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Abstract: *This paper explores the innovative use of pop culture—particularly film and television—as a pedagogical tool for teaching Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). By analyzing familiar narratives through a CBT lens, learners can observe key concepts such as cognitive distortions, automatic thoughts, and behavioral patterns in action. Films like Inside Out, Good Will Hunting, and Groundhog Day vividly depict core CBT principles, enabling students to engage with psychological content in an emotionally resonant and accessible manner. This media-based approach supports experiential learning, enhances empathy, and facilitates the application of theoretical knowledge to real-world contexts. Moreover, it promotes cultural sensitivity and clinical reasoning through reflective and interactive activities such as scene analysis, role-play, and cognitive restructuring exercises. The integration of narrative media into CBT education represents a valuable, inclusive strategy that bridges the gap between abstract theory and therapeutic practice, enriching both academic instruction and clinical training.*

Keywords: pop culture, cognitive behavioural therapy, pedagogical tool, cognitive distortions, behavioral change

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Using Pop Culture and Film to Teach Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

Dr. Barbara Gabriella Renzi [1]

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a widely recognized, evidence-based form of psychotherapy that focuses on identifying and restructuring maladaptive thought patterns to improve emotional regulation and encourage adaptive behaviour (J. Beck). Traditionally taught through lectures, clinical observation, and case studies, CBT can also be effectively illustrated using films and other forms of pop culture. These media provide emotionally resonant and relatable narratives that can help learners understand complex psychological processes in a more engaging and memorable way.

At the heart of CBT is the cognitive model, which posits that thoughts, emotions, and behaviours are interconnected. When individuals interpret events through distorted or irrational beliefs—such as catastrophizing, overgeneralizing, or personalizing—they are more likely to experience psychological distress (A. Beck). Pop culture, particularly film and television, often depicts characters struggling with precisely these kinds of distorted thinking patterns. Viewing and analyzing such narratives through a CBT lens allows learners to identify real-world applications of therapeutic concepts.

For example, the film *Inside Out* (2015) provides an accessible depiction of the relationship between emotions, thoughts, and behaviour. While designed for a younger audience, the film portrays the internal emotional struggles of an adolescent adjusting to life changes. Viewers can observe how the character Riley's core beliefs and thought patterns shift in response to her environment, ultimately affecting her mood and behaviour. This makes the film a valuable resource for illustrating key CBT principles such as emotional regulation, cognitive restructuring, and the impact of automatic thoughts. In more adult-themed media, the character Tony Soprano from *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) offers rich material for CBT analysis. Tony frequently engages in black-and-white thinking, assumes the worst, and reacts to distorted thoughts with aggressive behaviour. A CBT-informed discussion could focus on identifying his cognitive distortions and hypothesizing how techniques like thought records or behavioural experiments might help him challenge these patterns. According to Dryden and Branch (2008), using fictional characters can facilitate learning because they offer a “safe distance” for learners to engage with psychological material without the emotional intensity that real clinical cases might provoke.

The use of film and television in CBT education also supports active learning. Rather than passively absorbing information, students analyze, discuss, and apply theoretical concepts to dynamic, evolving narratives. This aligns with Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory, which suggests that

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knowledge is more effectively acquired when learners actively participate in reflective observation and conceptual application. Media-based teaching strategies also appeal to visual and auditory learners who may find traditional text-based methods less engaging.

Moreover, using pop culture in psychotherapy education can foster empathy and cultural competence. Characters often face challenges related to identity, trauma, relationships, and mental health that reflect real societal issues. For instance, BoJack Horseman, the protagonist of the animated series *BoJack Horseman* (2014–2020), exhibits classic symptoms of depression and substance misuse, alongside persistent negative self-talk and dysfunctional interpersonal behaviour. Discussing BoJack's struggles can help trainees understand how CBT might approach comorbid conditions through interventions like behavioural activation and schema-focused work (Wright, Basco, & Thase).

While not a substitute for formal clinical training or supervision, pop culture media can enrich CBT education by bridging theory and lived experience. By analyzing how characters think, feel, and act in response to life's challenges, learners can better understand cognitive-behavioural principles in context. This approach helps demystify therapy concepts and reinforces their relevance in everyday life. In my opinion, integrating film and pop culture into CBT instruction enhances learner engagement, deepens understanding, and supports the development of therapeutic insight. As CBT continues to evolve, embracing diverse teaching methods—including the use of narrative media—can expand its accessibility and effectiveness in both academic and clinical settings.

1. Key Concepts in CBT

To effectively apply pop culture in the teaching of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), it is important to first establish a solid understanding of the therapy's core theoretical components. At its foundation, CBT operates on the premise that our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours are closely interconnected, and that maladaptive thinking patterns can lead to emotional distress and problematic behaviour. One of the most central concepts in CBT is the notion of *automatic thoughts*—those immediate, often unconscious mental responses that arise in reaction to everyday situations. These thoughts are typically shaped by past experiences and underlying belief systems, and while they often go unnoticed, they exert a powerful influence over emotional and behavioural outcomes (J. Beck).

Closely related to automatic thoughts are *cognitive distortions*, which refer to systematic errors in reasoning that reinforce negative emotions and self-defeating behaviour. Examples include overgeneralization, catastrophizing, personalization, and dichotomous thinking. These distortions are frequently rooted in deeper, more enduring cognitive structures known as *schemas*—core beliefs and assumptions developed over time, often during childhood, that shape how individuals perceive themselves, others, and the world around them (A. Beck). When these schemas are rigid or

dysfunctional, they can predispose individuals to interpret neutral or ambiguous situations in a negative light, perpetuating cycles of distress.

Another key concept in CBT is the relationship between cognition and observable outcomes—namely, emotions and behaviours. CBT posits that emotional experiences and behavioral reactions are largely influenced by how individuals interpret events, rather than the events themselves. By identifying the specific thoughts that precede emotional distress or maladaptive behaviour, therapists can work with clients to evaluate the accuracy and utility of these thoughts and, where appropriate, modify them through techniques such as cognitive restructuring, thought records, and behavioural experiments (Wright, Basco, & Thase).

The interplay among thoughts, emotions, and behaviours is captured in the *thought–emotion–behaviour cycle*, a foundational model in CBT that illustrates how each component influences the others in a continuous and reciprocal loop. For example, a person who believes they are incompetent may feel anxious in performance situations and avoid challenges, which in turn reinforces the belief in their own inadequacy. Understanding this cycle allows for targeted interventions at any point—whether it's addressing the thought directly, modifying emotional responses, or altering behaviour to produce new feedback that contradicts the original belief.

The ultimate goal of CBT is to help individuals become more aware of their internal cognitive processes and to equip them with strategies to change unhelpful patterns. By developing skills in identifying automatic thoughts, recognizing distortions, challenging negative beliefs, and engaging in adaptive behaviour, clients can gradually experience improvement in mood, functioning, and overall psychological well-being. This structured and skills-based approach makes CBT particularly amenable to teaching through narrative media like film and television, where the cognitive and emotional development of characters can vividly demonstrate these theoretical principles in action.

2. Pop Culture as a Pedagogical Tool

Films, television shows, and other forms of popular media are far more than mere entertainment; they function as cultural texts that reflect, construct, and comment on human behaviour, relationships, and psychological processes. When used intentionally, they can serve as powerful pedagogical tools in the teaching of complex psychological concepts, including those found in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). One of the key advantages of using pop culture in this context lies in its *visual and narrative engagement*. Unlike traditional textbooks or lectures, films and series offer dynamic, story-driven contexts that allow abstract psychological theories to be visualized in action. Characters' internal struggles, interpersonal conflicts, and behavioural choices are rendered vividly on screen, making it easier for students to grasp and remember the underlying cognitive and emotional mechanisms at play (Moreno & Mayer).

In addition to visual learning, pop culture media possess strong *emotional resonance*, which fosters deeper cognitive processing and empathy. Viewers often form emotional connections with fictional characters, identifying with their experiences and investing in their outcomes. This emotional involvement creates a fertile ground for understanding psychological processes in a meaningful and memorable way. For example, observing a character experience a downward spiral due to negative automatic thoughts can bring to life the concept of cognitive distortions far more effectively than a clinical case vignette might. This emotional dimension aligns well with the goals of CBT, which often seeks to help individuals develop emotional insight and regulation through a better understanding of their thought patterns.

Furthermore, films and television shows offer rich *opportunities for critical thinking and applied analysis*. Students can be encouraged to evaluate characters' behaviour, assess their cognitive processes, identify distorted thinking patterns, and hypothesize possible CBT interventions that could alter the character's emotional or behavioural outcomes. This kind of engagement transforms passive viewing into active learning and mirrors the cognitive work required in actual therapeutic settings. According to Illes and Sinno (2013), media-based pedagogy can cultivate important clinical skills such as observation, interpretation, and hypothesis testing, making it an ideal supplement to more traditional didactic methods.

The inherent relatability of pop culture also makes it a highly inclusive and accessible teaching tool. Whether the material is a Pixar film or a psychological thriller, instructors can select examples that resonate with diverse student populations and cultural backgrounds. This flexibility allows for the teaching of CBT principles in ways that are both academically rigorous and culturally responsive. By framing psychological theory within the context of familiar narratives, students can more easily bridge the gap between theory and practice, facilitating not only comprehension but also retention and transfer of knowledge to real-world clinical settings.

3. Films That Illustrate CBT Concepts

Popular films can serve as compelling case studies for exploring and applying core CBT concepts. By examining character behaviour, thought patterns, and emotional reactions through a cognitive-behavioural lens, students can gain a deeper, more intuitive understanding of theoretical constructs. Below are selected films that exemplify key CBT principles in action.

a. Cognitive Distortions and Schemas – *Good Will Hunting* (1997)

Good Will Hunting (1997), directed by Gus Van Sant and written by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, is a deeply affecting psychological drama that explores the internal world of Will Hunting, a young janitor at MIT who possesses extraordinary intellectual ability but suffers from profound emotional and interpersonal difficulties. From a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) perspective, Will's

psychological struggles are best understood through the concepts of cognitive distortions and schemas—two foundational elements that shape how individuals perceive and respond to their experiences (J. Beck).

Cognitive distortions are habitual and irrational thought patterns that influence how people interpret events. These distortions often emerge from deeply ingrained schemas, or core beliefs formed early in life based on experiences, particularly those involving attachment, trauma, and identity (A. Beck; Young et al.). In Will's case, his cognitive distortions are frequently on display in both his internal monologue and his interactions with others. He consistently engages in discounting the positive, minimizing his accomplishments and deflecting praise. Despite solving complex mathematical equations that baffle MIT students and professors, Will insists that his ability is unremarkable, stating that it's something he was simply born with. This reflects not only distorted thinking but also an underlying schema of unworthiness—one that tells him he doesn't deserve recognition, success, or happiness.

Another common distortion that Will demonstrates is emotional reasoning, the belief that his feelings reflect objective truth. For example, because he feels unsafe in intimate relationships, he interprets closeness as inherently dangerous and assumes abandonment is inevitable. As a result, he repeatedly sabotages potential sources of affection and support, including his romantic relationship with Skylar. He tells her she deserves someone better, projecting his feelings of inadequacy as though they were facts. This behaviour illustrates how cognitive distortions, rooted in maladaptive schemas, can result in defensive, avoidant, and self-defeating behaviour patterns.

Will's deeply entrenched schema - "I am unlovable" or "People can't be trusted"—developed from a history of severe childhood abuse and abandonment. These core beliefs drive his hostile and guarded demeanour, particularly when he is confronted by figures of authority or those who attempt to get close to him emotionally. He uses sarcasm, aggression, and intellectual superiority as defence mechanisms to keep others at a distance and protect himself from anticipated rejection or betrayal. These coping strategies, while protective in nature, reinforce his cognitive distortions and perpetuate his isolation, highlighting the cyclical relationship between schemas, distorted thinking, and maladaptive behaviour.

The turning point in Will's psychological trajectory occurs during his therapy sessions with Sean Maguire, a psychologist portrayed by Robin Williams. Unlike other authority figures, Sean challenges Will's distortions not with logic or argument, but through compassion and persistence. Over time, Sean helps Will recognize the discrepancy between his automatic thoughts and reality. A particularly poignant moment arises when Sean repeats the phrase, "It's not your fault," breaking through Will's resistance and allowing him to confront the deep emotional wounds that have fueled his cognitive distortions. This scene powerfully illustrates the therapeutic process of schema healing, where

core beliefs are not merely intellectually disputed but emotionally reprocessed in a safe and affirming relationship (Young et al.).

Through this therapeutic alliance, Will gradually develops the insight and courage to question his long-held beliefs about himself and others. He begins to consider the possibility that he is worthy of love and capable of change. This process exemplifies CBT's emphasis on identifying distorted thinking, understanding the schemas that drive them, and challenging these beliefs through both cognitive and experiential strategies.

Good Will Hunting provides a rich and emotionally layered depiction of how cognitive distortions and schemas operate in everyday life. It also highlights the transformative power of therapeutic intervention in reshaping deeply held beliefs. As a teaching tool, the film offers valuable insights into the internal mechanisms of CBT and demonstrates the importance of trust, vulnerability, and relational repair in the journey toward psychological healing.

b. The Thought–Emotion–Behavior Cycle – *Inside Out* (2015)

Pixar's *Inside Out* (2015), directed by Pete Docter, is more than a visually imaginative animated film—it is a remarkably effective psychological allegory. It illustrates complex emotional and cognitive processes in a way that is both accessible and conceptually aligned with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Central to CBT is the Thought–Emotion–Behaviour Cycle, a model that describes how our interpretations of events influence our emotional responses and behavioural outcomes (Beck, 2011). *Inside Out* externalizes this cycle by personifying emotions and depicting the internal workings of an 11-year-old girl named Riley as she experiences a significant life transition.

The story begins with Riley's move from her childhood home in Minnesota to a new city, school, and social environment in San Francisco. This relocation disrupts her routine, challenges her sense of stability, and activates a cascade of emotional reactions. Within her mind, five anthropomorphic emotions—Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust—work from a control centre, influencing how Riley interprets and reacts to the world around her. Each emotional reaction is linked to specific thoughts and behaviours, visually representing the cyclical nature of cognition, feeling, and action that underpins CBT's theoretical framework.

Initially, Joy dominates Riley's emotional life and attempts to suppress Sadness. This mirrors a common cognitive distortion in which individuals believe that negative emotions must be avoided or minimized at all costs—a mindset that often leads to emotional invalidation and psychological distress (Leahy). Joy's insistence on positivity results in the unintended consequence of emotional disconnection. As Sadness is pushed aside, Riley begins to lose touch with her authentic experiences and gradually disengages from meaningful activities, such as spending time with her parents or enjoying past hobbies.

The consequences of ignoring or invalidating emotions become clear as Riley's internal balance deteriorates. She begins to feel alienated and misunderstood, which leads to changes in her behaviour, including withdrawing from social interactions, lashing out at her parents, and ultimately planning to run away. These behavioral shifts are rooted not in the events themselves (the move or her challenges at school), but in Riley's interpretation of those events—her belief that she is alone, misunderstood, and powerless. CBT emphasizes that such interpretations (or automatic thoughts) significantly influence emotional experiences and behavioural reactions, rather than the events alone (A. Beck).

As the narrative unfolds, Sadness—initially portrayed as a liability—emerges as a vital force for emotional healing and connection. When Riley finally expresses her sadness and vulnerability to her parents, she experiences emotional validation and support, prompting a behavioural shift toward reconnection and adaptation. This pivotal moment represents a core CBT principle: acknowledging and exploring emotional experiences can interrupt maladaptive cycles and promote healthier outcomes. Instead of denying negative emotions, CBT encourages individuals to examine them, understand the thoughts behind them, and choose responses that are congruent with their values and goals.

Moreover, the film demonstrates elements of cognitive reappraisal—a CBT technique in which individuals learn to reinterpret situations in more balanced and realistic ways. By allowing Sadness to take a role in forming new core memories, Riley develops a more integrated emotional experience that includes both joy and sorrow. This shift enables her to see the complexity in her feelings and recognize that distress does not mean something is wrong with her—it means she is experiencing life fully. This emotional flexibility is key to psychological resilience and is a skill that CBT explicitly aims to cultivate.

e. Reframing Negative Narratives and Persistence – *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006)

The Pursuit of Happyness (2006), directed by Gabriele Muccino and based on the real-life story of Chris Gardner, is a compelling portrayal of adversity, hope, and perseverance. Through the lens of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), the film illustrates how reframing negative narratives and sustaining persistent effort in the face of hardship can serve as powerful cognitive and behavioural mechanisms for overcoming emotional and situational challenges. Chris Gardner's journey is a vivid example of how a shift in perspective—central to CBT's cognitive restructuring techniques—can help individuals maintain psychological resilience, even under extreme stress.

CBT posits that our emotional experiences are shaped not solely by external events but by how we interpret those events—our internal narrative or thought patterns (J. Beck). In Gardner's case, life presents a series of destabilizing circumstances: failed business ventures, eviction, homelessness, and single parenthood. Despite this, he refuses to succumb to despair. Rather than framing himself as a victim of systemic failure or personal inadequacy, he consistently reframes his experiences in terms of purpose, responsibility, and opportunity. This process of cognitive reframing, a key CBT technique,

involves identifying negative, unhelpful thoughts and deliberately reinterpreting situations in more constructive and realistic ways.

One of the clearest examples of this occurs when Gardner and his son must spend the night in a subway restroom. In this scene, Gardner's external circumstances are objectively bleak, yet he comforts his son and shields him emotionally, refusing to interpret the moment as a symbol of defeat. Instead, he focuses on their bond and their shared goal of building a better future. From a CBT perspective, this response represents an active choice to replace catastrophic thinking with resilience-enhancing alternatives. He resists distorted cognitions such as overgeneralization ("This will never get better") or labelling ("I am a failure"), opting instead to maintain a flexible, future-focused mindset.

This ability to reframe is closely linked to persistence, another behavioural component emphasized in CBT, especially within strategies such as behavioural activation and problem-solving therapy. Behavioural activation encourages individuals to engage in value-driven activities, even when motivation is low or circumstances are discouraging (Martell, Dimidjian, & Herman-Dunn). Gardner consistently demonstrates this principle: he shows up to his unpaid internship, makes cold calls, and studies for his licensing exam—all while facing basic survival challenges. His behaviour reflects a CBT-informed belief in agency, the idea that while one cannot always control circumstances, one can control responses to them.

Gardner's persistence is not fuelled by blind optimism but by carefully sustained cognitive strategies that align with CBT's emphasis on evidence-based hope. He gathers "evidence" that his efforts might succeed through small daily wins—securing a short conversation with a potential investor, gaining praise from a supervisor, or helping his son feel safe. These moments function as behavioural experiments, another CBT strategy where individuals test the validity of their beliefs in real-world settings (Wright et al.). Gardner tests the belief that he is capable, resourceful, and worthy of success—and finds consistent support for it, even in adversity.

Importantly, the film does not romanticize poverty or suggest that mindset alone guarantees success. Instead, it portrays how the reframing of internal narratives and sustained, goal-directed behaviour can be critical coping mechanisms that help individuals maintain dignity, self-worth and hope in the face of overwhelming odds.

d. Breaking Repetitive Patterns Through Behavioral Change – *Groundhog Day* (1993)

Groundhog Day (1993), directed by Harold Ramis and starring Bill Murray as the cynical weatherman Phil Connors, has become a cultural touchstone for personal transformation. Though the film is framed as a fantasy comedy, its narrative structure—where the protagonist is forced to relive the same day over and over—provides a powerful metaphor for behavioural patterns, habitual thinking, and ultimately therapeutic change. Viewed through a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) lens, *Groundhog Day*

vividly illustrates how breaking out of maladaptive cycles requires intentional behavioural change, a central tenet of CBT interventions such as behavioural activation and exposure-based strategies.

At the start of the film, Phil is arrogant, emotionally distant, and self-serving. He treats others with condescension and views his assignment to cover the Groundhog Day festivities in Punxsutawney as beneath him. When he becomes trapped in a time loop, forced to relive February 2nd repeatedly, his initial reaction is confusion, followed by despair and nihilism. These reactions reflect a familiar CBT sequence: when people interpret situations as uncontrollable or hopeless (e.g., "nothing matters"), they often experience depressive symptoms, emotional disengagement, and avoidance behaviours (A. Beck). Phil engages in hedonistic and reckless behaviour—eating excessively, manipulating others, and even attempting suicide—believing that no change is possible.

However, as the repetition continues, Phil gradually begins to experiment with different behaviours. Initially, this is superficial and self-serving (e.g., memorizing facts to seduce women), but over time, he shifts toward more value-driven actions, such as helping townspeople, learning piano, and genuinely caring about others' well-being. This transition reflects the principle of behavioural activation, a CBT technique that encourages individuals to engage in purposeful and reinforcing activities, even before they "feel" motivated to do so (Martell, Dimidjian, & Herman-Dunn). In the film, we see that as Phil changes his behaviour, his thoughts and emotions also begin to shift. He becomes more compassionate, patient, and fulfilled—not because his external world has changed, but because *his actions within it* have.

Phil's repetitive cycle also functions as an extended behavioural experiment, another core CBT strategy in which individuals test the consequences of altering their behaviour to challenge dysfunctional beliefs. For example, when Phil initially believes that nothing he does matters, he behaves impulsively and destructively. But as he begins making small positive changes—catching a falling child, helping a homeless man, bringing coffee to colleagues—he starts to see that his actions *do* have an impact. This challenges his earlier core belief of futility ("Nothing I do makes a difference") and replaces it with one of agency and meaning.

From a therapeutic perspective, Phil's transformation demonstrates how consistent behavioural changes can interrupt entrenched emotional and cognitive patterns. Rather than attempting to "think" his way out of his situation, Phil alters his routine, habits, and emotional engagement with the world, a process that aligns with CBT's understanding that action can precede and even catalyze cognitive change. His growing self-awareness and empathy emerge not from introspection alone, but from repeated, lived experiences in which he tests and reinforces more adaptive behaviours.

Eventually, the time loop breaks—but not because Phil discovers a mystical trick. It ends when he stops trying to manipulate outcomes for selfish reasons and instead acts with authenticity, empathy, and purpose. This resolution powerfully reflects a CBT message: sustainable change occurs not through

magical thinking or wishful hoping, but through deliberate, repeated actions that align with one's values and challenge maladaptive cycles.

Groundhog Day is a vivid cinematic representation of CBT principles in practice. It showcases how behavioural change can disrupt dysfunctional patterns, leading to shifts in cognition and emotion. For educators and therapists alike, the film provides a compelling, accessible narrative for illustrating the therapeutic power of behavioural activation, repetition, and the transformation that can occur when individuals begin to live with intentionality and meaning.

e. **La stanza del figlio (The Son's Room, 2001)**

Nanni Moretti's *La stanza del figlio* presents a profound exploration of grief and its impact on cognition, emotion, and behaviour. The narrative centres on Giovanni, a psychoanalyst and father whose teenage son dies unexpectedly in a diving accident. Through a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) lens, the film offers rich opportunities to examine cognitive distortions, behavioural avoidance, emotional suppression, and schema disruption—particularly within the context of bereavement and family systems.

CBT posits that our emotional responses are shaped not just by events, but by how we interpret them through ingrained cognitive schemas—core beliefs formed from past experiences (J. Beck). In Giovanni's case, his sudden loss catalyses deeply painful automatic thoughts and distorted interpretations of himself and the world. For instance, he engages in personalization ("If I had gone jogging with him that morning, he might still be alive"), which is a common cognitive distortion in grief that attributes undue responsibility for uncontrollable outcomes (A. Beck). He also shows signs of catastrophizing ("This loss has destroyed our family beyond repair") and emotional reasoning ("Because I feel guilty, I must be to blame"), both of which reinforce despair and inhibit adaptive coping.

Giovanni's grief is compounded by behavioural avoidance, a key maintaining factor in many psychological disorders (Martell, Dimidjian, & Herman-Dunn). Rather than facing his grief openly, he immerses himself in work, appearing emotionally detached and disengaged at home. In CBT, this form of avoidance is understood as a short-term coping mechanism that prevents the emotional processing necessary for long-term healing. His withdrawal from family rituals, such as mealtimes and shared mourning, deepens the emotional chasm within the household.

In tandem with avoidance, Giovanni exhibits emotional suppression, attempting to maintain stoicism despite internal distress. Emotional suppression is known to exacerbate psychological distress and weaken interpersonal connections (Leahy). His reluctance to express grief contrasts sharply with his wife Paola's desire for emotional connection and shared mourning. Meanwhile, their daughter Arianna retreats into silence. This divergence in coping styles leads to interpersonal tension and

isolation—key issues in family systems that CBT-based interventions often aim to address through psychoeducation and behavioural experiments.

The film also illustrates the disruption of professional and personal schemas. As a psychoanalyst, Giovanni is accustomed to understanding and guiding others through their emotional pain. His son's death destabilizes his belief in therapeutic logic and predictability. According to Beck (2011), when life events contradict one's core schemas—such as "the world is fair" or "I can help people manage suffering"—individuals may experience cognitive dissonance and existential despair. Giovanni begins to question his own efficacy, both as a therapist and a father.

A turning point occurs when the family meets Arianna, a friend of their son's. This encounter—emotionally charged yet quietly redemptive—creates an opportunity for value-based behavioural re-engagement, a concept from CBT's behavioural activation framework (Martell et al., 2010). Sharing a car ride and small acts of empathy gradually reconnect the family with emotional vitality and mutual presence. This moment signals the beginning of a therapeutic shift: from avoidance to acceptance, and from emotional isolation to re-engagement with life's uncertainties.

La stanza del figlio is not only a compelling film about grief, but also a subtle case study in cognitive-behavioural processes. It captures the interplay of core beliefs, automatic thoughts, and behavioural responses in a way that resonates emotionally and clinically. For educators, the film can be used to stimulate classroom discussions, scene analysis, and role-play interventions. Questions such as "What schema might Giovanni be operating from?" or "What CBT techniques could help this family reconnect?" can promote deeper clinical reasoning and empathy in trainees.

f. **Caterina va in città (Caterina in the Big City, 2003)**

Paolo Virzì's *Caterina va in città* is a nuanced coming-of-age film that follows the psychological and social transformation of a young girl, Caterina, who moves from a rural town to Rome with her parents. Through the lens of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), the film is particularly effective for exploring adolescent identity development, the formation of cognitive schemas, automatic thoughts, and the impact of environmental context on self-concept and emotional regulation.

Caterina's psychological journey begins with cognitive dissonance—her expectations of urban life quickly clash with the complex social hierarchies and political divisions she encounters in her new school. Her attempts to fit in with two opposing social groups—one leftist and bohemian, the other affluent and conservative—reveal a growing internal struggle. CBT posits that adolescents form core beliefs or schemas based on repeated social feedback and significant emotional events (J. Beck). Caterina begins to internalize contradictory schemas: on one hand, "I need to be interesting and intellectual to be accepted"; on the other, "I must be attractive and desirable to have value." These beliefs begin to drive automatic thoughts and behaviours that affect her self-esteem and decision-making.

One clear CBT concept in the film is external validation as a cognitive trap. Caterina's growing dependence on others' approval leads to cognitive distortions such as *mind reading* ("They must think I'm boring") and *all-or-nothing thinking* ("If I'm not popular, I'm a failure"). These distorted thoughts are exacerbated by her unstable family environment. Her narcissistic father swings between grandiosity and rage, while her mother exhibits emotional withdrawal. This instability reinforces Caterina's belief that she must manage others' emotions to feel secure—an example of a schema rooted in emotional neglect or inconsistency (Young et al.).

Caterina also demonstrates behavioural avoidance, particularly when she distances herself from emotionally difficult conversations or decisions. When she is excluded by one friend group, she immediately shifts her identity to align with the other, avoiding confrontation or reflection. From a CBT standpoint, this behaviour can be seen as a form of experiential avoidance—an attempt to sidestep uncomfortable emotional states like rejection, shame, or uncertainty (Leahy). Rather than identifying and challenging her underlying thoughts ("Am I unlikable?"), Caterina modifies her external behaviour in ways that suppress emotional authenticity.

Importantly, the film captures the role of the social environment in shaping cognitive patterns. The polarized political culture of her new school, combined with parental pressure and media saturation, influences not only how Caterina sees herself, but also what she believes she must become to survive. This aligns with CBT's assertion that cognition is socially and contextually embedded (A. Beck). Her father's public humiliation and career failure also serve as a mirror: Caterina begins to fear vulnerability and embarrassment, mirroring his belief that self-worth is contingent on recognition and control.

A subtle shift occurs toward the end of the film when Caterina begins to disengage from the ideological extremes of her social environment. She reconnects with her personal interests and develops a more stable sense of self, suggesting the beginning of cognitive restructuring. She no longer appears to rely entirely on social approval, and her internal dialogue softens. In CBT terms, she begins to develop more balanced thinking, rejecting rigid "should" statements and acknowledging the complexity of relationships and identity.

For CBT educators, *Caterina va in città* provides rich pedagogical material. Students can identify Caterina's automatic thoughts and corresponding emotions across different social interactions, mapping them using CBT's thought–emotion–behaviour model (Beck, 2011). In group settings, scenes can be used for Socratic questioning exercises ("What evidence does Caterina have that she's unworthy?") or cognitive restructuring practice. The film also offers opportunities to discuss cultural humility, especially regarding class, politics, and adolescence in an Italian sociopolitical context.

g. **Come un gatto in tangenziale (Like a cat on the ring road - Out of Place)**

Come un gatto in tangenziale (2017), directed by Riccardo Milani, is a sharp and comedic social commentary that brings together two vastly different worlds: Giovanni, a cultured European policy

expert, and Monica, a single mother from the marginalized Roman suburb of Bastogi. Beneath its humorous tone, the film offers a rich narrative for exploring key principles of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), particularly around class-based cognitive schemas, automatic thoughts, emotional coping, and cognitive restructuring.

Monica embodies a deeply ingrained schema of social exclusion, shaped by years of stigmatization and marginalization. Her automatic thoughts reveal a belief that she does not belong in "respectable" environments: "People like me don't belong in places like that," or "They look at me like I'm garbage." These thoughts are clear examples of mind reading and catastrophizing—two common cognitive distortions in individuals who have internalized social inferiority (J. Beck; Young et al.). Her outward aggression and sarcasm can be viewed as protective coping strategies, aimed at pre-empting rejection by asserting control through anger.

Giovanni, on the other hand, represents a more subtle but equally rigid cognitive pattern: an elitist schema grounded in intellectual and cultural superiority. His language early in the film is riddled with overgeneralizations and labelling— "People from Bastogi are hopeless," "They'll never amount to anything"—reflecting black-and-white thinking and confirmation bias. Like Monica, Giovanni processes the world through distorted beliefs, though his are shaped by privilege rather than exclusion.

As the plot unfolds, the real narrative arc lies in the mutual transformation of both characters' mental models. CBT emphasizes the importance of cognitive restructuring—the process of identifying and challenging maladaptive beliefs and replacing them with more balanced and evidence-based perspectives (J. Beck). This is precisely what happens as Giovanni and Monica are forced to interact for the sake of their children. Their lived experiences with each other begin to challenge their assumptions: Giovanni witnesses Monica's intelligence, resilience, and moral clarity, while Monica discovers that not all "bourgeois" people are arrogant or cold. These shifts happen gradually, and the film cleverly illustrates how exposure to disconfirming experiences can soften rigid thinking patterns.

There are several moments in the film that serve as visual metaphors for cognitive change. When Giovanni shares a sincere laugh with Monica's family, or when Monica dares to attend a formal conference in a white blouse, both characters are engaging in new behaviours that contradict their old beliefs. These actions reflect the CBT principle that behaviour can influence thought just as much as thought can influence behaviour.

Monica's development also highlights the transition from reactive to proactive coping. Initially driven by avoidance, aggression, and low expectations, she begins to make choices that align with her values—fighting for her daughter's future and imagining a life beyond her current limitations. This is an example of behavioural activation, a CBT technique used to help clients engage in meaningful activities despite emotional discomfort (Martell et al.).

Importantly, the film acknowledges how social context shapes cognitive development. CBT increasingly recognizes the influence of cultural and systemic forces in forming schemas. Monica is not irrational; her thoughts reflect a lifetime of being dismissed and diminished. Giovanni's worldview, though polished and rationalized, is also a product of a filtered and insulated experience of reality. Their relationship, built initially on judgment and friction, becomes a space for challenging these narratives.

Come un gatto in tangenziale offers more than social satire—it's a study of how entrenched beliefs can shift through authentic human connection. For CBT training, the film provides fertile ground for exercises in identifying automatic thoughts, analysing social schemas, and simulating therapeutic conversations. It shows how humour, discomfort, and empathy can work together to soften cognitive rigidity and build bridges across psychological and social divides.

Persepolis (2007): Identity, Trauma, and Cognitive Restructuring

Persepolis, directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, is an animated adaptation of the eponymous autobiographical graphic novel. The film follows the protagonist, Marjane, as she grows from childhood to adulthood between post-revolutionary Iran and Europe. It explores themes such as identity, oppression, alienation, and resilience. From the perspective of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), *Persepolis* serves as an effective portrayal of how socio-political contexts influence the development of cognitive schemas, automatic thoughts, cognitive distortions, and coping strategies. It provides a valuable starting point for discussing concepts like cognitive restructuring, psychological flexibility, and behavioural activation.

A core principle of CBT is that our emotions and behaviours are not determined by events themselves but by how we interpret them (A. Beck). Marjane grows up in a context marked by political violence and religious oppression—factors that deeply shape her cognitive schemas around safety, identity, freedom, and self-worth.

After being sent to Europe to escape repression in Iran, Marjane experiences a deep sense of alienation. She feels "not Iranian enough" for Europeans and "not Western enough" for her homeland. This leads to dysfunctional automatic thoughts like "I don't belong anywhere" or "I'll never be accepted," reinforcing a rejection schema.

Behaviourally, Marjane adopts experiential avoidance strategies to cope with emotional distress. In Europe, she distances herself from her cultural identity, lies about her origins, and engages in self-destructive behaviours. These behaviours are meant to avoid feelings of shame and loss, but according to CBT, avoidance prevents individuals from facing painful thoughts and reinforces negative schemas (J. Beck). Only later, through introspection and acceptance, does Marjane begin to restructure her beliefs.

A significant CBT turning point occurs when Marjane decides to reclaim her identity, stops hiding her origins, and begins to act in alignment with her values. This shift reflects the principle of behavioural activation: intentionally engaging in meaningful activities even in the presence of uncomfortable emotions (Martell, Dimidjian, & Herman-Dunn). She begins standing up for herself, setting boundaries in toxic relationships, and taking control of her choices. This marks the beginning of a gradual cognitive restructuring, as Marjane replaces rigid, self-destructive thoughts with more realistic and compassionate interpretations (J. Beck).

Persepolis can also be viewed as a narrative of the therapeutic process: the reconstruction of one's life story and the acceptance of painful emotions as a path to healing. Marjane's narrative reflection, with its flashbacks and introspection, resembles CBT techniques like writing therapy and narrative timeline construction, which help integrate traumatic events into a coherent autobiographical memory.

In educational settings, *Persepolis* is particularly useful for discussing:

- The role of culture and political context in the development of automatic thoughts and schemas
- The identification of cognitive distortions such as dichotomous thinking, catastrophizing, and mind-reading
- The use of cognitive restructuring and behavioural activation in the context of trauma, migration, and fragmented identity

Using selected scenes, educators can propose exercises such as: analyzing thoughts ("What automatic thought is emerging here?"), discussing emotional avoidance, and role-playing therapeutic interventions with a "Marjane as client" scenario.

4. Avoidance and Dysfunctional Behaviours

Avoidance is a common yet maladaptive coping strategy in many mental health conditions, particularly anxiety and mood disorders. CBT recognizes avoidance not only as a behavioural symptom but also as a maintaining factor of psychological distress. Dysfunctional behaviours—such as emotional suppression, impulsivity, or disengagement—often arise when individuals attempt to escape uncomfortable internal states (A. Beck). *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) and *Groundhog Day* (1993) both exemplify how avoidance operates, and how behavior-focused strategies can break these cycles.

In *Silver Linings Playbook*, Pat's emotional instability is exacerbated by his tendency to avoid processing painful emotions. Rather than confronting the reality of his failed marriage or his own mental health condition, he clings to delusional hope and obsessive rituals (e.g., exercising to control his moods, fixating on a letter from his ex-wife). These behaviours serve as *avoidant coping mechanisms*, allowing him to sidestep vulnerability and grief. His relationship with Tiffany gradually challenges this pattern. Through shared experiences and emotional confrontation, Pat begins to engage with discomfort

rather than evade it, illustrating the CBT principle that facing emotions—not fleeing from them—is essential for healing.[2]

Groundhog Day presents a more metaphorical take on avoidance and repetition. Phil Connors is caught in a literal time loop, reliving the same day endlessly. Initially, he responds with denial, escapism, and reckless hedonism—classic forms of behavioural avoidance. His inability to move forward mirrors the experience of many clients stuck in habitual, self-defeating patterns. It's only when Phil stops avoiding his emptiness and begins engaging in meaningful, value-consistent behaviour that the cycle breaks. This shift aligns with CBT's behavioural activation strategies: by committing to action despite discomfort or lack of immediate reward, emotional and cognitive changes eventually follow.

These two films illustrate that while avoidance may offer short-term relief, it reinforces long-term dysfunction. CBT teaches that true change requires confronting what one fears or avoids—and doing so with intention, structure, and support. Whether through the realism of Pat's emotional journey or the allegorical loop of Phil's eternal day, learners gain insight into how behavioural and cognitive avoidance sustain suffering, and how adaptive change can be initiated through deliberate engagement.

5. Pedagogical Applications

Integrating films and popular media into the teaching of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) offers a dynamic and engaging way to illustrate abstract psychological concepts and therapeutic techniques. Films serve as emotionally resonant and narrative-rich case studies that allow students to observe psychological phenomena in a context that is both concrete and relatable. When used strategically, movie clips can transform passive learning into active clinical reasoning, enhance empathy, and provide experiential insight into the cognitive and emotional lives of fictional characters. This section outlines practical methods for incorporating film into classroom and training settings to enrich CBT education.

Using Movie Clips in Educational Settings

Short, well-chosen film clips—typically 2 to 5 minutes in length—can be highly effective teaching tools when aligned with specific learning objectives. Instructors can select scenes that clearly demonstrate core CBT concepts such as automatic thoughts, cognitive distortions, avoidance behaviours, or therapeutic breakthroughs. These clips can be paused at key moments to prompt discussion, introduce

[2] For instance, for CBT, Julia experiences panic attacks and typically avoids public transportation for fear of feeling trapped or losing control. During cognitive behavioural therapy, her therapist guides her through gradual exposure exercises. She starts by taking short bus rides with someone she trusts, then progresses to riding alone. Instead of escaping the discomfort, Julia learns to stay with the anxiety and observe it. Over time, her symptoms decrease, and she gains a sense of control and confidence. This illustrates a core CBT principle: by facing distressing emotions and situations rather than avoiding them, individuals can reduce their fear response and promote emotional healing (Beck, 2011).

relevant terminology, or highlight internal cognitive processes that might otherwise be inferred through dialogue or behaviour.

For example, a clip from *Good Will Hunting* can be used to explore schema activation and therapeutic resistance, while *Inside Out* offers a compelling visual representation of emotional regulation and thought-emotion-behaviour cycles. By watching characters struggle with and respond to psychological challenges, students gain a richer understanding of how CBT theory maps to lived experience.

Suggested Classroom Activities

A variety of structured activities can enhance learning through the use of film:

- **Guided Scene Analysis**: In this activity, students watch a selected clip and are guided through a series of questions related to CBT constructs. For instance, "What automatic thought did the character have in this scene?" or "Which cognitive distortion is influencing their interpretation of this event?" This promotes diagnostic thinking and vocabulary retention.
- **Role-Play**: After analysing a scene, students can take on the roles of therapist and client, reenacting and extending the narrative as a mock therapy session. The "therapist" might use Socratic questioning or thought records to help the "client" (character) examine their thoughts. This not only reinforces clinical techniques but also builds empathy and perspective-taking.
- **Reflective Writing**: Students may be asked to write a brief reflection from the perspective of the character, identifying their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours using CBT terminology. Alternatively, they can reflect on their personal reactions to the character's situation, which can open up discussions around transference, bias, and the emotional dimensions of therapeutic work.
- **CBT-Based Reinterpretation**: Learners can select a pivotal scene and rewrite it as if the character were applying CBT principles. For instance, how might Pat from *Silver Linings Playbook* respond differently if he challenged his belief about rekindling his marriage? This imaginative exercise helps students operationalize CBT techniques in narrative form.

Facilitating Group Discussions

Group discussions centred around film characters are particularly effective for examining cognitive and emotional processes. Students can collaboratively identify what a character might be thinking or feeling and hypothesize about their underlying schemas or maladaptive beliefs. Discussions can be framed with CBT-relevant prompts, such as:

- "What core belief might be driving this character's behaviour?"
- "How does this scene illustrate the thought-emotion-behaviour cycle?"

- "What behavioural strategies could support this character in changing their patterns?"

These discussions promote clinical reasoning, strengthen conceptual understanding, and encourage collaboration.

Films provide a unique pedagogical advantage by blending emotional engagement with theoretical application. They allow students to observe psychological patterns in real time, develop therapeutic insight, and practice clinical reasoning in a low-risk, creative environment. By employing targeted clips, structured activities, and guided discussion, educators can harness the power of narrative media to bring CBT to life in the classroom or training setting.

6. Conclusion

As psychological education and training continue to evolve in response to diverse learning needs and technological advancements, the use of narrative media—particularly film—has emerged as a highly effective pedagogical strategy. This paper has demonstrated how film, when intentionally selected and thoughtfully integrated, can illuminate core principles of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), including automatic thoughts, cognitive distortions, avoidance behaviours, and therapeutic techniques such as cognitive restructuring and exposure. Through vivid storytelling and emotionally resonant character arcs, films allow learners to witness psychological processes in action, making abstract concepts more tangible and clinically relevant.

The unique strength of film as an educational tool lies in its capacity to humanize theoretical constructs. CBT is a structured, evidence-based model, but its application requires empathy, nuance, and a deep understanding of human behaviour. Films provide emotionally immersive case studies, enabling students to analyse cognitive and emotional patterns in characters over time. Whether it's the cognitive distortions of Will Hunting, the behavioural activation of Chris Gardner, or the avoidance cycles seen in *Groundhog Day*, these stories offer textured, lifelike representations of therapeutic challenges and breakthroughs. Moreover, the visual and narrative format enhances memory retention and learner engagement—two essential factors in professional development (Moreno et al., 2011).

Beyond theoretical understanding, films also foster clinical imagination. They give students space to hypothesize therapeutic interventions, explore client perspectives, and develop therapeutic language in a safe and creative context. Through guided activities such as scene analysis, reflective writing, and role-playing, learners can practice applying CBT techniques in ways that mirror actual clinical encounters. In doing so, they develop not only cognitive competence but also emotional literacy and cultural sensitivity—essential qualities for effective practitioners.

The encouragement to integrate film into CBT education is also a call to embrace broader forms of cultural and narrative media. Contemporary students and clients alike engage daily with complex stories through not only films but also TV series, podcasts, graphic novels, and video games. Each of

these media forms presents unique opportunities for psychological exploration and pedagogical innovation. For instance, long-form storytelling in television allows for deeper character development and the tracking of behavioural patterns over time, which could be especially useful in exploring chronic conditions or therapeutic progressions. Graphic novels, with their combination of imagery and internal narration, are increasingly recognized for their ability to depict mental illness and emotional nuance, as seen in works like *Marbles* by Ellen Forney. Similarly, video games—especially those with narrative depth and decision-based mechanics, such as *Life is Strange* or *Celeste*—offer interactive opportunities to explore emotional regulation, identity, and coping strategies.

Looking forward, CBT education would benefit from a more expansive and interdisciplinary approach to media integration. Collaboration between clinical educators, media scholars, and digital designers could yield new frameworks for using these tools in both academic and clinical training contexts. Furthermore, including culturally diverse narratives and international films can enhance learners' appreciation of how cognitive and emotional processes manifest across sociocultural contexts, fostering greater cultural humility and relevance in therapeutic practice.

Films are more than entertainment—they are narrative mirrors of human complexity and resilience. When used thoughtfully, they become powerful educational instruments that deepen understanding, build empathy, and enrich the training of future CBT practitioners. As therapeutic education moves further into the 21st century, the integration of narrative and cultural media should not be seen as a supplemental strategy but as a vital component of holistic, experiential, and culturally informed learning. The stories we watch, read, and play have much to teach us about the human mind—and much to offer in preparing those who seek to heal it.

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