The theory for the current study was based on a few theories that have been researched. These theories are:

Media Influences in General – When people see things in the media (whether in fictional television or the news), their perceptions and attitudes are affected, albeit not consciously. According to Bandura's social-cognitive theory, “heavy exposure to this symbolic world may eventually make the televised images to be the authentic state of human affairs.” Therefore, because people see these realistic-looking scenarios, they believe that that is what reality is like. An example of this is the CSI effect which is when people expect more evidence than is reasonably needed to convict someone in a trial and thus end up acquitting people they should have convicted.

Help Seeking in Self-Stigma – “Self-stigma is the perception held by the individual that they are socially unacceptable themselves. In the case of help-seeking, an individual seeking psychological services may perceive themselves as inferior, inadequate, or weak for needing help and as a result, decide to forego psychological services to maintain a positive self-image.”

The researchers weren't sure which portrayals in the media affected the self-stigma. The portrayals considered were viewing those that seek therapy negatively (PSH), the negative labels associated with having a mental illness (PMI), and the portrayals of the psychologists (PCT). The current study looks to see how the different types of therapy-related figures influence self-stigma. Study 1 examines how the perception of these figures in real life affect self-stigma, and Study 2 builds on it by adding in their portrayal in the media.

In Study 1, participants (50% male, about 80% white) were asked to rate on a Likert scale how much they agreed with statements regarding PSH, PMI, and PCT to determine how they perceived them. They also measured their self-stigma for seeking psychological help with statements like “I would feel inadequate if I went to a therapist for psychological help.”

Result: Even though PCT and PSH were correlated with self-stigma, perceptions of PMI were correlated with PSH only. Positive views of PCT are correlated with less self-stigma. More positive
views of PSH were correlated with less self-stigma. Perceptions of PMI were not directly linked to self-stigma, but they are indirectly in that they influence perceptions of PSH, which is linked to self-stigma. Study 2: The researchers had the participants indicate which of the 10 listed movies and tv shows they had seen and how often. After determining which they had seen the most often, the researchers listed characters from the movies and tv shows in the PSH, PMI, and PCT categories and had the participants rate statements about them with a Likert scale. The participants were asked the same things they were asked in Study 1 about the 3 categories, but with added statements, such as how realistic they thought the characters were and how much they liked them.

Results: “In general, the results suggest that media portrayals of psychologists and PMIs have the greatest influence on the perceptions of PCTs, PMIs, and PSHs in real life. For both movies and TV, perceptions of psychologists were significantly predicted by the participants’ indication of whether they would seek help from a psychologist character. The more likely participants would be to seek help from a given character, the more positive was their perception of psychologists in general, which in turn led to less self-stigma for seeking help.” “The other primary perception that was found to influence self-stigma was negative perceptions of PSHs in real life. Interestingly, none of the media variables related to characters seeking help were correlated with perceptions of PSHs. Instead, exposure to TV shows depicting characters with a mental illness who are not in therapy was related to real-life perceptions of PSHs.” “Participants who are exposed to TV characters who are not in therapy and judge TV characters to have relatively typical mental illness problems held more negative perceptions of real-life PMIs. Additionally, participants who rated movie characters with a mental illness negatively also held negative perceptions of real-life PMIs.”