metaphor, he creates a space for viewers to engage with the film on multiple levels, allowing them to bring their own experiences and biases to their interpretation of Joe's behavior. The tension between von Trier's encoded message and the various ways it can be decoded reflects Hall's argument that meaning is never fixed but, rather, fluid and open to reinterpretation—just as addiction itself can be understood from multiple perspectives.

### **Narrative and framing as tools of addiction portrayal**

The film's structure plays a critical role in conveying addiction's fragmented, chaotic nature. *Nymphomaniac* is divided into chapters, with each segment portraying a particular aspect of Joe's life or sexual experiences. This non-linear narrative structure mirrors Joe's fragmented sense of self, as her addiction to sex has taken over her life to the point that it is not a continuous, cohesive

journey but a series of compulsions. Von Trier visualizes this fragmentation through jump cuts, disjointed transitions, and the frequent use of flashbacks, which underscore Joe's inability to maintain a stable emotional connection with others. As Joe recounts her experiences to Seligman, the episodic format conveys how sex addiction has compartmentalized her life, with each episode being a temporary fix for an underlying emptiness that is never satisfied.



**Figure 4:** Girls on the train (*Nymphomaniac*)

For instance, in *Chapter 1: The Compleat Angler*, Joe describes her early discovery of sex through experimentation with a friend, B. The chapter unfolds as a standalone vignette, disconnected from the previous events of her life. Joe recounts a game she and her childhood friend, B, would play on trains: they would compete to see who could seduce the most men during the journey. The winner would win a simple, symbolic bag of candy. This competition, which Joe refers to as “fishing for men,” introduces the metaphor and sets the tone for how sex will be portrayed throughout the film. Much like a fisherman casting his line into the water with the hope of reeling in a catch, Joe and B approach the act of seduction as a sport devoid of emotional investment or genuine attraction. The act of “catching” men becomes a thrill in itself, detached from any deeper meaning or satisfaction. In this sense, fishing symbolizes the repetitive, cyclical

nature of addiction, where the addict continually seeks gratification without ever truly achieving it. The setting of this scene on a train is particularly significant. The movement of the train, steadily progressing toward its destination, contrasts with the static nature of Joe's addiction. While the train moves forward, Joe's sexual experiences remain stagnant, repeating in different forms but never progressing toward any form of resolution or emotional growth. This visual juxtaposition between forward motion and cyclical behavior emphasizes the paradox of addiction: the addict is constantly in pursuit of something new, yet remains trapped in a pattern of repetition. The fishing game on the train exemplifies how Joe's early sexual experiences were devoid of meaning from the start, serving only as a temporary fix for an underlying void. The segmented nature of this scene echoes Joe's future trajectory, where each sexual encounter becomes an isolated event, disconnected from intimacy or emotional depth. Von Trier's use of framing and camera techniques plays a significant role in de-romanticizing the act of sex, reinforcing its portrayal as a compulsive, mechanical behavior rather than an intimate or passionate act. The framing often isolates body parts—limbs, torsos, or faces—in close-up shots, reducing sex to a series of physical movements. This is particularly evident in scenes where Joe has sex with strangers, where the camera does not linger on sensuality but instead captures the clinical, almost robotic nature of the act. For example, in *Chapter 3: Mrs. H*, Joe begins an affair with a married man. The camera focuses on the repetitive, mechanical thrusting of their bodies, devoid of passion or connection. By framing sex in this cold, detached manner, von Trier visually communicates the emotional void Joe feels in her relationships, emphasizing that sex is merely a compulsive act for her, divorced from any deeper meaning. The viewer is rarely invited to connect with Joe or her partners on an emotional level, as the film deliberately distances the audience from the characters' internal lives. This mirrors the

emotional alienation that addiction often creates, as Joe becomes increasingly disconnected from her feelings, treating sex as a tool for temporary relief rather than an expression of intimacy.

Another visual element that von Trier masterfully employs to reflect addiction is his use of lighting and color. The film's palette is often cold, muted, and desaturated, evoking a sense of numbness and emotional isolation. Many of Joe's encounters take place in sterile, dimly lit environments—such as anonymous hotel rooms, dark alleyways, or bare apartments—reinforcing the impersonal, transactional nature of her sexual activities. These dimly lit scenes contrast sharply with moments of heightened emotion or introspection, where natural light or warmer tones are used to signify fleeting moments of clarity or vulnerability.

One powerful example occurs in *Chapter 2: Jerome*, where Joe tries to feign virginity with her boss, Jerome, to seduce him. The lighting in this scene is dim and oppressive, reflecting Joe's discomfort and emotional detachment as she goes through the motions of seduction without any real desire. The contrast between the dark, shadowy environment and the innocence of the act Joe tries to mimic highlights the emotional dissonance she feels. Despite her efforts to create a moment of significance, the lighting emphasizes how hollow and forced the experience is for her. Through these choices, von Trier visually represents Joe's inner desolation and her inability to find satisfaction in her addiction. In addition to visual aesthetics, von Trier uses minimalism in dialogue and performance to portray Joe's emotional detachment. Many of Joe's sexual encounters are wordless, with little to no verbal communication between her and her partners. This lack of dialogue reinforces the idea that these encounters are not about connection but about fulfilling a compulsive need. The silences in these scenes create a sense of isolation, both for Joe and for the audience, as we are left to watch the mechanical nature of her addiction unfold without any emotional context.

For example, in *Chapter 5: The Little Organ School*, Joe's relationship with Jerome, who she claims to love, is characterized by awkward, uncomfortable silences. Even when she finally engages in sexual intercourse with him, there is no catharsis or release. Instead, the scene is marked by an overwhelming sense of emptiness, with Joe breaking down in tears afterward, lamenting that she can't feel anything. The minimalist approach to dialogue here emphasizes Joe's emotional disconnection, not just from Jerome but from herself. What further underlines the silence and isolation of this type of addiction is the little to no use of background music or sound throughout the whole film.

### **Symbolism: The Fishing Metaphor as Addiction**

One of the most striking symbolic elements in *Nymphomaniac* is the recurring use of the previously mentioned fishing as a metaphor for Joe's addiction. Introduced in *Chapter 1: The Compleat Angler*, the fishing metaphor serves as a visual and narrative representation of Joe's relentless pursuit of sexual encounters, which parallels the compulsive and often predatory nature of addiction. By employing the fishing motif, von Trier highlights how Joe's relationship with sex is driven not by desire or emotional fulfillment but by an insatiable need to conquer, consume, and move on to the next challenge—much like a fisherman casting his line over and over, hoping to catch something bigger or more satisfying. This metaphor evolves throughout the film, coming to symbolize the futility of Joe's addiction, where no amount of sexual experience ever brings her closer to a sense of wholeness or peace. Another relevant concept from Stuart Hall's theories that can be applied to this work of art is his idea of 'representation' as a process of constructing meaning rather than simply reflecting reality. Hall argues that representation involves the use of language, images, and symbols to create meaning, shaping how we understand and engage with various

concepts. In *Nymphomaniac*, the fishing metaphor represents more than a mere reflection of Joe's addiction; it constructs an understanding of her compulsions in a way that invites deeper contemplation. The fishing scenes are not just narrative devices but visual representations that work to define Joe's addiction as something cyclical, predatory, and unfulfilling. Through von Trier's deliberate use of this metaphor, viewers are guided to see Joe's pursuit of men as an endless and consuming process, reflecting Hall's notion that representation plays a crucial role in how we make sense of human behavior and identity. The metaphor doesn't just "show" addiction; it constructs its meaning in a symbolic language that asks the audience to engage with it critically. Furthermore, Hall's theory emphasizes how representations can reinforce or challenge dominant cultural ideas. In this case, von Trier challenges typical depictions of female sexuality by framing Joe's behavior through a traditionally masculine metaphor of conquest (fishing). This challenges viewers' preconceptions about power, control, and agency in the context of addiction and subverts traditional narratives about women and sex. By employing representation in this multi-layered manner, von Trier makes it possible for the fishing metaphor to function as a visual and intellectual construct that challenges our comprehension of addiction and highlights its societal ramifications and psychological complexity.



**Figure 5:** ‘The Little Flock’ club meeting (*Nymphomaniac*)

The club that Joe and B start, referred to in *Nymphomaniac* as “The Little Flock,” plays a crucial role in illustrating Joe’s growing detachment from emotional connections and deepening addiction to lovemaking. The club, founded by the two young women, is based on a set of strict rules: they are allowed to have as much sex as they want, but under no circumstances are they allowed to form emotional attachments or engage in relationships. This “no love, only sex” rule is critical in the development of Joe’s character and serves as a stark metaphor for her descent into a compulsive cycle of sexual addiction. The fishing metaphor comes into play again here, as Joe and B essentially use their club as a platform to “fish” for men, seeking out new partners in a ritualistic, almost mechanical manner. The club is based on the principle of conquests—much like how a fisherman seeks out various catches for sport, Joe and B use the club as a way to constantly pursue new men without investing anything emotional or meaningful into the encounters. This depersonalized, transactional approach to sex underscores the core elements of addiction: the compulsive need to repeat behavior without any lasting satisfaction or fulfillment. The very structure of the club mirrors the isolating nature of addiction, where emotional connection is actively avoided, and the pursuit of sex is reduced to a series of impersonal exchanges. The creation of this club also highlights the idea of addiction as a form of rebellion or rejection of societal norms. By forming a group centered around sexual freedom but devoid of any emotional ties, Joe and B not only distance themselves from traditional ideas of romance and relationships, but also challenge the expectations placed on women regarding love and intimacy. Their behavior, which is motivated by the desire to control and dominate their own sexual experiences, is a direct rebellion against the notion that sex must be tied to affection or connection. However, much like

the fisherman who continues casting his line despite never catching the perfect fish, Joe's experience within the club becomes hollow and repetitive. While the club initially seems to offer freedom, it soon becomes clear that the rigid rules of "no love, only sex" trap Joe in a cycle of unfulfilling encounters that only deepen her addiction.

The club's structure also emphasizes the competitive nature of Joe's addiction. As in the earlier "fishing game" on the train, the club fosters a sense of rivalry between Joe and B, who both seek to outdo each other in their number of sexual partners. This competitive aspect is another key feature of addiction: the constant need for more, to go further, to exceed previous limits. The more partners Joe accumulates, the more hollow and meaningless her experiences become, highlighting the destructive cycle of addiction where each new encounter brings her no closer to the satisfaction she craves. By organizing their sexual exploits into a formalized club, Joe and B transform sex into a system of consumption, stripping it of intimacy and reducing it to a series of conquests that reflect the compulsive nature of addiction.

As the film progresses, the fishing metaphor becomes a more explicit representation of Joe's addiction. In *Chapter 2: Jerome*, Joe begins her first relationship with a young man named Jerome. Unlike her earlier encounters, Jerome represents a potential for emotional connection. However, Joe's addiction prevents her from engaging with him on a deeper level, as she is more interested in the chase than in the relationship itself. The fishing metaphor resurfaces here, as the protagonist's pursuit of Jerome is not about love or intimacy but about the thrill of "catching" him. Once she succeeds in seducing him, her interest wanes, and she moves on to the next challenge, much like a fisherman discarding one catch and casting his line for another. The cyclical nature of this metaphor reaches its apex in *Chapter 4: Delirium*, where Joe's addiction spirals out of control. In one pivotal scene, Joe approaches a random man on the street, asking him to engage in sexual

acts with her. The encounter is brief, mechanical, and devoid of any emotional connection. Afterward, the camera lingers on Joe's expressionless face, emphasizing the emptiness she feels after each "catch." Despite her compulsive need to seek out these encounters, they bring her no satisfaction. The fishing metaphor here illustrates the futility of her addiction. No matter how many men she seduces, she remains unfulfilled and trapped in the same repetitive cycle of seeking and discarding. Her addiction worsens with age.

Von Trier reinforces the fishing metaphor through Joe's narration to Seligman, who, as a character, represents rationality and intellectual detachment. Seligman frequently interrupts Joe's story to provide his own interpretations and explanations, often using fishing as a frame of reference. For Seligman, fishing is a benign, meditative activity, an intellectual pursuit that requires patience and skill. However, Joe's version of fishing is far more aggressive and compulsive. While Seligman views fishing as a controlled, deliberate act, Joe's sexual "fishing" is driven by a need that is beyond her control. This contrast between Seligman's intellectual understanding of fishing and Joe's compulsive behavior highlights the disconnect between addiction and rationality. Addiction, as portrayed through Joe's story, is not something that can be intellectualized or controlled—it is a force that drives her actions despite her best efforts to stop.

The fishing metaphor also underscores the predatory nature of Joe's addiction. Much like a fisherman baiting a hook to lure in fish, Joe uses her sexuality as a tool to lure men into brief, meaningless encounters. In this way, her addiction turns her into both the predator and the prey. She is constantly hunting for her following "catch," but at the same time, she is trapped by her own compulsions, unable to break free from the cycle.

In conclusion, through its fragmented narrative, clinical framing, cold lighting, symbolic metaphors, and minimalist dialogue, *Nymphomaniac* visually and aesthetically portrays sex

addiction as a compulsive, isolating, and ultimately dehumanizing force. Lars von Trier's deliberate choices in these areas strip away the sensuality and intimacy traditionally associated with sex, instead presenting it as an empty, repetitive behavior that erodes Joe's emotional well-being. These aesthetic elements work in concert to convey the profound impact of addiction, emphasizing its destructive nature and the emotional desolation it leaves in its wake.

### **Audience Reception and Interpretation of Addiction Portrayals**

The reception of *BoJack Horseman* and *Nymphomaniac* provides insight into how these portrayals shape audience perceptions of addiction, particularly regarding empathy, stigma, and the complexities of recovery. Online fan discussions and viewer reviews suggest that *BoJack Horseman*'s nuanced exploration of substance addiction fosters a sense of understanding and relatability. In contrast, *Nymphomaniac*'s portrayal of sex addiction often evokes mixed reactions, highlighting cultural stigmas around hypersexuality and addiction. Fans of *BoJack Horseman* frequently interpret BoJack's character as a realistic and multi-dimensional depiction of addiction, appreciating how the show addresses the cycle of relapse and recovery without glorification or moral absolutes. Many viewers note that the show's willingness to confront BoJack's repeated mistakes, rather than offering a neat resolution, resonates with their understanding of addiction as an ongoing battle. On Reddit, one user shares, "BoJack's struggle feels real because he does not just magically get better. He makes progress, he falls back, and it's messy—just like real addiction." This perspective illustrates how audiences perceive *BoJack Horseman* as both empathetic and honest in its depiction of substance dependency. Viewer comments across fan forums also reveal a strong appreciation for how the show humanizes those struggling with addiction, challenging traditional media tropes that stigmatize or oversimplify addiction. One fan

writes, “Seeing BoJack fail so many times, but still having moments where he tries, reminds me that addiction isn’t a straight path. It’s one of the few shows that makes me feel seen” (BoJackForum). Additionally, audience interpretations indicate that *BoJack Horseman* influences viewers’ perceptions of recovery. While the show avoids a definitive redemption arc for BoJack, fans discuss how it encourages an empathetic view of those with addictions, particularly by showing the impact of BoJack’s struggles on his relationships and mental health. This engagement suggests that viewers see *BoJack Horseman* as entertainment and a platform that invites meaningful conversations about addiction. As one user on Tumblr notes, “*BoJack* doesn’t glorify addiction, but it doesn’t make it a punishment either. It feels like a story about people doing their best, even when they’re at their worst, which makes it powerful” (BoJackDiscussions). The show’s fan communities underscore that *BoJack Horseman* challenges simplistic or punitive views on addiction, offering a narrative that fosters empathy and understanding.

Conversely, audience reactions to *Nymphomaniac* highlight the persistent stigma surrounding sex addiction and cultural discomfort with hypersexuality. Lars von Trier’s portrayal of Joe’s addiction as bleak and unyielding has led some viewers to view the film as an unflinching, if unsettling, look at the consequences of compulsive behavior. However, others interpret the film as reinforcing negative stereotypes about sex addiction, arguing that its unrelenting focus on Joe’s self-destructive behavior lacks the nuance often extended to portrayals of substance addiction. On Letterboxd, one viewer remarks, “Joe’s addiction feels like a punishment. There’s no room for hope or recovery here, just an endless cycle of degradation.” This perception indicates that, for some viewers, *Nymphomaniac* offers a compelling portrayal of addiction but ultimately limited in its exploration of recovery. Despite its divisive reception, *Nymphomaniac* has sparked discussions among audiences about the complexities of sex addiction and society’s judgmental stance toward

hypersexuality. In online film forums, viewers frequently debate whether the film's stark portrayal serves to critique societal perceptions of addiction or reinforces them. A user on an addiction-focused forum comments, "*Nymphomaniac* made me think about how society treats sex addiction differently from drug or alcohol addiction. People are quicker to judge, and the film plays into that, maybe intentionally." These audience reflections suggest that, while *Nymphomaniac* confronts the darker realities of addiction, its approach may leave audiences with unresolved questions about societal attitudes toward sex addiction.

The audience reception of *BoJack Horseman* and *Nymphomaniac* reflects the distinct cultural messages embedded within each work. *BoJack Horseman* resonates with viewers by portraying addiction as a complex human struggle, fostering empathy and reducing stigma around recovery's non-linear nature. Meanwhile, *Nymphomaniac* invites a more conflicted response, with some viewers interpreting its portrayal of sex addiction as a bold critique of societal judgment and others seeing it as a reinforcement of stigmatizing perspectives. These varied responses underscore the capacity of media portrayals to shape public attitudes toward addiction, influencing whether viewers view addiction through a lens of empathy or judgment.

## **Chapter 3 – Gaming Addiction and Its Framing in Traditional**

### **Media**

The selection of a case study on traditional media coverage of gaming addiction for the media chapter of this thesis stems from the recognition that the term “addiction” is often narrowly associated with substances such as drugs and alcohol. However, addiction is a multifaceted phenomenon that extends beyond substance use, encompassing behavioral forms such as gaming addiction. This choice aims to illuminate the complexity of addiction by examining how media representations contribute to shaping public perceptions of gaming as an addictive behavior. Traditional media plays a significant role in informing society about health-related issues, and its coverage of gaming addiction influences how the condition is understood and addressed. The analysis seeks to reveal the narratives employed and their implications for public understanding by exploring the extent to which gaming addiction is covered in the media. The portrayal of gaming addiction can either perpetuate negative stereotypes or raise awareness in constructive ways, affecting both the stigmatization and legitimization of behavioral addictions. The case study thus offers a lens through which to examine how media narratives impact societal attitudes toward non-substance-related addictions, potentially influencing policy, healthcare practices, and individuals’ self-perceptions in relation to gaming behaviors. Such an exploration underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of addiction that encompasses its various forms and recognizes the power of media to shape public discourse.

In recent decades, video games have evolved from simple recreational activities into a significant cultural and economic force, engaging millions of people across the globe. What was once considered a niche hobby has transformed into a multifaceted industry, encompassing everything from competitive e-sports to immersive virtual worlds. With the rise of online multiplayer games, mobile gaming, and increasingly sophisticated technology, video gaming has become an integral part of modern life for many individuals, particularly younger generations. However, alongside this rapid growth has emerged a growing concern about the potential negative impacts of excessive gaming, specifically in relation to gaming addiction. “Media depictions of addiction tend to highlight extreme behaviors, like criminal activity or violence, while ignoring the more mundane, everyday struggles of people with substance use disorders” (Schomerus and Corrigan 37).

Gaming addiction, also referred to as gaming disorder, is a behavioral condition characterized by the compulsive use of video games despite negative consequences in personal, social, or occupational life. It is often compared to other forms of addiction, such as substance abuse or gambling, due to its detrimental effects on mental and physical health, as well as its interference with daily functioning. Symptoms of gaming addiction can include preoccupation with gaming, loss of control over the amount of time spent playing, neglect of responsibilities, withdrawal symptoms when not gaming, and the continued use of video games even when it leads to problems in relationships or performance at school or work. For some individuals, excessive engagement in gaming can spiral into a cycle that mirrors the clinical patterns of addiction, leading to the need for professional intervention.

The recognition of gaming addiction as a serious mental health issue reached a critical juncture in 2018 when the World Health Organization (WHO) formally included ‘gaming

disorder’ in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). The WHO’s classification defines gaming disorder as a pattern of behavior characterized by impaired control over gaming, increased priority given to gaming over other activities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite negative consequences (World Health Organization). This classification signaled a growing consensus within the medical and psychological communities about the legitimacy of gaming addiction as a diagnosable condition. It also sparked widespread media coverage and public debate over the implications of gaming addiction for individuals, families, and society at large. Despite this formal recognition, there remains significant debate over the nature of gaming addiction, its prevalence, and the appropriate methods for treatment and prevention. The rise of gaming addiction is particularly concerning in light of the rapid expansion of gaming technologies that are designed to maximize user engagement. Many contemporary video games incorporate features that are specifically intended to encourage prolonged play. These features include reward systems, in-game achievements, loot boxes, and microtransactions, all of which are psychologically rewarding and can foster addictive behaviors. For instance, the concept of “variable rewards,” wherein players receive unpredictable rewards for their in-game actions, mirrors mechanisms used in gambling to keep individuals hooked. Likewise, socially interactive games—like multiplayer online games—create settings where social dynamics and peer pressure can reinforce gaming behaviors. Another level of complication is the possibility of financial rewards, such as those from professional e-sports, game streaming, or online content production, which makes it harder for certain players to distinguish between their jobs and their leisure time.

## **Gaming versus Gambling**

The distinctions and similarities between gambling and gaming addiction offer significant insight into the nature of behavioral addictions, as both involve compulsive engagement with an activity that can lead to negative consequences. While gambling addiction has long been recognized as a severe mental health issue, the classification of gaming addiction as a behavioral disorder is a more recent development, particularly after the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized “gaming disorder” in 2019. Despite their differences, gambling and gaming share common features, including the stimulation of reward pathways in the brain, the potential for financial and social consequences, and the use of specific design elements that can promote addictive behaviors. However, there are also fundamental distinctions in the nature of the activities, the types of rewards they offer, and the demographic profiles of those most at risk.

One of the most significant similarities between gambling and gaming addiction is their impact on the brain’s reward system. Both behaviors trigger the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward. According to Griffiths, “both gambling and gaming can be highly engaging and capable of providing intense experiences of excitement and arousal” (Griffiths 205). Given that repeated gambling or gaming can change the brain’s reward circuitry and make it harder for people to control their behavior, this similarity implies that the mechanisms underlying the development of addiction in both activities are neurologically comparable. This impact is further enhanced by the usage of reward schedules, such as loot boxes or in-game awards in gaming and random payouts in gambling. These reward systems mimic the variable reinforcement patterns found in gambling, which are known to be particularly effective in encouraging continued participation. However, while both gambling and gaming addiction involve reward mechanisms, they differ in the type of rewards that motivate the behavior. In

gambling, the primary reward is monetary, with players engaging in betting or wagering activities in the hope of financial gain. This direct association with money is a defining characteristic of gambling addiction. As Petry explains, “Gambling addiction is driven by the allure of financial rewards and the thrill associated with risk-taking” (Petry 130). In contrast, gaming addiction typically revolves around non-monetary rewards such as achievements, social status within the game, or progression through game levels. The rewards in gaming are often intrinsic to the gameplay itself rather than external, with players seeking a sense of accomplishment, social connection, or immersion in a virtual world. While some games incorporate financial elements through microtransactions or gambling-like features, such as loot boxes, the primary motivation for gaming is often rooted in the desire for entertainment and social interaction rather than financial profit.

Moreover, the demographics of those affected by gambling and gaming addiction show both overlap and divergence. Gambling addiction is more commonly observed among older adults, often associated with activities such as casino gambling, sports betting, or lottery participation. According to the National Center for Responsible Gaming, “the average age of onset for gambling problems is typically later in life compared to other addictions” (NCRG). On the other hand, gaming addiction predominantly affects younger individuals, particularly adolescents and young adults. The rise of online gaming, mobile apps, and e-sports has created a culture where gaming is a significant social activity among youth. The accessibility of gaming platforms and the integration of social features make it more appealing to younger demographics who may be more vulnerable to excessive gaming behaviors due to developmental factors and the influence of peer groups. Despite these demographic differences, the two types of addiction can share some social and psychological risk factors. Both gambling and gaming addiction are often linked to underlying

issues such as depression, anxiety, or trauma. For example, individuals who struggle with social anxiety may find solace in the immersive experiences offered by gaming or the high-stakes environment of gambling. The WHO notes that “gaming disorder is characterized by a pattern of persistent or recurrent gaming behavior that may become particularly prevalent in those who use it to cope with psychological distress” (World Health Organization). Similarly, gambling can serve as a maladaptive coping mechanism for individuals dealing with financial or emotional stress, as the excitement associated with betting can temporarily mask underlying problems. In both cases, the behavior provides an escape from reality, albeit through different means—gaming through virtual worlds and gambling through the anticipation of winning.

The design elements employed in gaming and gambling also exhibit significant overlap, particularly in how they encourage continued engagement. Features such as loot boxes, which mimic slot machines’ unpredictability and reward system, are examples of how gaming has incorporated elements traditionally associated with gambling. King and Delfabbro argue that “the convergence of gaming and gambling is evident in the use of monetized reward systems, which blur the lines between gaming for entertainment and gambling for financial rewards” (King and Delfabbro 87). The incorporation of gambling mechanics into gaming has raised concerns about the potential for gaming to serve as a gateway to gambling addiction, particularly among younger players who may be more susceptible to the influence of such features. Regulatory bodies in some countries, such as Belgium and the Netherlands, have responded by classifying loot boxes as a form of gambling and implementing restrictions on their use in video games. In contrast, traditional forms of gambling do not usually incorporate the social and immersive aspects of gaming. While some gambling environments, such as poker rooms or sports betting, involve social elements, they do not typically provide the same level of interaction and community as online multiplayer games.

This difference can have implications for the social impact of each addiction. Gaming, for instance, may facilitate social connections within virtual communities, albeit at the cost of real-world interactions. Conversely, gambling is more often associated with social isolation, mainly when individuals engage in solitary forms of gambling, such as online betting or playing slot machines. In conclusion, while gambling and gaming addiction share similarities in their impact on the brain's reward system and their use of reinforcement mechanisms, they differ in the types of rewards sought, the demographics most affected, and the social dynamics of the activities. Both can serve as coping mechanisms for psychological distress, and both have the potential to lead to significant negative consequences. However, the integration of gambling elements into gaming raises new concerns about the blurring of boundaries between the two behaviors. As such, understanding the distinctions and similarities between gambling and gaming addiction is crucial for developing effective prevention and treatment strategies tailored to the unique characteristics of each type of behavioral addiction.

### **Media portrayals of gaming addiction and its societal circumstances**

While gaming addiction is now recognized as a mental health disorder, it remains an area of significant controversy and ongoing research. Scholars and clinicians are divided on several key issues, including the threshold for diagnosing addiction, the long-term health consequences of excessive gaming, and the extent to which game design itself contributes to addictive behavior. Critics of the gaming disorder classification argue that it risks pathologizing what may be a benign or even beneficial activity for most people. Some researchers contend that video games can offer cognitive, social, and emotional benefits and that the vast majority of gamers can regulate their behavior without negative consequences. For example, Isabela Granic, Adam Lobel, and Rutger

C. M. E. Engels argue that video games can provide significant cognitive, social, and emotional benefits for players. In their review published in *American Psychologist*, they explain that video games, particularly action and strategy games, can enhance a range of cognitive skills, including spatial awareness, problem-solving abilities, and creativity. These games often require players to navigate complex environments, make quick decisions, and adapt to changing circumstances, thereby fostering cognitive flexibility. Furthermore, Granic et al. suggest that multiplayer games can serve as valuable platforms for social interaction, as they encourage cooperation, communication, and teamwork among players. The researchers also highlight the potential of gaming to contribute to emotional resilience by providing a safe space for experiencing and managing emotions, which can be beneficial for mental health (“The Benefits of Playing Video Games” 66-68). Through these findings, they challenge the perception that gaming is solely associated with negative outcomes, suggesting instead that it can be a constructive and enriching activity for most individuals.

Moreover, the media’s portrayal of gaming addiction often leans toward sensationalism, contributing to a moral panic about video games that can obscure the more nuanced realities of gaming behavior. For these reasons, there is an ongoing need for research that distinguishes between healthy, immersive gaming and pathological gaming behavior that meets the criteria for addiction. Despite these debates, the effects of gaming addiction are well-documented for those who struggle with the condition. Research has linked excessive gaming with various adverse outcomes, including poor mental health, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and social isolation. Moreover, individuals with gaming addiction often experience academic or professional decline, as excessive gaming interferes with their ability to focus on work or studies. In severe cases, gaming addiction can lead to estrangement from family and friends, financial problems, and

physical health issues such as repetitive strain injuries, poor posture, and weight gain from prolonged sedentary behavior. “Family members of people with SUDs are also affected by media stigma. The media often frames addiction as a family problem, attributing blame to loved ones” (Schomerus and Corrigan 38). Adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of gaming addiction, as they are the demographic that is most likely to engage heavily in video gaming during crucial developmental periods. As such, early intervention and prevention strategies are critical in addressing gaming addiction before it leads to more severe and long-lasting consequences.

The increase in gaming during the COVID-19 pandemic among young people parallels the phenomenon known as hikikomori, a term used to describe severe social withdrawal often associated with young individuals who retreat from society for extended periods. Similar to hikikomori, where individuals isolate themselves due to social, psychological, or familial pressures, the rise in gaming during the pandemic can be seen as a form of withdrawal driven by the unique challenges posed by global lockdowns. The need to escape the stress and uncertainty of the pandemic led many young people to turn to video games as a primary source of entertainment and social interaction. The prolonged isolation from regular social activities made young people particularly susceptible to excessive gaming, which provided a structured virtual space that seemed to replace disrupted routines. This pattern mirrors the withdrawal behaviors observed in hikikomori cases, where online environments substitute real-world interactions, compensating for the loss of direct social connections (Frankova 2). Research suggests that the increase in gaming hours during the pandemic can be viewed through the lens of hikikomori-related behaviors. For example, data from the American Time Use Survey indicated that the average daily time spent on gaming nearly doubled among young men between 2019 and 2022,

which reflects an increased reliance on video games to cope with the lack of physical socialization and to fill the void left by canceled activities and routines. In hikikomori, this pattern is characterized by the avoidance of real-world responsibilities and a preference for digital interactions, which can provide a sense of control and community that may be lacking in the individual's offline life. The parallels between hikikomori and pandemic-related gaming trends suggest that for many young people, gaming became not merely a hobby but a coping mechanism for managing social isolation, anxiety, and the lack of purpose during the pandemic (Frankova 4).

Moreover, the psychological features associated with hikikomori, such as social anxiety, difficulties in forming real-world social bonds, and a preference for indirect communication, can also be observed in the behaviors of young gamers during the pandemic. The WHO's recognition of "gaming disorder" as a legitimate mental health condition in 2019 brought attention to the addictive potential of video games, especially among vulnerable groups. The combination of stress, isolation, and increased access to digital technology created an environment conducive to the development of problematic gaming behaviors. In hikikomori, individuals often report turning to the internet or video games to satisfy social needs due to challenges in building face-to-face connections. The spike in gaming during the pandemic reflects a similar tendency, where virtual interactions temporarily replaced in-person socialization, potentially exacerbating addictive behaviors as individuals sought refuge in digital worlds (Frankova 6; "Video Game Addiction Statistics"). The link between gaming and hikikomori extends beyond the surface-level behavior of gaming itself, revealing deeper psychological and social patterns that drive individuals toward digital withdrawal. The conditions of the pandemic, such as unemployment, school closures, and social distancing, resembled the circumstances that often precede hikikomori, such as significant life stressors, academic pressure, or social rejection. The need for young people to navigate these

challenges without traditional support systems, coupled with increased exposure to gaming, heightened the risk of developing behaviors associated with both gaming addiction and social withdrawal. The psychological impact of these behaviors has long-term implications, as excessive gaming and social withdrawal during formative years can disrupt normal development, leading to persistent issues with social functioning, emotional regulation, and life satisfaction (“Video Game Addiction Statistics”).

Addressing gaming addiction requires a multi-faceted approach, combining medical intervention, psychological support, and public education. Clinically, treatment may involve cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), which focuses on helping individuals recognize and change maladaptive thought patterns related to their gaming habits. In more severe cases, inpatient treatment programs, such as those modeled on substance abuse rehabilitation, may be necessary. Beyond clinical interventions, educating the public, especially parents, educators, and young people, about healthy gaming practices is crucial in mitigating the risks of gaming addiction. As the gaming industry continues to expand, so too must the conversation about how to balance the benefits of gaming with the potential for addiction and the strategies for supporting those who struggle with it.

In their article “*Gaming Disorder: News Media Framing of Video Game Addiction as a Mental Illness*,” Scott Parrott, Ryan Rogers, Nathan A. Towery, and Samuel D. Hakim examine how news media portray this emerging phenomenon. The authors engage in a systematic content analysis of news coverage to explore how video game addiction is framed, particularly in the wake of its inclusion in the previously mentioned WHO’s International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). The study aims to understand the dominant narratives used by the media to present video game addiction, its framing as a mental health issue, and the broader cultural discourses shaping

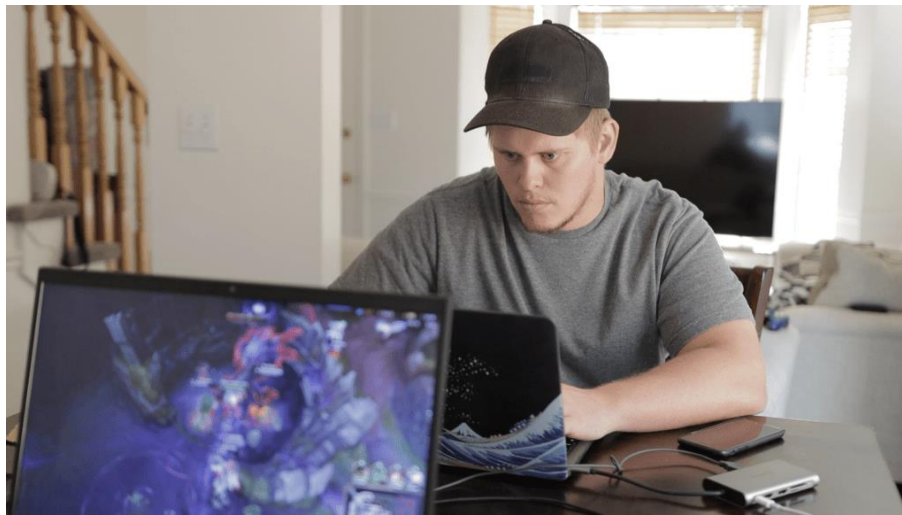
public perceptions of gaming and mental illness. Central to the study is the concept of framing, a term that refers to the way media constructs and presents information to shape public understanding. Framing influences how audiences interpret events, behaviors, or phenomena and thus plays a critical role in public discourse. In this case, the researchers focus on how media framing either legitimizes gaming disorder as a mental illness or sensationalizes it, contributing to stigma and moral panic. The authors seek to address several key research questions: How do news outlets frame gaming disorder following the WHO's classification? What themes dominate the discourse, and how do these narratives influence public perceptions of gaming addiction? And finally, how do these media frames interact with broader societal views on technology, mental health, and personal responsibility? The authors begin by exploring the significance of the WHO's recognition of gaming disorder as a legitimate mental health condition. As mentioned before, in 2018, the WHO included gaming disorder in the ICD-11, defining it as a pattern of gaming behavior characterized by impaired control, prioritization of gaming over other activities, and continuation of gaming despite negative consequences. This recognition was pivotal, providing legitimacy to the concept of gaming addiction and prompting widespread media coverage. Parrott et al. argue that the WHO's decision served as a catalyst for many news outlets to adopt a medicalized frame, portraying gaming disorder as a clinical issue that warrants professional diagnosis and treatment. Media coverage often emphasized the scientific validity of gaming addiction, aligning it with other well-established behavioral disorders such as gambling addiction. This medical framing sought to legitimize concerns over gaming and positioned gaming disorder within a broader context of public health crises.

However, the study also uncovers the prevalence of sensationalist reporting. It is a type of journalism where the focus is typically on dramatic, exaggerated, or alarming information to draw

in and hold the attention of readers—sometimes at the sacrifice of accuracy or subtlety. This kind of reporting usually concentrates on contentious or emotionally charged aspects of a topic and uses attention-grabbing headlines, imagery, and wording to elicit strong feelings. Sensationalism has the power to exaggerate the severity or danger of a situation by misrepresenting the facts or omitting important context. While the medicalization of gaming disorder brought legitimacy to the discussion, many media outlets simultaneously engaged in sensationalism. The authors note that sensationalist stories frequently dramatized extreme cases of gaming addiction, often highlighting isolated incidents where individuals' lives were severely impacted by their excessive gaming habits. For example, stories about young people who became socially isolated or physically harmed due to prolonged gaming sessions were familiar. These narratives contributed to what sociologists describe as a moral panic, a heightened societal response to a perceived threat, often disproportionate to the actual risk posed. In this context, video games were framed not only as an addictive substance but as a corruptive force capable of undermining individual autonomy and disrupting social norms. Such reporting stoked fear and reinforced negative stereotypes about gamers, especially adolescents, as lacking self-control or falling victim to the perils of technology.

The New York Post article, *Gaming addictions 'ruined' lives as players lost jobs, ignored school to spend up to 16 hours a day with video games*, is a great real-life example of sensationalist reporting in how it frames video game addiction. It focuses heavily on extreme personal stories that highlight the destructive impact of gaming without providing a balanced perspective. In the article, Logan Visser's personal battle with video game addiction is a poignant example of how digital entertainment can spiral into a harmful, compulsive behavior. Logan's story starts when he enters Brigham Young University as an 18-year-old student-athlete and a competitive wrestler with plans to study business. However, what started as a casual hobby quickly consumed his life.

He became addicted to *League of Legends*, spending entire nights glued to his computer screen and often playing until sunrise. This cycle became his daily routine; he would sleep until the late afternoon and go to extremes, such as donating plasma for money to buy pizza and Mountain Dew, and then spend the rest of the day gaming. The only break in this cycle was to sleep before repeating it again. This pattern of gaming was characterized by what Logan called a “deep shame” that only drew him further into his addiction, as he could not find a way out.



**Figure 6:** Logan Visser gaming (*The New York Post*)

In just half a year, Logan’s circumstances drastically deteriorated. He started to fail several classes, put on an excessive amount of weight, and lost his social circle. When Logan looked back on this time, he said that his addiction “completely took over” his life and motivated him to concentrate on becoming an expert at a game that, in the end, did not really matter. Logan pointed out that older generations frequently fail to see the attraction and addictive qualities of contemporary video games, which are made with the express purpose of keeping players interested and coming back for more despite the disastrous results. In this sense, Logan’s addiction fits within the broader framework of video gaming addiction as defined by the World Health Organization

(WHO), which in 2019 officially classified gaming disorder as a mental health condition. According to the WHO's definition, gaming disorder is marked by a lack of control over gaming, sidelining other interests and daily activities, and experiencing significant negative impacts on personal, educational, and social life.

Logan's story, while extreme, is not unique. Studies have shown that video game addiction affects between 3% and 4% of all gamers, with the number rising to 8.5% among gamers under the age of 18 (The New York Post). Logan's obsessive engagement with video games mirrors the experiences of other individuals who find themselves trapped by the addictive nature of gaming. For many, gaming becomes a primary method of emotional regulation, similar to other forms of addiction, including gambling. Research suggests that multiplayer role-playing games, such as *League of Legends*, are particularly addictive, as they stimulate a dopamine response in the brain, which can alter brain function over time. Furthermore, the highly social aspects of these games create a virtual environment where players feel a sense of accomplishment, progression, and community, even if their real-world lives are deteriorating. What makes Logan's story compelling is not just the fact that video games nearly ruined his life but also his subsequent recovery and self-awareness about the problem. Eight months before the publication of the article, Logan experienced a pivotal moment when his wife was nearing her due date with their first child. It was then that Logan realized the depth of his problem and made the decision to quit gaming cold turkey. He recognized that he needed to be a responsible father and a positive role model for his son, Mick. Although gaming had provided a sense of fulfillment during the darkest moments of his life, Logan understood that continuing down this path would lead to further harm. Since his decision to quit, Logan has remained abstinent from video games, although he does not plan to ban them entirely from his son's life. Instead, he aims to foster a healthy balance, encouraging outdoor activities like

hiking, biking, and spending time together as a family to fill his son's life with meaningful, real-world experiences.

Media outlets often employ emotional and personal aspects in news reporting to evoke strong emotional responses from their audience, a tactic that is closely linked to sensationalism. By focusing on individual stories that highlight the personal struggles or experiences of individuals, media organizations create narratives that resonate deeply on an emotional level, effectively amplifying the perceived gravity of an issue. This technique, known as “emotional framing,” serves to draw in readers or viewers by making abstract or large-scale issues, such as video game addiction, more tangible and relatable. In this way, media outlets not only capture attention but also shape public discourse around complex issues. The portrayal of personal struggles tied to gaming addiction can overshadow broader, more nuanced discussions, such as the socioeconomic factors or psychological mechanisms that contribute to addiction. By focusing predominantly on emotionally charged narratives, the media can intensify the perceived severity of the problem, making it seem more widespread or dangerous than it may be in reality. This approach is effective in driving engagement, but it often comes at the cost of balanced, informed understanding.

In addition to Logan's personal journey, the article underscores the growing recognition of gaming addiction as a public health issue. Experts, including Dr. Amanda Giordano and Dr. Tanveer Ahmed, emphasize that gaming addiction is a behavioral disorder rooted in social anxiety and emotional regulation challenges. For many young men, gaming becomes a way to escape the pressures of real-world social interactions and responsibilities.

Logan's story is not an isolated incident but part of a broader trend in which gaming addiction has become a serious concern for both individuals and their families. The impact of

gaming addiction extends beyond the virtual world, affecting personal relationships, mental health, and overall well-being. However, Logan's recovery highlights the possibility of overcoming this addiction through self-awareness, strong social support, and a commitment to change. As Logan looks to the future, he aims to set a healthy example for his son by promoting a balanced approach to gaming and ensuring that his child grows up with a variety of enriching real-world experiences.

This kind of framing tends to emphasize worst-case scenarios, reinforcing stereotypes that portray gaming as a societal threat rather than providing a nuanced view that takes into account the broader context of mental health issues associated with gaming. In terms of how gaming addiction is portrayed in the media, the article follows a trend seen in other outlets where the narrative fixates on individuals who claim that gaming has destroyed their lives, careers, and relationships. While such stories are real and should not be discounted, this approach often lacks the balance of showing the complexities of gaming addiction. For instance, research shows that video game addiction is a real issue. Still, it often co-exists with underlying mental health conditions like depression or anxiety, which might be the root cause driving excessive gaming. Additionally, articles like this can sometimes present gaming as inherently dangerous, feeding into moral panics rather than considering the full spectrum of gaming behavior. Some scholars argue that the term 'addiction' should be used cautiously, as not everyone who plays games excessively is necessarily 'addicted.' This kind of portrayal ignores the reality that many people use gaming as a healthy coping mechanism for stress or social isolation, especially during challenging times like the pandemic.



**Figure 7:** Pandemic Video Game sales spike (Statista)

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruptions to everyday life, including a significant shift in how people interacted with technology and entertainment. One notable consequence of the global lockdowns and social distancing measures was a marked increase in video game usage across various demographics, with gaming becoming one of the primary leisure activities during this period. This surge in gaming during the pandemic is not only a reflection of the need for entertainment during periods of isolation but also points to deeper societal and psychological dynamics that emerged as a result of the crisis. As individuals grappled with increased stress, uncertainty, and prolonged periods of isolation, video games offered an accessible and engaging escape, as well as a virtual space for social interaction. However, the sharp rise in gaming also brought to light concerns about video game addiction and its potential long-term

consequences, as gaming became a coping mechanism for many during an era of heightened anxiety and limited physical interaction.

To understand the spike in gaming during the pandemic, it is crucial to examine the context of global lockdowns and the accompanying social restrictions. As public health measures closed schools, workplaces, and social venues, individuals were confined to their homes for extended periods of time. The typical routines of social interaction, physical activity, and in-person entertainment were abruptly cut off, leaving many people with limited options for leisure activities. Video games quickly filled this void, as they offered a way to pass the time, alleviate boredom, and maintain social connections through online multiplayer modes. Games such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Fortnite*, and *Call of Duty: Warzone* experienced a massive increase in player engagement as people flocked to these platforms to interact with friends, family, and even strangers in virtual environments. For example, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, which was released in March 2020 at the height of the pandemic, became a cultural phenomenon, allowing players to simulate a peaceful, idyllic life while the outside world was in chaos.

The appeal of video games during the pandemic also lies in their ability to provide a sense of structure and achievement, which was often missing from real life during the lockdowns. Many people experienced a loss of routine and purpose, particularly those who were furloughed or unable to work. Video games, with their clear objectives, rewards, and progression systems, offered players a way to feel productive and in control, even if only in a virtual sense. This psychological appeal of gaming—providing a sense of mastery, achievement, and escapism—was particularly important during a time when real-world achievements and opportunities were limited. Games with persistent worlds, such as *World of Warcraft* or *Final Fantasy XIV*, also allowed players to

invest time in long-term goals, helping them maintain a sense of continuity and purpose despite the disruptions of the pandemic.

However, the rise in gaming during the pandemic was not without its negative consequences. As gaming became a primary source of entertainment and socialization, many individuals reported spending more time than ever before on video games. Research conducted during the pandemic indicates that the average time spent on gaming significantly increased, particularly among younger demographics. A study by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics' American Time Use Survey found that video game usage for men aged 15 to 24 nearly doubled between 2019 and 2022, rising from 1.08 hours to 1.82 hours per day. This increase reflects a broader trend where video games have become not just a pastime but a central part of daily life for many young people. Moreover, the economic and social pressures of the pandemic likely contributed to the increase in gaming as a form of escapism. With unemployment rates rising, particularly among younger men, and many people facing financial strain, video games provide a relatively affordable form of entertainment compared to other leisure activities. Online gaming platforms offered a sense of community and connection in an otherwise isolated world, further solidifying their role as a coping mechanism during a time of crisis. However, the very nature of video games—designed to be engaging and, in many cases, addictive—meant that for some, this form of escapism led to problematic behaviors. In the absence of traditional social outlets, the boundaries between healthy gaming and compulsive gaming became increasingly blurred.

Overall, the aforementioned article is a telling case study for the purpose of this thesis as it tends to oversimplify the issue and present gaming addiction as a straightforward cause of life problems, which can contribute to a stigmatized view of gaming. Instead, a more balanced

reporting would consider both the potential harms of gaming and the psychological benefits it can offer, depending on the context and the individual.

Moreover, the study identifies the widespread use of the individual responsibility frame, which places the onus on gamers themselves to manage their behavior. Media reports often portrayed those suffering from gaming addiction as personally at fault, emphasizing a lack of discipline or willpower. In this frame, gaming disorder is presented as a problem of personal failings rather than one influenced by external factors such as the design of video games or societal pressures. This approach minimizes the role of broader social, economic, or psychological factors that may contribute to addictive behaviors. For example, while certain games are designed with mechanics that encourage prolonged engagement, such as reward systems, loot boxes, and other in-game purchases—media coverage often downplays these systemic issues. By focusing on individual responsibility, this framing aligns with neoliberal ideologies that emphasize personal accountability over collective responsibility or regulatory intervention.

Parrott et al. highlight how the framing of gaming disorder intersects with broader cultural anxieties about technology. Video games, as a form of digital media, have long been the subject of scrutiny and concern, particularly among older generations. The rapid rise of technology in daily life—through smartphones, social media, and gaming has provoked fears about its impact on human behavior, social relationships, and mental health. Gaming disorder, in this context, is framed as emblematic of the broader risks associated with technology overuse. The media's portrayal of gaming addiction taps into these anxieties, positioning video games as a dangerous force capable of altering individuals' behavior and priorities in ways that conflict with traditional social values. The authors argue that this framing reflects a more profound unease feeling about

the role of technology in modern society and contributes to the stigmatization of gamers as socially deviant or dysfunctional.

The implications of these media frames are significant. First, the way news outlets present gaming disorder has a direct impact on public perceptions of video games and gaming culture. By framing gaming disorder as a mental health crisis, the media reinforces the perception that video games are inherently dangerous and that those who play them excessively are at risk of addiction. This portrayal can lead to increased stigma around gaming, particularly for younger populations who are more likely to engage in gaming as a form of entertainment and social interaction. Second, these frames have potential policy and industry implications. As media coverage increasingly positions gaming disorder as a public health issue, there may be greater pressure on policymakers to regulate the gaming industry. This could involve stricter oversight of addictive game mechanics, such as loot boxes and microtransactions, which are often criticized for exploiting players' psychological tendencies.

## **Chapter 4 – Social Media Addiction**

The chosen articles were selected as case studies to analyze the representation of social media addiction because they provide comprehensive perspectives on the phenomenon's extreme social impact. Social media, being the third pillar of media alongside print and broadcast, plays a critical role in modern communication, making its addictive nature a pressing issue. These articles reveal how social media's design fosters dependency through features that exploit psychological vulnerabilities, leading to widespread behavioral changes. Furthermore, the experiences of young people highlighted in these studies resonate with the struggles many adolescents face, illustrating how addiction disrupts daily life, academic performance, and mental health. The studies thus offer valuable insights into the implications of social media addiction and its representation in media discourse, underscoring the urgent need for greater awareness and intervention.

### **History of social media in the context of modern society**

As a transformative aspect of communication in the digital age, social media has revolutionized how individuals, groups, and societies interact and share information. From its origins in the early internet to today's vast, interconnected platforms, social media has fundamentally altered communication practices and norms. Understanding the history of social media from a communication studies perspective involves tracing its evolution from essential online interaction tools to sophisticated networks that facilitate diverse forms of self-expression, community building, and political engagement. The development of social media can be viewed as a response

to the need for more dynamic and participatory forms of communication, challenging traditional mass media structures and empowering individuals to become active content creators rather than passive consumers.

The roots of social media can be traced back to the early days of the internet, beginning with Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) in the late 1970s and 1980s. BBS allowed users to connect with one another through dial-up modems, posting messages on electronic boards, and engaging in discussions on various topics. This marked the beginning of online communities, where people with shared interests could come together in a digital space to exchange ideas. As Boyd and Ellison explain, “social network sites are not a new phenomenon, but rather an evolution of earlier online communication tools” (Boyd and Ellison 214). The BBS era laid the foundation for later social media platforms by fostering the idea of a virtual community where users could establish relationships and communicate across geographic boundaries.

The advent of the World Wide Web in the 1990s facilitated a significant leap forward in online communication. During this period, online communities began to grow more sophisticated, with platforms such as Geocities and forums like Usenet providing spaces for users to create personalized web pages and engage in threaded discussions. Geocities, launched in 1994, allowed users to create and host their own websites, which often included guest books and message boards where visitors could leave comments. This development marked a shift toward user-generated content, where individuals were no longer mere recipients of information but could actively contribute to the digital landscape. As Castells notes, “the internet’s transformation from a tool of data transmission to a platform for social communication heralded a new era of participatory culture” (Castells 48). This transition set the stage for the emergence of the first recognizable social network sites in the early 2000s.

The early 2000s saw the rise of several platforms that significantly shaped the social media landscape. The launch of Friendster in 2002 and MySpace in 2003 marked a new phase in online social interaction, where users could create profiles, connect with friends, and share content in more structured ways than previous platforms. MySpace, in particular, became known for its customizable user profiles and music integration, attracting millions of users and popularizing the idea of using social media for self-expression. These platforms “allowed individuals to craft online identities and share their lives with a network of friends,” as Turkle observes, representing a shift toward “the presentation of self in digital life” (Turkle 123). However, it was not until the launch of Facebook in 2004 that social media began to enter mainstream consciousness, evolving into a ubiquitous feature of everyday life. Facebook’s emergence marked a turning point in the history of social media, with its emphasis on real-name registration, user connections, and a news feed format that aggregated content from friends and pages. This approach created a more interconnected and personalized experience, where users could stay updated on their friends’ activities and engage with content through likes, comments, and shares. As Facebook grew in popularity, other platforms, such as Twitter, which launched in 2006, introduced new forms of communication. Twitter’s microblogging format, characterized by 140-character messages or “tweets,” offered a different approach to online interaction, focusing on real-time updates and public conversations. According to Papacharissi, “social media affordances transformed the ways in which individuals could engage in public and private communication,” highlighting the dual role of these platforms in facilitating both personal expression and mass communication (Papacharissi 56). The late 2000s and early 2010s witnessed the diversification of social media, with the emergence of platforms catering to specific content types and user preferences. Sites like YouTube (launched in 2005) and Instagram (2010) allowed users to share videos and photos,

respectively, tapping into the increasing role of visual content in digital communication. The integration of multimedia content into social media further blurred the boundaries between traditional mass media and user-generated content, challenging established media institutions. Jenkins argues that “convergence culture” emerged during this period as the lines between producers and consumers of content became increasingly fluid (Jenkins 97). The rise of influencer culture and social media monetization further emphasized this shift, as individuals could now leverage their online presence to gain visibility, influence, and even income.

More recently, the social media landscape has continued to evolve with the proliferation of mobile technology and the rise of apps like Snapchat and TikTok. These platforms prioritize short-form, ephemeral, and algorithmically curated content, reflecting changing user preferences toward more immediate and visually engaging communication. TikTok, in particular, has become a global phenomenon, with its algorithm promoting viral content and fostering a sense of community through shared challenges and trends. As Baym points out, “the affordances of different social media platforms shape the ways in which users communicate and form connections,” suggesting that each platform offers unique communication possibilities while also reflecting broader social and cultural trends (Baym 83). Throughout its history, social media has changed how people communicate and influenced societal dynamics, such as politics, activism, and cultural production. The role of social media in events like the Arab Spring and the Black Lives Matter movement demonstrates its capacity to amplify marginalized voices and mobilize social action. However, the same features that make social media powerful communication tools—such as virality and network effects—also pose challenges, including the spread of misinformation and concerns about privacy. Therefore, the history of social media is not merely a story of technological progress but also an ongoing negotiation of the possibilities and perils of digital communication.

The evolution of social media from BBS to modern platforms like TikTok reflects significant shifts in communication practices, where user agency, participatory culture, and the convergence of media forms have redefined the nature of social interaction. As the field of communication studies continues to examine the impact of these platforms, it is essential to consider both the affordances they provide and the broader implications for society. Social media has become a fundamental component of the contemporary communication landscape, shaping how individuals interact and how societies understand and engage with the world around them.

### **Social media's addictive design**

Social media's evolution from simple communication tools to integral parts of daily life has not occurred by chance; instead, platforms have been specifically designed to capture and retain user attention. As a result, social media addiction has emerged as a significant issue, affecting individuals and society at large. The addictive nature of social media is not merely a byproduct of its design but a deliberate outcome rooted in using psychological principles to keep users engaged. Scholars and commentators have increasingly recognized and critiqued these practices, with media representations bringing public awareness to the darker side of social networking. This section explores how social media platforms have been engineered to be addictive, the impact of this addiction on society, and its portrayal in media.

The addictive quality of social media can be traced to its design features that capitalize on human psychological vulnerabilities. Techniques such as infinite scrolling, algorithmic content curation, and intermittent rewards play a pivotal role in keeping users engaged for extended periods. As Eyal notes in *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*, social media companies often use “trigger, action, reward, and investment” cycles to create habit loops, which are similar

to those exploited by the gambling industry (Eyal 42). The infinite scroll, for instance, removes the natural stopping points encountered when reading a book or browsing a magazine, leading users to continue scrolling through their feeds without realizing how much time has passed. These design strategies tap into the exact reward mechanisms in the brain that make slot machines addictive, reinforcing behavior through unpredictable rewards such as likes, comments, and notifications.

Moreover, algorithmic content curation significantly creates a personalized, engaging experience that is difficult to resist. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok employ algorithms that analyze user behavior and tailor content to individual preferences. The goal is to show users content most likely to keep them scrolling, thereby maximizing engagement and ad revenue. As Harris, a former Google design ethicist, explains, “social media platforms are not neutral tools; they are designed to maximize user attention through a process of continuous optimization” (Harris 56). This optimization often involves using machine learning algorithms that adapt in real-time to user behavior, ensuring that content remains relevant, engaging, and, thus, addictive.

The problem of social media addiction extends beyond the design of the platforms themselves to affect individuals’ mental health and societal well-being. Excessive use of social media has been linked to various psychological issues, such as anxiety, depression, and poor self-esteem. According to Twenge, “the more time adolescents spend on social media, the more likely they are to report symptoms of depression and feelings of loneliness” (Twenge 82). The constant exposure to idealized portrayals of life on platforms like Instagram can lead to unfavorable social comparisons, where users measure their own lives against the carefully curated images of others. This dynamic is especially detrimental to young people, who are more susceptible to the effects of

peer pressure and social validation. The need for external validation, perpetuated by likes and comments, creates a cycle where users continually seek out social approval, further entrenching them in addictive behaviors. Beyond individual mental health concerns, social media addiction has broader implications for society, including its impact on productivity, relationships, and civic life. Employees who habitually check social media at work may experience decreased productivity, as frequent distractions interrupt their concentration and task flow.

Furthermore, excessive social media use can strain personal relationships as individuals focus more on their digital lives than real-world interactions. Turkle discusses this phenomenon, stating that “we are increasingly alone together, physically present but mentally distant due to our fixation on screens” (Turkle 164). The erosion of genuine face-to-face communication undermines the quality of interpersonal relationships, contributing to a sense of social isolation despite the illusion of connectivity provided by social networks. The addictive nature of social media has also sparked discussions about its ethical implications, particularly concerning the responsibility of technology companies to protect users from harm. Social media executives have faced criticism for their role in creating platforms that exploit addictive behaviors for profit, with some whistleblowers from within the industry speaking out against these practices. For instance, Tristan Harris, who has been vocal about the ethical issues in technology design, asserts that “companies have a moral duty to mitigate the harms associated with their products, especially when those harms are an intended consequence of design” (Harris 79). There is an ongoing debate about whether these companies should be held accountable through regulation or whether individuals should bear the responsibility for their own social media use. Nevertheless, the recognition of social media addiction as a public health concern is growing, with some governments and organizations advocating for digital wellness initiatives and screen time limitations.

Media representations have played a crucial role in raising awareness about the addictive nature of social media and its societal impact. Documentaries like *The Social Dilemma* (2020) have brought the issue to the forefront, featuring former tech insiders who reveal how platforms are engineered to exploit users' attention. The film discusses the psychological techniques used to keep users hooked and highlights the societal consequences of widespread social media addiction, such as the spread of misinformation and polarization. As one former executive featured in the documentary states, "If you're not paying for the product, then you are the product" (Orlowski), emphasizing how user data is commodified and exploited to drive engagement. The documentary's release sparked widespread discussion about digital ethics, with many viewers expressing concern over how much control social media companies have over their attention and behavior. The representation of social media addiction in popular media often depicts it as a pervasive and insidious force that undermines personal agency and well-being. This portrayal is evident in television shows like *Black Mirror*, which frequently explore dystopian scenarios involving technology's grip on society. For instance, the episode "Nosedive" imagines a world where social status is determined by a social media rating system, critiquing the ways in which digital validation can dictate one's self-worth and opportunities in life. These fictional representations reflect real-world concerns about how social media metrics—such as followers, likes, and retweets—can shape individuals' perceptions of themselves and influence their behavior.

The issue of social media addiction has also been addressed in journalism, with numerous articles exploring the addictive nature of these platforms and offering advice on how to manage one's screen time. The widespread coverage of digital detox trends, where individuals take breaks from social media to improve their mental health, highlights a growing recognition of the need to regain control over one's digital life. As Haidt and Allen discuss, "social media use is not

inherently harmful, but when it becomes compulsive, it can have serious negative effects on mental health and quality of life” (Haidt and Allen 101). This awareness has prompted some technology companies to introduce features that allow users to monitor and limit their screen time, such as “time well spent” tools and daily usage reminders. However, critics argue that these measures are often insufficient, as they do not address the underlying design choices that make social media addictive in the first place. Ultimately, the deliberate design of social media to be addictive and its resulting societal consequences represent a significant challenge in the digital age. The issue transcends individual self-control, as platforms employ sophisticated techniques to exploit psychological vulnerabilities, making it difficult for users to disengage. The impact of social media addiction on mental health, productivity, relationships, and societal cohesion warrants further scrutiny, particularly regarding the ethical responsibilities of technology companies. Media representations and scholarly critiques have played an essential role in bringing these concerns to light, urging society to rethink its relationship with social media and consider more responsible ways to use these platforms.

Social media addiction has garnered increasing attention over the years, with both academic and media discourses highlighting its widespread impact. This summary examines the mechanisms behind social media addiction, its implications for society, and how the issue is framed in the media, especially in the UK and the US. Social media companies often portray the addictive nature of social media as a deliberate design choice, aiming to exploit users’ psychological vulnerabilities to maximize engagement. Research indicates that certain design features in social media platforms, such as “infinite scroll” and “like” buttons, are intentionally implemented to encourage prolonged use. Sean Parker, a founding president of Facebook, admitted that features like the “like” button were designed to give users “a little dopamine hit” to drive

engagement (qtd. in Lundahl 1106). This manipulation of reward-based behaviors likens social media use to gambling, where intermittent rewards lead to addiction. Gamification elements like achievements, progress tracking, and social rewards further contribute to this problem by keeping users engaged in a cycle of continuous scrolling and interaction (Deterding et al. 1105). The societal implications of social media addiction are extensive. Heavy social media usage has been linked to anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. Adolescents, in particular, face higher risks, with studies showing that frequent users are “more than twice as likely to have poor mental health” (Lundahl 1107). This public health concern extends beyond individual psychological issues to societal disruptions, such as decreased productivity and strained personal relationships. The media often represents social media addiction as a moral panic, invoking comparisons to past public health concerns like smoking. Describing social media as a “public health emergency,” some reports emphasize its dangers by pointing out that “even children under 5 years old are now becoming addicted to social media” (Lundahl 1106).

Media framing significantly influences public perceptions and policy discussions around social media addiction. Initially, social media addiction was framed as an individual psychological disorder, where personal tendencies such as “fear of missing out” (FOMO) or narcissism were considered the primary causes. Over time, however, media narratives have shifted to emphasize the role of social media companies in intentionally fostering addiction through design elements. This shift is evident in articles highlighting statements from former tech industry insiders, who argue that social media platforms are built to “consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible” (Lundahl 1106). This representation has led to increasing demands for regulatory measures to address the issue. In the UK and the US, media portrayals of social media addiction diverge in their emphasis on regulation. The UK media has been more proactive in

calling for third-party regulation, drawing parallels between social media companies and “drug barons” or “tobacco companies,” while the US media has shown greater skepticism toward such regulatory measures, with some labeling the proposed policies as “nannyish” (Lundahl 1109). In response to the growing moral panic, the UK’s All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) recommended further research to determine whether social media addiction should be officially classified as a disease, and proposed measures such as age verification for social media accounts and warning labels for addictive features (Lundahl 1111). In contrast, US efforts have focused more on self-regulation, as seen in the limited support for the Social Media Addiction Reduction Technology (SMART) Act, which aims to curb addictive practices by social media companies. The act has sparked debate over balancing the need for regulation with preserving freedom of choice, reflecting the country’s cultural and ideological differences concerning public policy (Lundahl 1111).

The media’s role in shaping the public discourse on social media addiction cannot be underestimated. By framing the issue as a widespread and intentionally manufactured epidemic, the media has heightened societal awareness and concern. However, this framing may also contribute to a sense of helplessness among users, who may perceive social media addiction as inevitable and beyond their control, thereby reducing their motivation to manage their usage. Media representations serve not only as a source of information but also as cultural resources that influence how individuals understand and justify their behaviors (Lundahl 1104). The discussion of social media addiction continues to evolve, with ongoing debates about the appropriate level of regulation and the ethical responsibilities of technology companies. As concerns about social media’s addictive nature persist, future research and public policy initiatives will need to address both individual and structural factors contributing to the problem. The media’s influence in

framing these discussions will likely play a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of social media regulation and digital wellness efforts.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Digital Addiction: Habit Loops and Intermittent Reinforcement**

To understand social media addiction's pervasive impact on users, particularly young people, it is essential to consider the psychological mechanisms underlying digital addiction. One prominent framework is the concept of *habit loops*, discussed by Nir Eyal in *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*, which outlines how social media platforms utilize a cycle of triggers, actions, rewards, and investments to encourage repeated user engagement. Eyal explains that platforms deploy *internal triggers*, like feelings of boredom or loneliness, and *external triggers*, such as notifications, to initiate user interaction. This cycle leads users to take actions (scrolling, liking, sharing) in pursuit of a reward, creating a habit loop that becomes self-reinforcing. As Eyal describes, "When users begin to rely on a product to alleviate emotional pain, the product becomes habit-forming" (Eyal 32). This habitual use can evolve into compulsive behavior, especially as platforms continually refine features to exploit these triggers more effectively.

One of the most powerful elements in this cycle is the reward stage, where platforms employ *variable rewards* to keep users engaged. Drawing on principles of intermittent reinforcement, a concept rooted in behavioral psychology, platforms design rewards to be unpredictable, which has been shown to increase the likelihood of repetitive behavior. Behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner demonstrated this phenomenon through his studies with pigeons, where intermittent rewards led to more persistent behaviors than fixed rewards. Social media platforms mirror this mechanism by offering irregular reinforcements—such as likes, comments, or new content—each time users refresh their feeds. Tristan Harris, a former Google design ethicist and

founder of the Center for Humane Technology, explains that “the intermittent nature of rewards on social media is like pulling a slot machine lever; users never know when they’ll get a reward, making the experience addictive” (Harris 15). The unpredictability of these digital rewards draws users back, sustaining engagement and deepening dependence on the platform. These habit-forming design strategies have profound implications for mental health, particularly among adolescents and young adults, who are developmentally more susceptible to addiction. Studies have shown that the adolescent brain is highly responsive to dopamine, the neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward, released during positive social interactions, including digital ones. Harris emphasizes that social media companies deliberately “capitalize on dopamine-driven feedback loops,” a tactic that disproportionately affects younger users due to their heightened sensitivity to social validation and peer feedback (Harris 22). This relentless cycle of seeking validation can lead to compulsive behaviors, contributing to heightened anxiety, lowered self-esteem, and even depression in some users.

Additionally, the concept of “attentional capture” is integral to understanding the addictive nature of social media. Attentional capture refers to the process by which external stimuli draw a user’s focus, often in ways that are difficult to ignore. Social media platforms utilize features such as notifications, infinite scrolling, and autoplay functions to monopolize users’ attention. Eyal asserts that “social media engineers use attentional capture to make users feel as though their attention is constantly needed, exploiting the brain’s natural attraction to novelty” (Eyal 48). These design elements ensure that users remain engaged, often without conscious intention, thus contributing to a state of continuous partial attention—a fragmented focus that undermines the ability to sustain attention on other tasks, like schoolwork or social relationships. This is especially problematic for young users, who may experience deteriorations in cognitive control and focus as

a result. Harris argues that this pursuit of engagement at the expense of user well-being reflects a broader issue within the tech industry: the prioritization of profit over ethical responsibility. “Designers are not incentivized to protect users’ mental health but to maximize time on site,” he observes, noting that platform success is often measured by metrics like Daily Active Users (DAU) and engagement rates, which increase the platform’s value to advertisers (Harris 27). This business model prioritizes user engagement above all else and creates a mighty conflict between user welfare and corporate profit. For instance, platforms often encourage prolonged use through “streaks” or “badges,” which reward users for daily engagement, further entrenching their attachment to the platform and reinforcing addictive behaviors.

Given the influence of habit loops and intermittent reinforcement on user behavior, it is clear that social media’s design is not merely functional but intentionally manipulative. These strategies reflect a calculated approach capitalizing on psychological vulnerabilities to drive repeated engagement. This theoretical context reveals the need for ethical considerations in platform design, particularly for young audiences who may be more susceptible to addiction. As social media continues to occupy an ever-growing role in users’ lives, understanding these mechanisms is crucial for assessing their long-term impact on mental health and advocating for changes that prioritize user well-being.

### **Case study: Young people’s relationship with social media**

The NBC Miami article depicts social media addiction as a growing crisis, particularly affecting teenagers, and illustrates its consequences through the story of Jimena, a 19-year-old who struggled with social media use for up to 20 hours a day. The piece emphasizes the detrimental effects of such addiction, including disrupted daily routines, isolation, and mental health issues.

Dr. Adam Schiolo, Chief Medical Officer of Carbon Treatment Centers, describes symptoms such as “excessive isolation” and a “disruption in capacity to stay tuned” that signify addiction (NBC Miami). The story shows how social media, designed to facilitate connection, can instead lead to disconnection from real-life relationships and responsibilities.

Jimena’s journey to recovery began with her enrollment at Soulegria, a Utah-based rehabilitation center for young adults. The program focuses on replacing addictive behaviors with “outdoor activities, sports, as well as responsibilities like making a bed,” which aim to rebuild healthy routines and social skills (NBC Miami). This rehabilitation approach highlights the need for structured, real-world activities to counter the virtual world’s overwhelming pull. Founder Tyler Olsen explains that treatment “is not just taking something away” but also about providing new, healthier habits to replace old patterns (NBC Miami). The article extends its analysis to a broader societal context, noting that nearly 95% of teens aged 13 to 17 use social media, and one-third are constantly online. Such widespread use amplifies the potential for addiction, reinforcing the narrative that social media addiction is not merely a personal failing but a societal issue that demands recognition and intervention. By portraying Jimena’s ongoing struggle and gradual improvement, the article reinforces the notion that recovery from social media addiction requires deliberate, structured efforts, mirroring treatments for more traditional forms of addiction.

The article *Social Media Addiction and Young People: A Systematic Review of Literature* explores the prevalence of social media addiction among young people and its contributing factors. One major factor is the need for social connection, often sought through digital interactions. Social media becomes a substitute for real-life interactions for adolescents who lack fulfilling offline relationships. As Xuan and Amat explain, “young people with poor social relationships... seek attention through social media,” using platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat to gain

social validation (Xuan and Amat 538). This need for recognition often leads to behaviors such as frequent status updates, photo sharing, and constant checking of notifications, which fosters addiction by reinforcing attention-seeking patterns. The review points out that social media addiction correlates with various mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and loneliness. For many young users, excessive social media consumption serves as a coping mechanism for emotional distress. Jeri-Yabar et al. found that young people who prioritize social media use exhibit a higher tendency toward depressive symptoms, as “social media may be used to seek acceptance,” but often exacerbates feelings of inadequacy when online expectations do not match reality (Jeri-Yabar et al. 539). Similarly, Hou et al. note that the relationship between social media addiction and mental health is bidirectional, meaning that poor mental health can lead to increased social media use, while excessive use can, in turn, worsen mental health conditions (Hou et al. 540). This cycle illustrates how social media addiction can entrench individuals in a feedback loop where their digital habits perpetuate emotional problems.

Another significant consequence of social media addiction is its negative effect on academic performance. Young people who are addicted to social media often experience challenges with time management and concentration, leading to lower educational achievement. This association is partly due to social media’s constant demands for attention, which disrupt focus and reduce time spent on academic activities. As Xuan and Amat emphasize, “excessive social media use interrupts young people’s time management” (Xuan and Amat 540). In addition, the compulsion to engage with social media often results in sleep deprivation, which further impairs cognitive functions necessary for learning and academic success. Intervention strategies to address social media addiction typically involve cognitive and behavioral approaches that aim to modify users’ relationship with technology. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is identified as a

practical approach in treating social media addiction, mainly because it helps individuals recognize and restructure the false beliefs that contribute to their dependence on social media (Yu et al. 540). For instance, some young people hold the misconception that constant online presence is necessary to stay socially relevant, a belief that reinforces compulsive usage. CBT interventions work by challenging these distorted views and encouraging healthier behaviors, such as setting boundaries for screen time. The review also suggests that promoting real-life social interactions and physical activities can help reduce the risk of addiction. Programs that incorporate outdoor social engagement, sports, and community involvement effectively decrease reliance on social media for social fulfillment. This approach is grounded in the idea that “young people addicted to social media should engage in rehabilitation programs that emphasize efficient use of social media without detrimental impacts on mental well-being” (Xuan and Amat 540). By creating opportunities for meaningful face-to-face interaction, these programs help young people develop a balanced lifestyle that integrates both digital and real-world experiences.

Families and educational institutions are also crucial in addressing social media addiction. Parents, teachers, and counselors need to be proactive in guiding young people toward healthier social media practices and in recognizing signs of addiction early. Educational programs that teach digital literacy and responsible social media use can equip adolescents with the skills to navigate online spaces without becoming overly dependent. Xuan and Amat stress that “raising awareness in schools and homes can help young people understand the implications of social media addiction” and encourage them to develop better habits (Xuan and Amat 541). Self-efficacy is another critical factor in preventing and managing social media addiction. Young individuals with higher self-efficacy are better able to control their social media use and are less likely to become addicted.

Conversely, low self-efficacy is linked to higher rates of addiction, as individuals may struggle to regulate their behaviors effectively. The article recommends incorporating self-efficacy into prevention programs by fostering a sense of personal control and responsibility over one's digital habits. Strategies that build self-confidence, such as goal-setting and self-monitoring, can empower young people to manage their social media use more consciously (Yu et al. 540).

## Chapter 5 – Conclusions

This thesis has examined addiction's multifaceted portrayal in contemporary media, focusing on *BoJack Horseman*, *Nymphomaniac*, gaming addiction, and social media addiction. Through these analyses, the thesis underscores how modern media represent addiction not merely as a personal failing but as a complex social and psychological phenomenon shaped by individual vulnerabilities and external pressures. By examining these forms across traditional and digital media, this study reveals how various narratives reinforce or challenge prevailing stigmas surrounding addiction.

This study highlights that media plays a pivotal role in framing public perceptions of addiction, not only influencing how society understands addiction but also guiding policy responses. The depictions in *BoJack Horseman*, *Nymphomaniac*, and news portrayals of gaming and social media addiction underscore the diversity of addiction experiences and the powerful influence media holds in shaping societal attitudes. These media portrayals collectively reveal addiction's various dimensions, illustrating both traditional substance dependencies and modern behavioral addictions, such as gaming and social media. As a result, they point to a need for adaptive policies that address addiction in both its familiar and emerging forms.

The portrayal of addiction in *BoJack Horseman* exemplifies how media can generate empathy by offering a nuanced, compassionate view of addiction's complexities. BoJack's character, despite his many flaws and repeated missteps, reflects the internal conflict and vulnerability that often accompany substance dependency. The show's focus on BoJack's struggle with addiction—rooted in traumatic childhood experiences and intensified by isolation and

existential angst—illustrates the interplay between addiction, mental health, and identity. By narrating BoJack’s journey with unfiltered honesty, the series challenges viewers to reconsider addiction not as a moral failing but as a complex and often cyclical condition. This portrayal contributes to a more compassionate understanding of addiction, presenting recovery not as an immediate, linear journey but as a struggle marked by setbacks and introspection. Such narratives can inspire policy shifts toward a more rehabilitative approach, prioritizing mental health support and long-term care over punitive measures. In this way, *BoJack Horseman* contributes to discussions on addiction policy by promoting a framework of empathy and mental health-centered responses, aligning with recent shifts in addiction treatment that emphasize holistic recovery rather than solely focusing on cessation.

In stark contrast, *Nymphomaniac* offers a portrayal of addiction that emphasizes its consuming nature, depicting sex addiction as an unyielding, self-destructive force. Joe’s journey lacks the hopeful undertones present in *BoJack Horseman*, presenting addiction as an inescapable compulsion that erodes her moral compass and alienates her from society. This portrayal, while darker, serves an essential role in showing the gravity and often unmanageable nature of specific addictions. Joe’s addiction is framed less as a condition with a path to recovery and more as an all-consuming force that obliterates her sense of self. While cautionary in tone, *Nymphomaniac* invites audiences to confront the harsh realities of addiction, underscoring the need for comprehensive support systems for those struggling with behavioral dependencies. By highlighting the destructive capacity of addiction, this portrayal implicitly advocates for preventive policies and early intervention strategies that address underlying psychological needs and socio-environmental factors that can contribute to the development of such addictions.

This thesis has analyzed *BoJack Horseman* and *Nymphomaniac* to explore how addiction is portrayed in contemporary media, applying Stuart Hall's representation theory and Henry Jenkins' theory of media convergence to examine the cultural impact of these narratives. These frameworks reveal that media portrayals of addiction do more than reflect social attitudes; they actively shape public perceptions by constructing meaningful symbols, narrative arcs, and audience engagement. Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which emphasizes the media's role in creating rather than merely mirroring reality, underscores how addiction is framed ideologically in *BoJack Horseman* and *Nymphomaniac*. Hall's "signifying practices" concept illuminates how confident narrative and visual choices in media contribute to a portrayal that reflects and influences societal values. *BoJack Horseman* depicts BoJack's substance addiction through recurring visual symbols, such as empty bottles, dimly lit scenes, and cluttered spaces, which evoke addiction as a deeply rooted personal and relational struggle. These elements humanize addiction and engage the audience's empathy, presenting it as a personal journey and a social issue with the potential for redemption. Through these signifying practices, *BoJack Horseman* subverts stereotypes and encourages a compassionate view of addiction that highlights the possibility of recovery.

In contrast, *Nymphomaniac* uses a stark visual style to depict sex addiction as an all-consuming force, lacking redemptive elements. Hall's framework suggests that these narrative choices can reinforce stigma by emphasizing addiction's destructive aspects without room for hope or recovery. The film's fragmented, dimly lit scenes and handheld camera work underscore Joe's descent into isolation and self-destruction, challenging viewers to confront the harsh realities of addiction. This approach aligns with Hall's argument that media reinforces social ideologies and power dynamics, potentially influencing societal attitudes toward sex addiction as a taboo and alienating condition. Henry Jenkins' theory of media convergence, particularly his concept of

transmedia storytelling, further enriches the analysis by examining *BoJack Horseman* as a work that extends its cultural impact beyond the screen. Jenkins argues that convergence culture enables audiences to become active participants who shape and reinterpret narratives. *BoJack Horseman* exemplifies this by inspiring fan engagement across multiple platforms, including social media and online communities. This participatory culture allows fans to discuss, reinterpret, and connect with the show's themes, fostering greater empathy and understanding of addiction. Through Jenkins' framework, it becomes evident that *BoJack Horseman* portrays addiction and invites audiences into a transformative dialogue, encouraging viewers to challenge stereotypes and view recovery as a complex journey.

Moreover, Jenkins' concept of transmedia storytelling highlights how *BoJack Horseman*'s cross-platform presence allows it to engage with diverse audiences, each contributing unique insights to the addiction narrative. While the show primarily portrays BoJack's struggles with substance dependency, its influence extends through interviews, podcasts, and fan discussions that deepen the exploration of addiction's psychological and social dimensions. This approach aligns with Jenkins' view that media convergence supports multi-dimensional storytelling, shaping public understanding of complex issues like addiction by promoting empathy and reducing stigma. Examining *BoJack Horseman* and *Nymphomaniac* through Hall's and Jenkins' frameworks highlights the influential role of media in shaping cultural attitudes toward addiction. While *BoJack Horseman* engages audiences in a participatory culture that emphasizes empathy and recovery, *Nymphomaniac* presents addiction more traditionally, emphasizing isolation and self-destruction. Together, these portrayals demonstrate that media depictions of addiction are not neutral but are informed by and contribute to social ideologies and values. The application of Hall's and Jenkins' theories illustrates that contemporary portrayals of addiction function as cultural sites

where societal meanings are constructed and contested. *BoJack Horseman* and *Nymphomaniac* exemplify contrasting approaches to addiction representation, one promoting empathy and hope, the other reinforcing the darker stigmas associated with compulsive behavior. These theoretical perspectives, applied to these case studies, reveal that media can powerfully influence societal attitudes toward addiction, either challenging stereotypes or deepening existing stigmas. By critically examining these portrayals through the lenses of representation and convergence, this thesis underscores the media's role as an agent that shapes societal perceptions of addiction and recovery, inviting audiences to consider the complexities of these struggles in a new light.

In contrast to substance and sex addiction, gaming and social media addiction reflect a new dimension of dependency driven by technological design and behavioral psychology. Gaming addiction, while sometimes dramatized in media as a dangerous affliction affecting youth, is increasingly understood as a behavioral dependency with severe social and psychological implications. This addiction is often depicted as isolating and disruptive, impacting young people's academic performance, social relationships, and mental well-being. Such portrayals resonate with a broader societal concern over screen time and digital engagement, especially among adolescents and young adults. The media's portrayal of gaming addiction thus underscores the importance of considering environmental and societal factors that drive dependency. Unlike traditional substance addiction, which primarily involves biological dependency on chemicals, gaming addiction reflects a psychological dependency that game design elements, such as reward systems, in-game achievements, and immersive environments, may exacerbate. These factors foster compulsive behavior, leading to a sense of loss of control that mirrors traditional addictions. Media representations that frame gaming addiction within this context can push for policies aimed at

regulating in-game features, implementing age-appropriate restrictions, and funding public health campaigns that raise awareness of the potential risks of gaming overuse.

Similarly, portrayals of social media addiction reveal the subtle yet potent ways in which technology interfaces are engineered to foster dependency. News articles and studies highlighted in media often reveal how endless scrolling, notifications, and algorithmically curated content can trap users in a loop of compulsive checking and engagement. This form of addiction has mental health ramifications, including increased anxiety, depression, and disruptions to sleep patterns, particularly among young people. Social media addiction thus represents a convergence of psychological dependency with technological accessibility, underscoring how behavioral addictions have evolved alongside advancements in digital technology. The media's emphasis on these issues is crucial, as it brings attention to the influence of tech companies in shaping public behavior. The portrayal of social media addiction often carries an implicit critique of platform design, suggesting that tech companies bear responsibility for creating digital environments that prioritize user engagement over mental health. This perspective is increasingly shaping policy discussions around digital well-being, leading to calls for regulations that limit addictive design features and prioritize transparency around algorithms.

Collectively, these portrayals emphasize the media's importance in influencing public opinion and prompting policy change around addiction. By diversifying portrayals to include substance, behavioral, and digital dependencies, media narratives help to broaden the public's understanding of addiction as a multifaceted issue that encompasses more than traditional substances. This broader perspective supports equally multifaceted policy responses, calling for interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate mental health support, preventive measures, and targeted interventions for digital and behavioral addictions.

A comprehensive policy response to addiction might involve funding for addiction treatment centers that treat both substance and behavioral dependencies, mental health resources that address the root causes of addiction, and regulatory measures aimed at minimizing addictive features in digital environments. Such an approach would not only address the needs of those currently struggling with addiction but also help prevent the onset of behavioral addictions in future generations. Through its portrayals, media can serve as a powerful catalyst for societal change, shaping both public discourse and policy initiatives. By fostering a nuanced, empathetic understanding of addiction, media encourages a shift from punitive, stigmatizing policies to those that prioritize mental health, support, and regulation. In doing so, the media holds the potential to help reframe addiction as a condition warranting empathy and comprehensive care rather than solely as a personal failing requiring punishment.

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