

The Impact of Media Development on Public Perception of Mental Illness

Xihe Wu^{1,a,*}

¹*Nanjing Jinling High School, Jiangsu, 210000, China*

a. wuxihe1109@126.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Mental illness problems are supposed to be taken seriously all around the world because of the increasing number of patients and the complicated treatment process. However, patients with mental illness are suffering from public stigma and discrimination in various aspects of their lives. One of the most significant factors that lead to the formation of stereotypes is the development of modern media. The exaggerated violence in television programs and the inaccurate reporting of the news lead to misunderstandings about the mentally ill community. This stereotype spreads rapidly through both the Internet and social media. Special online mechanisms, such as large platforms and anonymity, also accelerate the spread of malicious comments and even stigmatize mental patients themselves. Figuring out the effects of media development on public perceptions of mental illness and the proper solutions is no time delay. Through analyzing the existing scientific research and reliable resources, it is concluded that although the media is a platform for information dissemination and diverse communication, inappropriate use of language and over-aesthetic depiction of mental illness without scientific analysis cause social prejudice and distorted portrayal of mental diseases, which has negatively affected the diagnosis and treatment of mental diseases. After exploring the causes of mental illness stigmatization and recent problems of modern media, the article also discusses several possible solutions for reducing the stigma, including the ways to improve public education and awareness of the mental illness community and alleviate patients' self-stigmatized feelings.

Keywords: Public stigma, mental illness, media transmission, information spreading, destigmatization.

1. Introduction

The issue of mental illness is a universal problem that cannot be ignored. A recent survey reported by the World Health Organization (WHO) demonstrates that almost 970 million people around the world are suffering from mental disorders. According to the study from Professor Laysha Ostrow and her colleagues from the Department of Mental Health, Johns Hopkins University, the mental problem is persistent and difficult to diminish not only owing to the lack of medical coverage and the difficulty of diagnosing mental illness but also because of the public stigma on mental illness [1]. Malicious discrimination and prejudice from the surrounding society seriously affect the recovery process of people with mental illness. Magdalena Podogrodzka-Niell and Magdalena Tyszkowska from Psychiatric Clinic, Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology, Warsaw, show a clear correlation that the

social stigma of mental illness causes patients to develop self-stigmatized emotions, exacerbating the distance from social communication. Moreover, the stereotyped media reports on mental disorders strengthen the public's negative attitudes towards psychiatric patients, making patients suffer from external discrimination and unfair treatment in all aspects of life [2]. The stigma from the public's misunderstanding and fear of mental disease is mainly cultivated and spread by the rapid development of modern media, according to the study by Suryasom Chatterjee and Annie Singh from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Gautam Buddha University [3]. In order to reduce the public stigma of mental illness and provide patients with a more inclusive recovery environment, it is important to figure out the way modern media influence public perceptions of mental illness. The significance of this study is that it discusses the role of modern media in shaping public mental health perceptions and emphasizes the positive and negative effects of media development. The article also provides directions for future research on improving mental health education and reducing the stigma of mental illness.

2. The Overview of Public Stigma

2.1. The Concept of Public Stigma

According to the study by Qiang Li and other professors from the Department of Social Psychology at Nankai University, China, the word stigma first appeared in ancient Greece to represent the label of a moral or behavioral defect in a person [4]. In later research, stigma also represents social exclusion and the debasement of social identity. Bruce G. Link, and Jo C. Phelan, PhDs from Columbia University, conceptualize stigma from a sociological perspective, “when the elements of labeling, stereotyping, cognitive differentiation, loss of identity, and discrimination occur simultaneously in the context of power that allows these processes to unfold” [5]. Therefore, mental illness stigma refers to the loss of social status and discrimination caused by stereotypes associated with mental illness.

2.2. The Development of Mental Illness Stigma

The development of stigmatization of mental illness is a process of social interaction and social construction according to the stigma development model proposed by C. Stangor and Chris Crandall from the University of Kansas [6]. The model indicates that when a trait is perceived as threatening on an individual or social level, it is stigmatized. Then, biases in social perception lead to negative stereotypes about stigmatized groups being exaggerated by prejudiced information search and attribution. Finally, social beliefs about stigma form consistent and shared social representations through communication among group members, making stigma common sense in the whole society. The consistently negative portrayal of people with mental illness in the media is an important reason for the stigma of mental illness. The media not only creates a negative image of mental illness in the public mind, such as uncontrollable emotions and violent tendencies, making people think that people with mental illness are threatening, but also accelerates the spread of stereotypes which causes widespread social stigma.

3. Bias and Stereotypes about Mental Illness in the Media

3.1. Difference Produces Bias

The origins of mental illness stigma stem from stereotypes and negative attitudes about people with mental illness, and these stem from differences between mental illness patients and the general population. While identifying with the stigmatization of mental illness may be dismissed as a threat

to one's ideological morality, identifying with differences is significantly easier. Patrick Corrigan and other distinguished professors dedicated to psychological research examined the psychometrics of various assessments that measured perceived differences among mental illness patients [7]. The result shows that the identification scores for differences were significantly higher than the measures for stereotypes, and difference scores were positively related to both stereotypes and negative attitudes. Although some people do not acknowledge the stigmatization of mental illness, negative attitudes and the lack of understanding of illness can also lead to prejudice. There is no guarantee that the public can deal with these differences objectively and inclusively without feelings of rejection.

Furthermore, the causes of prejudiced attitudes are also closely related to social reactions. The difference between mental illness patients and ordinary people, such as confused thinking patterns and unstable emotions, brings the consequences of different treatments for the special group of people. Some special treatment of mental patients also contributes to the public's fear and stereotype of mental illness, as illustrated in the research on mental patients and judicial services [8]. Robert D. Morgan and two other scholars from the Department of Psychological Sciences at Texas Tech University indicate that clinicians emphasize psychiatric rehabilitation rather than treatment aimed at criminogenic risk when providing judicial services to mental illness patients. Mental illness is sometimes used as an explanation for crime because people with mental diseases are unable to control their thoughts and actions. As a result, the special treatment for the mentally ill leads people to associate mental illness with crime rates. Those patients are imagined as terrorists who can use their illness as an excuse to commit heinous crimes. People's stereotypes of mental illness change from incomprehension to fear and anger.

3.2. Media Magnifies Stereotypes

Based on the negative public bias against people with mental illness, the negative portrayal and processing of people with mental illness in the modern media reinforces the tendency of the mental illness community to commit violent crimes. In order to follow the mainstream and gain attention, modern media choose to innovate on the basis of identifying with the public thinking, the stereotypes of mental illness. In the context of the stigmatization of mental illness, the media will spread one-sided reports or create fictional films to exaggerate the eccentricity of mentally ill people, ignoring the fact that most patients are not aggressive. Philo, who studies in the Department of Sociology, the University of Glasgow, describes an interview with a woman who frequently visited a mental hospital in Glasgow in the past 25 years [9]. The interviewee liked the violent mental illness and cited television and films as the source of her beliefs, such as Texas Chainsaw Massacre and Nightmare on Elm Street. However, the feelings of violence only come from the fictional work processed by the media since the mental patients she saw lived peacefully together in a large open ward. The interview result clearly demonstrates the promotion of stereotypes through media information dissemination. Without access to the mental illness patients in real life, the public mind will easily be manipulated by the media, drifting along to associate mental illness with inevitable violence. Consequently, stigmatization is created through the biased and distorted portrayal of mental illness in the media.

4. Characteristics and Disadvantages of Media Era

4.1. Characteristics of Modern Media

After the information age, the medium for disseminating information has almost been replaced by the Internet. Unlike traditional media, such as newspapers and letters, the Internet has one of its most significant characteristics, that is, the rapid spread of mass information beyond limited regions. The detrimental consequence of this convenience is that the spread and intensity of stigma will also increase, because regulating and managing mass communication online is a difficult task, according

to Alex Mills from the Faculty of Laws, University College London [10]. Traditional media publishers, like newspaper and magazine companies, typically exercise editorial control over their content before disseminating it to mitigate unscientific statements regarding mental illness. This practice helps limit the spread of stigma and avoid widespread misconceptions. Compared with print publications, digital content on the internet can be shared much more rapidly than physical objects. To ensure information is transmitted swiftly, it is challenging to meticulously review each personal comment on social media multiple times before posting. As a result, some unveracious information and prejudiced remarks are mixed into mass communications, making regulation difficult. When platforms or governments begin to identify these harmful messages about mental illness patients, the stigma has already proliferated and caused severe consequences.

4.2. Simplified and Misleading Information

“Cultivation theory”, which was first put forward by American journalist and media scholar George Gerbner, implies that those who are long-term exposed to media will perceive and interpret social realities through the portrayed realities in the media [11]. Prolonged exposure to media information means that this external information will gradually shape a person's worldview and values, including first impressions of different communities and attitudes toward minority groups. In other words, the inaccurate information and exaggerated remarks about mental illness distort public perception into misunderstanding and prejudice. The purpose of media reports is not to popularize science but to attract viewers' attention and gain more streams. The longer people are exposed to the media, the greater the discrimination against mental illness. People think that mental illness patients are just as manic and dangerous as those in movies because their views are cultivated in thousands of TV shows and online commentaries. According to the study by Katelyn M. Denton from the Department of Sociology, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, those stereotyped, negative, and inaccurate portrayals have profound implications for mental patients themselves and their surrounding people because it is difficult for these minorities who experience the truth to resist on their own against the malicious media voices from all over the world [12].

4.3. Anonymity Drives Online Violence

In order to promote a diverse online environment and avoid the problems of personal information disclosure, many platforms have implemented anonymous systems, which means users can post their true thoughts without revealing their identity. Natalia Tobón-Franco and Eduardo Varela-Pezzano, the professor and the intellectual property expert from the University of Rosario respectively, stated that ensuring the principle of protecting an individual's anonymity is crucial for supporting the right to free speech [13]. Although the primary purpose of online anonymity is to keep the focus on the incident itself rather than the people involved in the story, this system makes some users think of the Internet as separate from reality, like no one can punish them in real life because they do not show their real identities, resulting in expressing any speeches without limitation. People choose to vent their negative emotions and even build their satisfaction on the nasty words they say to others, which forms cyber violence. This depersonalizing effect encourages online discourse to freely attack other groups, including people with mental illness who are not accepted by the general public, resulting in more intense and vicious speeches on the Internet. Moreover, the research by Bengt Svensson and Lars Hansson from the Department of Health Sciences at Lund University shows that the deeper the public negative attitude towards mentally ill patients, the further the social distance from the patient [14]. The negative stereotypes associated with online anonymity make people more reluctant to talk to mental patients and lose the opportunity to truly understand mental illness. Unsociable patients can only suffer in a world of Internet violence and watch more prejudice without being able to defend

themselves. Online mechanisms perpetuate a vicious circle of prejudice against people with mental illness.

5. Solutions to the Mental Illness Stigmatization

5.1. Public Education through Media Positive Dissemination

Although the development of modern media provides the public with access to stigmatization, the nature of the Internet is promoting information spread and encouraging everyone to speak out. Media can also be an important ally in challenging public discrimination against mental illness and changing stereotypes when used properly, according to the research conclusion provided by Professor Heather Stuart from the Department of Psychiatry, the Queen's University [15]. When films and news media no longer depict the violent acts of people with mental illness in an artistic way, but instead depict the real lives of those patients, positive attitudes toward the mental illness community will be cultivated from the media information, just as prejudices were formed in the first place. Keeping media coverage scientific and accurate is not only a way to support justice for the patients who cannot speak out for themselves, but also a means to improve public awareness. Therefore, managing media messages and regulating inappropriate language towards the mentally ill is an effective way to reduce the stigma of mental illness through the media. Yuge Tang from the Department of Journalism and Communication, Southwest Jiaotong University, suggested the media system articulate scientific health information, construct empathy, and restrict hate speeches [16]. In this way, it is an attempt to alleviate the low public awareness and deep-rooted prejudice about various mental illnesses. Online public education is a cost-effective way to reduce the stigma of mental illness.

5.2. Reduce Patients' Self-stigmatized Feelings

Raising public awareness of caring for people with mental illness is not enough because patients themselves also feel stigmatized about their illness after prolonged exposure to negative media attitudes. Eliminating self-stigma is another significant goal of improving treatment outcomes. Patrick Corrigan and other distinguished professors from the Department of Psychology designed an experiment to explore the way the patient's self-stigma is alleviated [17]. Based on the scientific results, both education and contact initiatives yielded positive outcomes in reducing the stigma associated with mental illness in adults and adolescents. Contact in person proved to be more effective than educational programs in diminishing stigma among adults. In contrast, educational efforts were more impactful in reducing stigma among adolescents. It is also a necessary step for doctors to allow patients to accept their own disease before using drugs and surgery to treat it. After all, the doctor's duty is not only to give the patient a healthy body but also a bright future.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the media plays a key role in shaping public attitudes towards mental illness, but there is also the problem of promoting stigma. Although the original purpose of media is to promote information dissemination, the development of modern media contributes to the stigmatization of mental illness due to trend-following speeches, exaggerated portrayals, and biased depictions of mental illness. Through literary analysis, stigma can be effectively reduced by strengthening public education, reaching out to people with mental illness, and encouraging more comprehensive and balanced media reporting. Effective use of the special characteristics of the media and reasonable scientific dissemination of positive information can significantly reduce the stigma of the public, including mental patients themselves, and promote a more inclusive and supportive social environment for mental health. However, the research also points out the current problems with

network mechanisms and the lack of public education on mental illness knowledge. The diagnosis and subsequent medical treatment also need improvement. This phenomenon implies the difficulty of implementing strategies since many practical factors hinder the reinventing of new public beliefs. There is still a long way to go to completely eliminate the stigma of mental illness. For future studies, the researchers are supposed to focus more on the implementation of resolution strategies, such as how to reach the balance between ensuring user privacy and preventing malicious stigma, and whether there are successful cases in real life. It is hoped that in the near future, all mentally ill people will be able to receive treatment from society openly and confidently.

References

- [1] Ostrow L., Manderscheid R., Mojtabei R. (2014). Stigma and difficulty accessing medical care in a sample of adults with serious mental illness. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved.*, 25(4):1956–65.
- [2] Podogrodzka-Niell, M., Tyszkowska, M. (2014). Stigmatization on the way to recovery in mental illness - the factors associated with social functioning. *Psychiatria polska*, 48(6): 1201-11.
- [3] Chatterjee S, Singh AK. (2018). Comprehensive review of interpretations and role of media in elucidating the issue of mental illness to public, 5(1):15–21.
- [4] Li Q., Gao W., Xu D. (2008). A review of stigmatization theories in mental illness. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 16(4):582-589.
- [5] Link B.G, Phelan J.C. (2001) Conceptualizing stigma. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27(1):363–85.
- [6] Stangor C., Crandall C.S. (2000) *Threat and the social construction of stigma*. The Guilford Press, New York.
- [7] Corrigan P.W., Bink A.B., Fokuo J.K., Schmidt A. (2015) The public stigma of mental illness means a difference between you and me. *Psychiatry Research*, 226(1):186–91.
- [8] Morgan R.D., Scanlon F., Van Horn S.A. (2020) Criminogenic risk and mental health: a complicated relationship. *CNS Spectrums*. 25(2):237–44.
- [9] Philo G. (1997) Changing media representations of mental health. *Psychiatric Bulletin*. 21(3):171–2.
- [10] Mills A. (2017) Choice of law in defamation and the regulation of free speech on social media: Nineteenth-Century law meets twenty-first-century problems. *The Legal Challenges of Social Media*.
- [11] Perera A. (2023) Cultivation Theory In Media. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/cultivation-theory.html>
- [12] Denton KM. (2020) Quirky or Crazy: The Presentation of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Symptoms in Early 21st Century American Scripted Television Shows. *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses*.
- [13] Tobón-Franco N, Varela-Pezzano E. (2010) Freedom of speech and safeguard of anonymity: Jurisprudential overview of Colombia. *Dikaion*, 19(1):121–38.
- [14] Svensson B, Hansson L. (2015) How mental health literacy and experience of mental illness relate to stigmatizing attitudes and social distance towards people with depression or psychosis: A cross-sectional study. *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry*. 70(4):309–13.
- [15] Stuart, H. (2006) Media Portrayal of Mental Illness and its Treatments. *CNS Drugs*. 20:99–106.
- [16] Tang Y. (2019) A study on the stigmatization of depression and the communication strategies of new media Destigmatization. Southwest Jiaotong University, Sichuan.
- [17] Corrigan P.W., Morris S.B., Michaels P.J., Rafacz J.D., Rüsch N. (2012) Challenging the Public Stigma of Mental Illness: A Meta-Analysis of Outcome Studies. *Psychiatric Services*. American Psychiatric Publishing, 63(10):963–73.