

Bojack Horseman: An Exploration Of Realism, Humour And Mental Health

Yadawanka Yoolyda Pala

Research Scholar, Department Of Journalism And Mass Communication, North Eastern Hill University,
Shillong

Abstract

This research explores the Netflix adult animated sitcom BoJack Horseman through the lens of realism, humour and mental health. Using a qualitative framework-based content analysis, nine episodes across six seasons were purposively selected for in-depth study. The selection focused on scenes that exemplify everyday human struggles, employ humour as a narrative tool, or depict mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety and trauma. The study applies theoretical frameworks of hyperreality and social realism to examine how the series mirrors authentic adult experiences, illustrating failed relationships, identity crises and personal insecurities. This research explores BoJack Horseman as an adult animated sitcom that transcends its genre, merging realism, humour and mental health discourse in a unique narrative form. While it employs animation and satire, the show addresses profound psychological and sociocultural issues, including trauma, identity, loneliness, and the modern obsession with success.

Findings indicate that BoJack Horseman balances entertainment with social commentary, creating narratives that are both relatable and thought-provoking. Episodes reveal that beneath the anthropomorphic and comedic exterior lies a nuanced depiction of human behaviour, struggles and resilience. The series' unique blend of realism, humour and sensitive mental health representation establishes it as a culturally and academically significant text within contemporary television studies.

Keywords: *BoJack Horseman, realism, humour, mental health, adult animated sitcom, content analysis, television studies.*

Date of Submission: 12-10-2025

Date of Acceptance: 22-10-2025

I. Introduction

Since replacing radio as the most popular mass medium in the 1950s, television has played a pivotal role in shaping modern social and cultural life. It has become difficult to imagine a world without it, as it serves as a powerful medium that informs, entertains, and connects people across geographical boundaries (Williams, 1974). In shaping and reflecting cultural values, television has been both criticised for its negative influences on children and youth (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986) and praised for its ability to create shared, global experiences among audiences (McLuhan, 1964).

With the expansion and privatisation of television, content creators in the postmodern era diversified their work beyond traditional films to accommodate emerging tastes and trends (Lotz, 2014). One of the genres that gained immense popularity during this shift was the sitcom or situational comedy, a television format that stands out for its humorous treatment of everyday life. Sitcoms have long been a staple of popular entertainment, using humour to both reflect and shape social realities (Mills, 2009). Although created for light-hearted amusement, sitcoms have evolved into nuanced commentaries on human behaviour and societal change. As Tueth (2005) observes, sitcoms not only provide laughter but also act as subtle mirrors to society, sometimes exploring the very anxieties, aspirations and contradictions that define a generation.

Early sitcoms were characterised by live studio audiences, laugh tracks, and the presence of recurring or guest characters who added to the comic relief (Feuer, 1983). Unlike stand-up comedy, sitcoms typically revolved around familial or workplace settings, allowing audiences to engage with familiar social dynamics. The “suburban middle-class family sitcom” of the 1950s and 1960s often depicted a breadwinning father, a homemaking mother and growing children in an idealised domestic space (Haralovich, 1989). Such representations reinforced certain social norms while also providing a comforting, idealised image of American family life.

For decades, sitcoms remained family-oriented, providing wholesome and often sentimental entertainment. These shows featured imaginative elements like talking puppets, eccentric neighbours, or characters with special abilities, all of which were crafted to appeal to both children and adults (Feuer, 1983). Their episodic nature encouraged habitual viewing, with audiences eagerly awaiting each new instalment. However, with the advent of digital streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu, the way

audiences consume sitcoms has changed drastically. Viewers can now binge-watch entire seasons, redefining both narrative structure and audience engagement (Jenner, 2018).

As the genre evolved, sitcoms gradually abandoned live studio setups and laugh tracks, favouring realistic storylines and emotionally resonant scripts. This transformation led to the creation of sitcoms that blended humour with social critique, including *Seinfeld* (1989), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000), *Arrested Development* (2003), *The Office* (2005), and *BoJack Horseman* (2014). While differing in tone and style, these shows shared a commitment to exploring human flaws, irony, and the absurdities of everyday existence (Thompson, 1996; Mills, 2009).

Among these, *BoJack Horseman* stands out as a groundbreaking work that redefined the adult animated sitcom genre. Created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg and first released on Netflix in 2014, the show ran for six seasons and concluded in 2020 with a total of seventy-seven episodes (Netflix, 2020). On the surface, *BoJack Horseman* follows the life of a washed-up actor who happens to be an anthropomorphic horse struggling with fame, failure, and self-destruction. Yet beneath its absurd premise lies a profoundly human story about emotional pain, addiction, and the search for meaning in an increasingly isolating world (Mittell, 2015).

Through its dark humour and deeply emotional storytelling, the series paints a realistic portrait of mental health and existential struggle. The show's final moments, when BoJack and Diane reflect on life and its painful continuity, capture the core of its philosophical outlook: "*Life's a bitch, and then you die, right?*" "*Sometimes. Sometimes life's a bitch and then you keep on living.*" (*BoJack Horseman*, 2020)

By analyzing selected episodes through critical content analysis, this study examines how the series uses humour not merely for laughter but as a medium of empathy, critique, and self-reflection. Ultimately, this paper argues that *BoJack Horseman* represents a new wave of postmodern realism in animation, one that challenges the conventional boundaries of comedy and opens up meaningful discussions about mental health in popular culture. It redefines what a sitcom can achieve by transforming humour into a vehicle for understanding pain, failure and the complexity of living in a media-saturated world.

II. Literature Review

This literature review has been divided into sub-themes.

Realism

Sitcoms replaced traditional comedy shows back in the 1950s. According to Wikipedia (2024), a sitcom is a show where situational humour erupts spontaneously and where laughter is the desired and calculated effect. What distinguishes one sitcom from another, as Andre Merek (2018) suggests, is the ability to deviate from conventional formulas. *BoJack Horseman*, as an adult animated sitcom, represents the intersection of childhood with its colourful package, and the often crippling reality of adulthood, with its content (Merek, 2018, p. 3). Although the series makes audiences laugh, it simultaneously provokes reflection on the complexities of adult life.

One of the most enduring debates in twentieth-century television criticism concerns realism. Pam Morris (2004) defines realism as an association with the insistence that art cannot turn away from the more sordid and harsh aspects of human existence, distinguishing it between being a realist (recognising what is possible) and realism (an artistic representation of what could or does occur). Similarly, Busselle (2000) identifies three dimensions of realism in television: the conceptual, perceived and processing dimensions. The conceptual dimension relates to how a program is structured and how it connects with real-world settings and experiences. The perceived realism dimension depends on audience interpretations and preconceptions shaped by social context and prior criticism. Lastly, processing characteristics reflect how viewers internalise characters and situations, creating a sense of empathy or self-recognition (Busselle, 2000).

Rodrigo (2012) introduces the concept of social realism, which refers to the representation of everyday struggles shaped by social and economic development. In *BoJack Horseman*, social realism manifests through its portrayal of fame, depression, addiction, and self-destruction, which are issues familiar to contemporary society. Although fictional and comedic, the show mirrors real emotional and psychological experiences, making its representation both comforting and unsettling for viewers who recognise parts of their own reality.

Humour

Humour plays a central role in the construction of meaning within *BoJack Horseman*. Lefcourt (2002) defines humour as a positive trait. The capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, and wisdom. In analysing humour, one considers how jokes, punchlines and metaphors shape emotional tone and narrative rhythm. While humour may occasionally offend certain audiences, it also serves as a tool for deeper reflection on the absurdities of modern existence.

Baliramo (2008) proposes a semiotic approach to humour, emphasising that jokes may exist not only in dialogue but also in signs, symbols and visual cues within a show. This is particularly relevant to animated

sitcoms, where meaning often emerges from background details, colour symbolism, or exaggerated character behaviour.

In *BoJack Horseman*, humour operates on both visual and existential levels (Troy, 2018). Visually, the anthropomorphic characters, animals behaving as humans, create absurd and ironic situations. Existentially, the humour arises from the tension between self-awareness and despair, turning laughter into a means of coping. However, humour's subjectivity remains evident; as Baliramo (2008) observes, cultural and racial contexts affect how jokes are interpreted. The portrayal of Diane Nguyen, for instance, may appear to reinforce Asian stereotypes, yet the show simultaneously critiques such typecasting by giving her emotional depth and agency. Through this balance, *BoJack Horseman* uses humour not merely for laughter, but to reveal emotional truths (Troy, 2018).

Mental Health

Mental health representation in the media is often fraught with ambiguity. Boorse (1976) explains that the concept of mental health lacks a unified theoretical framework due to psychiatry's ongoing definitional challenges. Media portrayals, therefore, risk misrepresentation or oversimplification. *BoJack Horseman*, however, stands out for its nuanced depiction of depression, addiction, and trauma, blending authenticity with self-aware satire (Chap, 2019).

Chap (2019) also uses autoethnography to describe how audiences engage with televised depictions of mental illness through three interrelated processes: recognition, recall, and recovery. These involve identifying with the character's struggles, revisiting one's own experiences and finding catharsis through narrative closure. In *BoJack Horseman*, viewers witness characters' repeated cycles of relapse and self-reflection, creating an honest and often uncomfortable representation of recovery as non-linear.

The show's approach to mental health thus aligns with what Foucault (1988) termed the "problematization of madness", wherein mental illness is not moralised but analysed as a symptom of broader social contradictions. Through this framework, *BoJack Horseman* dismantles the stigma around therapy, medication and emotional vulnerability, using animation as a space for empathy and critique.

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this research is to examine *BoJack Horseman* as a complex cultural text that combines elements of realism, humour and mental health representation within the framework of an adult animated sitcom. The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- i) To explore the theme of realism as reflected in the narrative structure, characters and setting of *BoJack Horseman*.
- ii) To analyse the use of humour in the series and its function in expressing deeper emotional and existential ideas.
- iii) To identify and interpret episodes and scenes where issues of mental health are addressed, represented, and critically discussed within the storyline.

III. Theoretical Framework

This study is rooted in a combination of media representation theory, realism theory and humour theory. Media representation theory states that media texts are not neutral reflections of reality but are socially constructed narratives that influence audience perceptions (Hall, 1997). Applying this framework to *BoJack Horseman* allows for an examination of how the series represents real-life social and psychological issues such as depression, addiction and existential crises through its characters, storylines, and visual design.

Realism theory (Morris, 2004; Busselle, 2000) further guides the study by providing tools to assess the authenticity of the series' portrayal of human experiences. Through this lens, the research evaluates how the show balances exaggerated comedic elements with situations that resonate with real-life experiences.

Finally, insights from mental health theory and media psychology (Chap, 2019) underpin the study's exploration of audience engagement, particularly through the processes of recognition, recall and recovery. These perspectives help understand how viewers relate to characters' struggles and how the series facilitates awareness and empathy regarding mental health issues.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive conceptual lens for analysing how *BoJack Horseman* merges realism, humour and mental health representation, forming the foundation for the study's methodological approach.

IV. Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, combining thematic analysis with critical content analysis to examine *BoJack Horseman*. The research focuses on understanding how the series reflects realism,

humour and mental health, using a framework-based approach to interpret narrative, dialogue and character behaviour.

Sampling and Episode Selection

The study covers all six seasons of BoJack Horseman (2014–2020), which includes a total of seventy-seven episodes. From these, nine episodes were purposively selected based on the following criteria:

- i) Episodes that prominently depict realistic interpersonal dynamics, identity exploration, or adult life struggles.
- ii) Episodes that contain significant humour, including visual, situational and existential comedy.
- iii) Episodes that explicitly address mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, trauma, or addiction.

This purposive sampling allows the study to focus on content that is most relevant to the conceptual framework, ensuring that the episodes selected reflect the research objectives. Three episodes were chosen for each theme, providing a balanced representation across the series.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected through direct content observation of the selected episodes, with attention to Character interactions and dialogue, Narrative structure and plot developments, Visual cues, setting, symbolic elements and Instances of humour and emotional responses linked to mental health themes.

Data Analysis Approach

The selected episodes were analysed using framework-based thematic content analysis, structured around the study's conceptual framework:

- A. **Realism:** Scenes were analysed for hyperreality, social realism and perceived realism, following Simmel (2017, 2018) and Rodrigo (2012).
- B. **Humour:** Episodes were examined for visual, situational and existential humour, using semiotic and conceptual humour theories (Baliramo, 2008; Lefcourt, 2002; Troy, 2018).
- C. **Mental Health:** Episodes were interpreted through recognition, recall and recovery frameworks in relation to depression, trauma and coping mechanisms (Boorse, 1976; Borin Chap, 2019).

V. Analysis And Discussion

Realism

Realism in BoJack Horseman is central to its narrative, portraying human experiences and relationships in ways that resonate with viewers. Through the lens of hyperreality (Simmel, 2017, 2018), the series represents ordinary life while exaggerating certain traits for narrative emphasis. Social realism (Rodrigo, 2012) further grounds the show in familiar societal challenges, making characters' experiences relatable.

Season 2, Episode 10 - "Yes And"

BoJack's strained relationships with Wanda and Todd exemplify hyperreal emotional experiences. The argument with Wanda, where he says, "*you didn't know me, then you fell in love with me and now you know me*", reflects the disillusionment common in adult relationships. Todd's improv graduation, which BoJack fails to attend, illustrates the struggle to prioritise meaningful relationships over personal insecurities. From the perspective of perceived realism, viewers recognise familiar patterns of avoidance and disappointment, making the narrative emotionally engaging.

Season 6, Episode 10 – "Good Damage"

Diane Nguyen's reflections on her childhood, including bullying, family dysfunction and professional setbacks, demonstrate realism through the lens of conceptual and social realism. Her candid discussion of antidepressants and failed aspirations mirrors authentic adult struggles (Chater, 2015). The narrative emphasises how past trauma shapes present decisions, reinforcing the series' realistic depiction of human complexity.

Season 4, Episode 3 – "Hooray! A Todd Episode"

Todd Chavez's identity exploration highlights realism in contemporary social contexts. His realisation of being asexual and his gradual acceptance of this identity depict the nuanced challenges faced by individuals navigating personal and societal expectations. Through processing characteristics, the audience relives familiar struggles of self-discovery and social integration, connecting Todd's experiences to their own realities.

Humour

Humour in BoJack Horseman serves multiple functions: it entertains, provides social commentary and mediates emotional intensity. Through semiotic analysis (Baliramo, 2008) and the understanding of existential and visual humour (Troy, 2018), the series integrates comedy with narrative depth.

Season 2, Episode 4 – “After the Party”

The episode’s visual humour, including anthropomorphised characters such as a penguin working at a publishing company or a literal grasshopper bartender, exemplifies semiotic humour, where meaning is conveyed through context rather than direct dialogue. Celebrity cameos, including a Ryan Gosling-type character and Paul McCartney hidden in a cake, layer the humour while connecting audiences to familiar cultural references. Wanda’s joke about mulch evolves into a narrative lesson, demonstrating how humour can reinforce thematic content.

Season 3, Episode 5 – “Love And/Or Marriage”

Satirical humour critiques Hollywood culture, using absurd situations to contrast public personas with private realities. From a conceptual humour perspective (Lefcourt, 2002), the audience perceives the irony of celebrity life while engaging with the absurdity of BoJack’s environment, reflecting the series’ sophisticated comedic strategy.

Season 5, Episode 11 – “The Stopped Show”

Existential humour emerges as BoJack confronts personal failures. The comedy here is subtle, arising from ironic situations rather than overt jokes. By embedding humour within emotionally heavy contexts, the show aligns with the framework of humour as a coping mechanism, balancing laughter with reflection on personal and social realities.

Mental Health

Mental health is a prominent and complex theme, explored through characters’ struggles with depression, trauma and self-acceptance. Using frameworks from Boorse (1976) and Borin Chap (2019), the show depicts recognition, recall and recovery in relation to mental health experiences.

Season 1, Episode 11 – “Downer Ending”

BoJack’s drug-induced hallucinations and revisiting of past relationships illustrate depressive behaviours, including social withdrawal and self-doubt (Simmel, 2017, 2018, p.7). His questioning of self-worth when he asks Diane if he is “*good enough*” and whether there is “*hope for change*”, reflects the ongoing navigation of trauma and the recovery process, aligning with the recognition and recall framework.

Season 3, Episode 7 – “Stop the Presses”

Diane’s anxiety and professional stress illustrate how personal trauma intersects with daily life. Her experiences with bullying, self-perception and occupational challenges embody the framework of autoethnographic mental health representation (Borin Chap, 2019), showing how narratives revisit and process trauma in meaningful ways.

Season 6, Episode 16 – “The View From Halfway Down”

BoJack confronts mortality and past actions in a surreal, introspective episode. The hallucinatory sequences and metaphorical imagery illustrate recovery and self-reflection, emphasizing the long-term effects of trauma and addiction. The episode exemplifies the framework’s “recovery” stage, portraying a confrontation with personal history and its psychological impact.

VI. Conclusion

BoJack Horseman emerges as a distinctive adult animated sitcom that seamlessly combines realism, humour and mental health to create a narrative both entertaining and deeply reflective. Through the lens of hyperreality and social realism (Simmel, 2017, 2018; Rodrigo, 2012), the series portrays characters navigating complex relationships, personal failures and societal expectations, allowing viewers to recognise fragments of their own lives in the storylines. Episodes such as “Yes And” (S2E10) and “Good Damage” (S6E10) exemplify this, illustrating how emotional struggles and everyday dilemmas are mirrored in the characters’ lives. Todd’s journey of identity exploration (S4E03) further reflects realism in contemporary social contexts, emphasising personal growth and self-acceptance.

Humour operates as both a narrative and emotional tool, providing levity while enhancing the depth of the story. Through visual, situational, and existential humour (Baliramo, 2008; Lefcourt, 2002; Troy, 2018), episodes like “After the Party” (S2E04) and “The Stopped Show” (S5E11) demonstrate how comedy can highlight absurdities of life, mediate difficult emotions and foster audience engagement without undermining the seriousness of underlying themes.

The series’ nuanced treatment of mental health further distinguishes it from contemporaries. By depicting depression, anxiety, trauma and addiction in episodes such as “Downer Ending” (S1E11), “Stop the

Presses” (S3E07), and “The View From Halfway Down” (S6E16), BoJack Horseman embodies the processes of recognition, recall and recovery (Boorse, 1976; Borin Chap, 2019), creating spaces for reflection, empathy and connection for its audience.

Ultimately, while BoJack Horseman retains the comedic elements of a traditional sitcom, its integration of realism and sensitive portrayals of mental health elevate it into a thoughtful, socially resonant text. The series demonstrates that animated storytelling can engage critically with complex human experiences, balancing humour and tragedy, while leaving viewers with profound insights into resilience, empathy and moral reflection.

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