

# Mental Illness in Film and TV: A Content Analysis of Steven Universe Future

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## Abstract

*Steven Universe*, a children’s cartoon show that piloted in May of 2013, is a science-fantasy series written by Rebecca Sugar that follows the adventures of Steven Universe, a half-human half-gem (i.e. alien) who protects Earth from intergalactic threats alongside his guardians, the Crystal Gems. Throughout each successive season, Steven encounters increasingly dangerous villains, learns to navigate the gem powers passed to him from his mother, and is subsequently villainized for her crimes. The purpose of this study was to conduct a film review of *Steven Universe* to investigate the accuracy of the portrayal of three mental illnesses (i.e. major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder), in addition to the presence of mental illness stigma. Episodes were chosen solely from the finale season *Steven Universe Future*, as it depicts the culmination of the trauma Steven endures in prior seasons. Moreover, the criteria for measuring the frequency of these mental illnesses was based on the 2013 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. To determine the presence of stigma, components of the Mental Illness Stigma Framework were observed, namely the stigmatization mechanisms used against individuals with mental illnesses. The results found that a majority of episodes had relatively accurate depictions of the three investigated mental illnesses and were devoid of mental illness stigma. These findings suggest that it is feasible for television and film outlets to portray constructive depictions of mentally ill characters and that, among modern shows, *Steven Universe* sets a replicable standard for achieving this.

*Keywords: Major depressive disorder, Generalized anxiety disorder, Post-traumatic stress disorder, Stigma*

## 1. Introduction

In a study conducted by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative and American Foundation for Suicide Prevention on the top movies and TV series from the 2016-2017 film season, the predominant portrayal of characters with mental illnesses was found to be negative. Common treatment of these characters included disparagement and the trivialization of their experiences via humor (Smith, et al., 2019). Stigmatization is a norm in the depiction of mental conditions in popular television, which creates a narrative that discourages help-seeking and discussions of mental wellness among general audiences - children and adults alike.

Thus far, the scholarly literature surrounding *Steven Universe* has mainly appraised the show’s queer representation, focusing on its inclusion of diverse, LGBTQIA+ characters (Dunn, 2016; Moore, 2019). That is to say, there have not yet been studies published that focus on the show’s depiction of mental illness. However, tangential studies have already measured the presence of mental illness in other, similar children’s shows and films. For instance, a 2004 content analysis of animated films by The Walt Disney Company (TWDC) published in the *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* found that, among the 34 selected feature films, most carried demeaning references to characters with mental illnesses (Lawson & Fouts, 2004). The most common verbal references were the words “crazy,” “mad,” and “nutty,” all of which were “employed to segregate, alienate, and denote the inferior status of the character(s) to which

they referred" (Lawson & Fouts, 2004). Based on this data, authors Andrea Lawson and Gregory Fouts expressed concern that children's exposure to such a dramatized, dehumanizing image of mental illness through TWDC films would cause them to conceive "[an] unrealistic and stereotypic view of individuals with a mental illness in society" (Lawson & Fouts, 2004). A similar study conducted in the British Journal of Psychiatry sampled a full week of children's television to observe the presence and means by which mental illnesses were depicted. The analysis found that 59 of the 128 episodes observed contained one or more references to mental illness, with cartoons having the most references among all the episode types (Wilson, et al., 2000). Additionally, characters who were most consistently referenced with this language were labeled as mentally ill (Wilson, et al., 2000). Among the 6 characters deemed to be mentally ill, none displayed redeemable qualities; they instead engaged in irrational behaviors and served as sources of entertainment for other characters (Wilson, et al., 2000). The study was unable to find "any understanding of the suffering that mental illness involves" and suggested that the "generic nature of the illnesses portrayed" and "the lack of specificity of symptoms or diagnosis" invited young audiences to not only make falsified generalizations about mental illness, but also to apply said assumptions to all mentally ill individuals within the real-life context. Since existing children's entertainment already lacks nuanced portrayals of mental illness, the primary objective of the study was to confirm the validity of the hypothesis that *Steven Universe* diverges positively the norm of children's TV.

Key to analyzing the prevalence and accuracy of mental illnesses' portrayal in *Steven Universe* is an understanding of the defining characteristics of each selected condition. According to the National Library of Medicine, major depressive disorder (MDD) is a condition characterized by a combination of "[a] persistently low or depressed mood ...[,] decreased interest in pleasurable activities, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, [a] lack of energy, poor concentration, appetite changes, psychomotor retardation or agitation, sleep disturbances, [and] suicidal thoughts" (Bains & Abdijadid, 2022). In accordance with DSM-5, an individual must demonstrate 5 or more of the aforementioned symptoms and be socially or occupationally impaired by their depressed mood within a 2-week period to be medically diagnosed with MDD (Bains & Abdijadid, 2022). Similarly, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is a mood disorder that causes "persistent, excessive, and unrealistic worry about everyday things," such as one's financial well-being, health, and familial stability (Munir & Takov, 2022). A wide range of symptoms can manifest as a result of GAD, including restlessness, fatigue, irritability, sleep disturbance, and muscle tension (Munir & Takov, 2022). An individual can be officially diagnosed with GAD once they exhibit these symptoms frequently within a 6-month period (Munir & Takov, 2022). Finally, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric illness that, unlike MDD and GAD, *must* be triggered by exposure to an actual traumatic experience, such as a significant injury or sexual assault (Mann & Marwaha, 2022). Common symptoms of PTSD include "re-experiencing the [original] traumatic event, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, flashbacks, dissociation...[,] and intense negative emotional...and physiological reaction[s] [upon] being exposed to the traumatic reminder" (Mann & Marwaha, 2022). Alongside these symptoms, individuals with PTSD may also have difficulty concentrating, become more irritable, and exhibit hypervigilance (Mann & Marwaha, 2022). Fortunately, all of these mental conditions can be effectively remedied with prescription medication or psychotherapy, making help-seeking a critical component of mental illness recovery (Bains & Abdijadid, 2022; Mann & Marwaha, 2022; Munir & Takov, 2022). On the whole, the medical research surrounding each illness would provide a more in-depth understanding of Steven's symptoms, whether it be through his outward behaviors or dialogue.

The final component critical to this film review is mental illness stigma. As defined by the American Psychological Association, stigma is a "negative social attitude attached to a characteristic of an individual that may be regarded as a mental, physical, or social deficiency" (APA, n.d.). The MISF, developed by researchers Annie Fox, Valerie Earnshaw, Emily Taverna, and Dawne Vogt, proposes a holistic framework for understanding the way individuals experience societal stigmas surrounding mental illness, accounting for the perspective of both the stigmatized and the stigmatizer (Fox, et al., 2018). Within the MISF, the three most significant mechanisms used by stigmatizers (i.e. individuals without mental illness) in response to encounters with the stigmatized (i.e. individuals with mental illness) are stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (Fox, et al., 2018). The most common stereotypes used against the mentally ill include "dangerousness, rarity, responsibility, incompetence, weakness of character, and dependence" (Fox, et al., 2018). Prejudice, or "the emotional reaction or feelings that people have toward a group or member of a group," is also leveraged against the mentally ill, most frequently taking the form of anger, pity, and fear

(Fox, et al., 2018). In the same way, discriminatory behaviors, such as “withholding help, avoidance, segregation, and coercion,” serve as additional barriers to mentally ill individuals’ recovery (Fox, et al., 2018). In other words, individuals struggling with mental illness face the potential of significant maltreatment from unaffected peers and family. Of even more importance is the fact that the treatment of the mentally ill by others markedly impacts their willingness to discuss their issues, seek outside guidance, and navigate their day-to-day life. Since mental illness stigma in television usually manifests through the language and actions of non-mentally-ill-characters (e.g. name-calling, bullying, ostracization) the perspective of the stigmatizer becomes crucial in the evaluation of stigma in *Steven Universe Future*.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Content analysis is a “research tool used to...quantify and analyze the presence, meanings, and relationships of such certain words, themes, or concepts” within a body of qualitative data (Columbia Public Health, n.d.). For the content analysis within this study, several salient episodes from *Steven Universe Future* were chosen and reviewed. The entirety of the finale season was rewatched to determine the episodes wherein Steven’s emotional trauma responses were most prominent. Out of the 20 episodes in the season, the 7 episodes with the most cumulative frequencies of mental illness symptoms among all three disorders were selected for conceptual analyses. After completing the episode selection, each episode was re-watched for data collection, which entailed measuring the frequency of mental illness symptoms. Based on Steven’s observed behaviors, symptoms were deemed “present” (P) or “not present” (NP). Separately, three 4-point scales were developed that measured the accuracy of the depiction of each mental illness based on the amount of DSM-5 diagnostic criteria they fulfilled, excluding time-based requirements since episodes were analyzed in isolation and several had muddled timelines. Once a symptom chart for a given mental illness was completed, the corresponding accuracy scale was employed to determine if the portrayal of said illness was very inaccurate, somewhat inaccurate, somewhat accurate, or very accurate. Differences in accuracy categories were evaluated based on the number of diagnostic criteria missing (ex. a somewhat accurate portrayal of PTSD is missing 1-2 criteria whereas a somewhat inaccurate portrayal misses 3-4). Clauses in each set of criteria regarding whether the illness could be better ascribed to a different disorder were also removed, as otherwise, only the presence of a singular mental illness would’ve been measured per episode. Furthermore, 3 results tables were created to organize each episode’s accuracy determinations for each mental illness.

In another, separate results chart, the MISF, a framework with “terminology for understanding mechanisms of mental illness stigma” based on existing “prominent mental illness stigma theories, conceptualizations and definitions,” (Fox, et al., 2018) was used to track mental illness stigma against Steven for each selected episode. If any of the three types of negative responses towards people with mental illness identified by the MISF (i.e. stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination) were observed through characters other than Steven in each episode, stigma was considered “present” (P).

## 3. Results

Tables 1 through 3 summarize the accuracy findings of each mental disorder for each selected episode. The general trend indicates that the majority of episodes demonstrated depictions that were somewhat accurate or very accurate for each mental illness (i.e. MDD, GAD, and PTSD). In regards to Table 4, which details the presence of stigma within each episode, most episodes were found to have an absence of all three stigmatization mechanisms. Across all 7 episodes, only 2 instances of stereotyping and 1 instance of prejudice were exhibited, with none of the instances overlapping within the same episode.

Table 1: Accuracy chart of major depressive disorder portrayal per selected episode

<b>Major Depressive Disorder</b>				
<b>Episode</b>	Very Inaccurate	Somewhat Inaccurate	Somewhat Accurate	Very Accurate
Volleyball	0	1	0	0
Prickly Pair	0	0	1	0
In Dreams	0	0	1	0
Growing Pains	0	0	0	1
Fragments	0	0	0	1
Homeworld Bound	0	0	1	0
Everything's Fine	0	0	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>

Table 2: Accuracy chart of generalized anxiety disorder portrayal per selected episode

<b>Generalized Anxiety Disorder</b>				
<b>Episode</b>	Very Inaccurate	Somewhat Inaccurate	Somewhat Accurate	Very Accurate
Volleyball	0	0	0	1
Prickly Pair	0	0	0	1
In Dreams	0	0	0	1
Growing Pains	0	0	1	0
Fragments	0	0	0	1
Homeworld Bound	0	0	0	1
Everything's Fine	0	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>

Table 3: Accuracy chart of post-traumatic stress disorder portrayal per selected episode

<b>Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder</b>				
<b>Episode</b>	Very Inaccurate	Somewhat Inaccurate	Somewhat Accurate	Very Accurate
Volleyball	0	0	0	1
Prickly Pair	0	0	1	0
In Dreams	0	0	0	1
Growing Pains	0	0	0	1
Fragments	0	0	0	1
Homeworld Bound	0	0	0	1
Everything's Fine	0	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>

Table 4: Presence of stigma per selected episode

<b>Stigma Mechanism</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Volleyball</b>	<b>Prickly Pair</b>	<b>In Dreams</b>	<b>Growing Pains</b>	<b>Fragnents</b>	<b>Homeworld Bound</b>	<b>Everything's Fine</b>
<b>Stereotypes</b>	“The core stereotypes associated with mental illness include dangerousness, rarity, responsibility, incompetence, weakness of character, and dependence” (Fox, et al., 2018).	NP	NP	P	NP	P	NP	NP
<b>Prejudice</b>	“The most common forms of prejudice toward PWMI are fear, pity, and anger” (Fox, et al., 2018).	P	NP	NP	NP	N	NP	NP
<b>Discrimination</b>	“There are four common types of discrimination directed towards PWMI...[:] withholding help, avoidance, segregation, and coercion” (Fox, et al., 2018).	NP	NP	NP	NP	NP	NP	NP

#### 4. Discussion

To best understand how Steven’s actions and behaviors correlate to his mental illness diagnoses, it’s key to analyze his recurring symptoms across each disorder. Their respective portrayals will also be discussed at length, considering they meaningfully shape the audience’s perception of Steven as an individual.

##### 4.1 Guilt

Guilt is Steven’s most prominent emotion across the episodes with somewhat or very accurate depictions for all three conditions. For example, in the episode “In Dreams,” Steven discovers a newfound power that allows him to broadcast his dreams like movies onto electronic devices, such as his home TV. As such, he decides to collaborate with his friend Peridot to create a modified version of the new season of their favorite TV show, Camp Pining Hearts. For their plan to work out, Steven had to dream of an altered plot so that Peridot could view it broadcast on Steven’s TV. Unfortunately, Steven ends up being plagued by several nightmares that distort the projected dreams. At the end of the episode, Steven is startled awake by a particularly disturbing nightmare and breaks down in tears. He tells Peridot "I don't think I know how to be a friend without something to fix!...I'm sorry I can't do this for you!" (Guignard et al., 2020, 7:49). The “something to fix” is a reference to the Camp Pining Hearts plot that he and Peridot were attempting to alter. This behavior was categorized as excessive guilt, a qualifying symptom of MDD (Bains & Abdijadid, 2022), in addition to a persistent negative emotional state, one of the markers of PTSD (Mann & Marwaha,

2022). The portrayal of these symptoms adds depth to Steven's condition, veering away from the negative archetype of mentally ill characters established in previous media, such as the TWDC feature films explored in Andrea Lawson and Gregory Fouts' 2004 study. Considering that "inappropriate guilt becomes less normative with age" since children are better able to identify events' cause-effect relations as they mature, Steven's partial acknowledgment of the reason for his guilt is consistent with the emotional cognition of a depressed individual of his age (Pulcu et al., 2013). Still, Steven demonstrates a large magnitude of guilt, which reflects the idea that "direct personal involvement during [a] traumatic event is associated with greater guilt" and that it can produce "stronger perceived responsibility and sense of wrongdoing" (Kip et al., 2022). Overall, the inclusion of these symptoms provides for a more constructive understanding of MDD and PTSD, enabling viewers to be more cognizant how their symptoms are manifested.

#### 4.2 Anger

Across the majority of episodes with somewhat or very accurate depictions of the investigated mental illnesses, anger was observed to be a recurring symptom. For instance, in the episode "Volleyball", Steven's mother's former servant Pink Pearl approaches him for help in healing a crack on her left eye. After failing to heal the crack with the power of his magical healing spit, he and Pearl, one of his adoptive gem guardians, accompany Pink Pearl to a coral reef to find other means of fixing her physical form. However, none of the resources available at the reef are able to mend Pink Pearl's crack either, which upsets Steven. While this is happening, Pink Pearl discusses the origins of her injury and reflects on her past relationship with Steven's mother, revealing that her damaged form was actually caused by unresolved emotional trauma from a tantrum thrown by Steven's mother in her youth. Visibly agitated by this new information, Steven yells "I can't deal with one more horrible thing she did, okay?" and creates fissures in his surroundings from his power-imbued scream (Guignard et al., 2019, 7:53). This behavior was classified under the symptoms of restlessness and irritability for GAD (Munir & Takov, 2022), and characterized as an angry outburst under PTSD (Mann & Marwaha, 2022). Steven's irritability is most likely an "abberant response to reward," a frustrated response in which "an individual continues to do an action in the expectation of a reward but does not actually receive that reward" (Vidal-Ribas & Stringaris, 2021). The "action," in this case, is searching for physical remedies to Pink Pearl's crack instead of confronting the breadth of her emotional abuse under his mother. Unable to see tangible results of his healing efforts, Steven becomes irate when the severity of his mother's wrongdoing towards Pink Pearl is fully unveiled, which causes him to lash out. When understood from the perspective of PTSD symptom criteria, his emotional response aligns with the idea that "day-to-day exposure to emotionally distressing trauma cues may underlie the increased risk for infrequent (but often socially and interpersonally devastating) verbal or physical aggression" for individuals suffering from PTSD (Voorhees et al., 2018). As with Steven's guilt, the inclusion of his angry outburst helps illuminate central concepts for each of the explored mental illnesses, providing viewers with a more all-encompassing understanding of the factors influencing Steven's behaviors.

#### 4.3 Self-Isolation

Steven's emotional stability throughout the season is largely crippled by his aversion toward seeking help. During later episodes of the finale season, he becomes increasingly prone to sporadic absences and atypical behaviors, declining to explain them when prompted by his family and friends. For example, in the episode "Prickly Pair", Steven picks up the hobby of gardening to serve as a buffer for the loneliness he feels after witnessing most of his childhood friends move away from his hometown to pursue independent careers. After accidentally growing a sentient cactus with his gem powers, he ends up projecting all of these negative emotions onto it via indignant rants. Around halfway into the episode, he tells the cactus "I can't tell Pearl how I feel, 'cause she'll blame herself and spiral out of control, and I'll have to pick up the pieces. And I don't want any more high-and-mighty advice from Garnet. I just want to know better for once" (Green et al., 2019, 5:11). This dialogue was characterized as excessive worry under GAD (Munir & Takov, 2022) and feelings of estrangement from others under PTSD (Mann & Marwaha, 2022). The narrative's focus on Steven's thoughts and emotions provides viewers insight into the rationale behind his avoidance of others. His self-justifications follow the trend that "those with GAD use worry to shift their intrapersonal



experiences toward negativity in an attempt to preclude sharp increases in negative emotion” (Newman et al., 2016). Once again, through the accurate depiction of Steven’s mental illness symptoms, the audience can better comprehend his personal struggles without reducing him to a set of negative attributes.

#### 4.4 Stigma

Though most of Steven’s family and peers demonstrate healthy concern for his depleting emotional wellness, there still exists a select few instances where he’s exposed to negative stigmas. The details surrounding the two observed instances of mental health stigma will be discussed below.

##### Prejudice: Pink Pearl and Pearl

As mentioned prior, Steven displays a violent, agitated outburst in the episode “Volleyball”. In the immediate aftermath of his destructive screaming, both Pink Pearl and Pearl exhibit a fear-induced response. Pink Pearl begins visibly trembling and curls into a fetal position, while Pearl steps in front of her to shield her and eyes Steven warily (Guignard et al., 2019). Their combined display of alarm was characterized as an instance of prejudice, as it fell under the category of fear (Fox et al., 2018). Pink Pearl may have exhibited a negative response because Steven’s anger was reminiscent of his mother’s past tantrums. Pearl, on the other hand, may have backed up to guard Pink Pearl out of concern for her emotional wellbeing, rather than out of fear of Steven himself. Regardless of the reason for their response, their reactions reflect the notion that “prejudice towards people with [mental illness] appears to be an outcome of ideology, personality, and past experiences” (Kenny et al., 2018). The existence of stigma through Pink Pearl and Pearl’s prejudice towards Steven still demonstrates that the show isn’t impervious to harmful social stereotypes surrounding mentally ill individuals.

##### Stereotyping: Jasper

In the episode “Fragments”, Steven decides to isolate himself in the nearby forest to seek guidance from Jasper, a former enemy of his from prior seasons. He reaches out to her for advice on how to control his gem powers, which had become increasingly unstable due to his worsening emotional state. During the episode, Jasper frequently belittles him and insinuates that he’s pathetic for letting his emotions get the better of him (Abrams et al., 2020). To remedy his perceived weakness, Steven takes on Jasper’s offer to train his developing powers in the middle of the woods. In an ensuing spar days later, Steven, after being egged on by Jasper, shatters her gemstone in a violent daze, thus destroying her physical form (Abrams et al., 2020).

Jasper’s consistent disparaging attitude throughout the episode was classified as stereotyping, as many of the remarks she spouted to Steven before being shattered reinforced the notion that mentally ill people are weak in character (Fox et al., 2018). However, since Jasper is a former antagonist, the viewer is less likely to buy into the ideas she preaches, as much of her personality revolves around the principle that violence and brute force are the best and only means to accomplish one’s goals. Even so, Jasper’s behavior towards Steven was still largely negative, supporting the prominent stereotype that mentally ill individuals are unreliable in nature (Rössler, 2016). As with the instance of prejudice perpetuated by Pearl and Pink Pearl, the mental illness stigma exhibited through Jasper’s harsh stereotyping of Steven demonstrates that Steven Universe Future still has instances that relay negative characterizations of mental illness, though they are very scarce across the selected episodes.

## 5. Conclusion

One major factor that limited this study was the presence of researcher bias when classifying Steven’s behaviors. Given that the study was conducted with the expectation that most of the episodes would portray highly accurate depictions of each mental illness, it’s very likely that some of Steven’s neutral actions were mistakenly characterized as symptoms of the chosen disorders. Another constraint of the study was the absence of time-related criteria when evaluating each episode’s illness diagnoses. Even though this aspect was purposefully removed to allow for greater ease of conducting the symptom analyses, it may have also inflated the accuracy results since a less holistic approach

was taken towards characterizing Steven’s behaviors. Finally, since the study only focused on the finale season of *Steven Universe*, it can’t account for the portrayals of mental illnesses in any of the prior seasons, or of the series as a whole.

Regardless of these limitations, *Steven Universe Future* still sets a precedent for a more de-stigmatized outlook toward mental health, especially in children’s TV. Its portrayal of mental illness is generally quite accurate and it perpetuates very few stigmas surrounding the treatment of mentally ill individuals. Also, considering how recently the show ended, it provides a promising outlook for future cartoon series seeking to breach the same topics. What remains unclear, though, is whether *Steven Universe* is following a trend of improved mental illness representation or is simply a show that diverges from an existing negative standard.

*Steven Universe’s* ability to breach a subject as complex as mental health to a child audience suggests that children’s media plays a key role in combating deep-rooted social stigmas surrounding mental health treatment. Even though the relative effectiveness of early childhood mental illness education is beyond the boundaries of my research, it is a worthwhile subject to explore in future studies.

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