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Media Representation of Mental Illness

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ABSTRACT

The representation of mental illness in media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions, societal attitudes, and policy responses. Historically, mental illness has been portrayed through a lens of fear, misunderstanding, and stigma, often reducing individuals to violent or helpless caricatures. This paper examines the evolution of mental illness portrayals across various media platforms, including film, television, news, and social media, with a special focus on New Zealand and global contexts. The study critically examines common stereotypes, historical biases, and contemporary shifts towards more empathetic narratives. Drawing from real-world case studies, both negative and constructive representations are analyzed to assess their impact on public understanding and treatment-seeking behavior. Furthermore, the paper addresses the ethical responsibilities of media professionals and the role of advocacy in challenging stigma and promoting mental health awareness. The findings underscore the necessity for media reforms and collaborative frameworks that prioritize accuracy, dignity, and inclusivity in mental health storytelling.

Keywords: Mental illness, media representation, stigma, public perception, mental health advocacy, stereotypes, ethical media.

INTRODUCTION

In mass communication, media serves as a key information source. News is deemed incomplete without TV; radio stations and newspapers are always alert; the internet is omnipresent, contributing to widespread concern. Media wields the ability to elevate or tarnish reputations while shaping public opinion swiftly. A single message can profoundly alter perceptions, thoughts, and lives. Selection, reception, and expressions in the media are influenced by various factors, with the media text's nature and its socio-cultural context being paramount. Understanding these contexts is essential for grasping media representations and practices. Control over information grants power to media owners and the state, impacting public perception regarding status and social power. Individuals' thoughts and understandings are shaped by diverse contexts daily. Some media sources carry more weight, influenced by the dynamics of power relations that determine whose meanings prevail as 'real.' These dynamics govern cognition and emotional responses, signifying mediation of social life through representations. The portrayal of mental illness reflects a complex media ecosystem that has historically evolved, with certain feminist influences significantly shaping its contemporary representation [1, 2].

Historical Overview

This article examines the media representation of mental illness to guide a new research project aimed at destigmatizing it. The project has two main goals: analyzing how various media in New Zealand portray mental illness and establishing a solid evidence base for industry stakeholders, advocacy groups, and mental health providers. It seeks feedback from the media industry on what support is necessary for better practices in depicting mental illness and aims to conduct interviews with mental health service users and media professionals. The research also aspires to promote ethical media portrayal of mental illness and suggests two interesting groups whose ideas could contribute significantly. Media, broadly understood as a collection of news outlets delivering information through mass communication, faces challenges, particularly traditional forms like television and newspapers, as audiences increasingly prefer

information via smartphones. The research begins with a contemporary historical overview of mental illness portrayal in New Zealand before expanding to a global perspective, including insights from Hawaiian studies. Over the last decade, newspapers have faced growing pressure to represent mental illness more accurately, culminating in numerous studies and guidelines urging journalists to consider the impacts of misrepresentation. As a result, many newspapers have improved the quality and frequency of mental health-related articles, with almost all national and community newspapers publishing at least one relevant story in the past year. Reflecting on this, it is encouraging to see a gradual shift towards more accurate portrayals of mental illness entering public discourse [3, 4].

Types of Media Representations

Research on the representation of mental illness in media has predominantly focused on fictional narratives in cinema and television rather than news or documentaries. These portrayals often highlight themes of personal tragedy, isolation, and abandonment, with individuals frequently depicted within institutional settings. Studies show that the intersection of gender and mental illness is poorly represented, with women commonly featured as main characters in stories about depression or PTSD. Furthermore, individuals with mental illness are often portrayed as violent or dangerous, especially in crime dramas where they are overrepresented as perpetrators of violent crime but also depicted as victims. Psychopathy stands out as a popular theme, offering a narrative that showcases the cunning and manipulative traits of serial killers, while cognitive impairments are frequently illustrated as well. Other conditions like autism, schizophrenia, and drug-related psychosis receive less representation. Crime dramas serve as accessible narratives for understanding mental illness due to their cultural relevance. Social media has emerged as a platform for self-disclosure regarding mental illness, though the characteristics of such disclosures can vary. While these online expressions can enhance public understanding on one hand, they may also perpetuate stigma or lead to concerns about authenticity. The trivialization of mental illness on social media remains an underexplored area, despite its rising prevalence. Additionally, as mental health intersects with information sharing, there is a lack of understanding about its implications [5, 6].

Common Stereotypes and Misconceptions

Despite growing awareness and accurate coverage by some news outlets, misconceptions about mental illness remain widespread among the public and in popular media. The most common myth is that people with a psychiatric disorder are dangerous and violent, especially toward others. This view is perpetuated, for example, by news reports in mental illness, where individuals with a history of psychiatric illness are often labelled as dangerous criminals in connection with violent behaviour. Also perpetuating this view is popular film and television depictions of an individual with a serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia, statistically more likely to commit violent crimes. Further misconceptions prevalent in media include views of people with a mental illness as childlike or incapable of personal responsibility and self-deterioration, indicating hopelessness. Feelings of disillusionment with the prospect of recovery, coupled with views of mental illness as “crazy,” promote stigma, decrease willingness to connect with people like them, and prevent individuals from pursuing mental health care themselves. Even brief exposure to psychiatric distorted representation of reality reduces the patience of others toward individuals with a “crazy” mental illness. This impairment occurs simultaneously with increased attention toward the stereotyped behaviour of individuals with a psychiatric illness. Public discussing options for treatment of the aforementioned behaviours enhance perceptions of hopelessness, further furthering stigma. Whether written in fiction or fact, media consumption exposes audiences with these portrayals of those with mental illness, providing a public window to view a “crazy” mentality judgable by a public audience rather than a private one. These representations actively affect society and contact between the public and a potentially misrepresented people group, leading to enduring stigma [7, 8].

Impact of Media on Public Perception

Public attitudes toward people with mental illness are significantly influenced by the media, which can play a crucial role in de-stigmatizing these issues through anti-stigma campaigns, disability simulations, and advocacy. The implications for clinical practitioners and researchers are important, highlighting the need for strategies to reduce stigma. The analysis reviews the media's representation of mental health, considering both positive and negative portrayals. There is a call for increased efforts to enhance positive media depictions across various platforms, asserting that what has been achieved for other disabilities can also apply to mental health. Negative public attitudes toward mental illness correlate with perceived needs for help, emphasizing the media's impact on societal views. Research indicates that familiarity with mental illness and positive professional interventions encourage social support and reduce stigma. The connection between media portrayals and public attitudes raises concerns about the media's power to

inform and shape perceptions regarding mental illness. Advocates stress the necessity of responding to stigmatizing media portrayals, advocating for collaborative efforts to push for fair representations. An analysis of media responses highlights the need for strategic modifications to improve conditions for individuals with mental illness. Key initiatives promoting mental health anti-stigma campaigns and accurate portrayals are discussed, presenting guidelines for media production. Recommendations for clinicians and researchers focus on coalition-building, proactive measures, and meaningful responses to challenge stigma in media representation [9, 10].

Case Studies

In recent decades, scholarly sources have noted that media primarily portrays individuals already involved with the mental health system, overshadowing others who also struggle, particularly those who have faced abuse or trauma as children. This focus leads to an uncritical view of mental health services, framing them as necessary and normal, without questioning their existence. Examples from HBO's popular shows illustrate how narratives about "mental illness" reflect this trend. *BRIT'S STORY: Raise Your Hand If You've Lost a Friend to Mental Illness* begins with Brit, a wealthy New Yorker nearing her college graduation. Her memories of her friend and fellow therapy participant, Rachel, surface when she sees a woman wearing Rachel's distinct scarf. The woman notices Brit's stare and retorts, while Brit recalls past events with Rachel, revealing her own misunderstanding of Rachel's neurochemical disorder. The episode showcases Brit's ignorance and naive attempts to support Rachel, culminating in Brit's emotional breakdown. Therapy is portrayed awkwardly, resembling new-age fitness classes where participants engage in unusual group activities. Brit's dramatic remarks, such as "that's the beauty of bourbon, you just forget," reflect her turmoil. She learns from a therapist, resembling her patients in yoga attire, that Rachel is in a psychiatric ward. Upon receiving a visiting pass from Amanda, Brit is struck by the hospital's starkness. When Brit and Rachel sit together, their contrasting appearances highlight Brit's superficiality versus Rachel's state of distress [11, 12].

Positive Representations

When addressing the complex issue of mental illness, turbulent thoughts and emotions such as anxiety, sadness, despair, and anger may arise. The media often grapples with this multifaceted issue, but irresponsible portrayals can create stigma that discourages individuals from seeking help. However, some media examples present a more profound examination of mental illness, its treatment, and the struggles individuals face. Early films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Bedlam* shocked audiences with depictions of insanity, while others, such as *The Snake Pit* and *The Three Faces of Eve*, offered a more humanistic view of madness and revealed the complexities of schizophrenia. Films like *Sock of Wood* and *Glitter* poignantly highlighted the plight of mental illness, inviting empathy and cautioning against the abuse of power in care settings. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* captured the erasure of personhood by medical professionals, raising awareness of the dehumanizing aspects of mental health institutions. Furthermore, in 2014, the documentary series *The Bridge* explored the phenomenon of individuals jumping to their deaths in a city, dissecting the tragic intersection of mental health and societal challenges. Overall, while negative portrayals dominate the narrative, there is a growing need for more positive representations that address stigma and promote understanding of mental health conditions [13, 14].

Negative Representations

Negative media representations of mental illness often portray individuals as dangerous due to incompetent behaviors, untrustworthy because they struggle to care for themselves, isolated social outcasts, or excessively caring. These depictions contribute to societal stigmatization of mental illness. Media coverage frequently emphasizes the danger posed by individuals with mental illness, particularly relating to socio-pathic behavior and violent crime. This aligns with prior findings that associate mental illness with societal dangers, depicting violence as primarily uncontrollable and extreme. A notable example involved a high-profile case in Porirua, where a man with untreated mental illness committed murder, providing media an opportunity to frame the story around crime and mental illness. Headlines generated psychological fear, emphasizing the risks of untreated psychosis while reinforcing the stereotype of dangerous individuals becoming social outcasts. Moreover, stories often illustrate individuals with mental illness as victims of abuse or violence due to their perceived competency levels. Such portrayals lead to an image of untrustworthiness, suggesting they cannot care for themselves. Displacement of these individuals by businesses is also reported, contrasting greedy owners with sympathetic individuals facing mental health challenges. The challenge of accurately conveying these complex issues explains the scarcity of balanced articles. Rarely are positive representations found in newspapers, consistent with previous research [15, 16].

The Role of Mental Health Advocacy

In recent decades, the media has become a crucial ally in advocating for humane treatment and understanding of mental illness and health services aligned with human rights. It plays a significant role in shaping public discussion, influencing opinions, and prioritizing mental health issues. However, some media outlets contribute to misconceptions, fears, and discrimination, often driven by poorly-informed reporting that exacerbates stigma and discourages individuals from seeking treatment. In Ethiopia, government media has largely ignored mental health topics, with most coverage occurring on social media, which, while raising awareness, tends to lack depth and urgency. Media advocacy is vital in Ethiopia, viewed primarily by professionals as an essential tool for disseminating critical information. Yet there is a risk that health professionals, in their influential roles, could unintentionally stigmatize those with mental disorders through the information they share or the perspectives they propagate. Therefore, it is essential to evaluate how mental health issues are represented and advocated for within the media and by professionals in Ethiopia. Understanding current practices in media advocacy for mental health and the challenges faced will highlight gaps for future efforts. Professional advocates need to be mindful of the implications of their messaging, framing individuals not merely as subjects but as agents of change. Collaboration is necessary to establish a society that respects rights and enhances overall human welfare [17, 18].

Ethical Considerations in Media

The relationship between the public and the media is a mutual one that all parties must maintain responsibility for. The ethical treatment of a subject in media often falls to the media, and it is up to audiences as well as advocacy groups to ensure that works are in keeping with what is generally accepted as good practice. Attention to mental illness by mass media has been varied, with some television programmes offering harrowing insight into the lives of mentally ill people and some well-respected films depicting realistic images. Common to these portrayals are traditional images of dysfunction and derangement, which perpetuate misunderstandings of what mental illness consists of. Historically, this misunderstanding has not gone unchallenged, and a plethora of works have emerged to deconstruct the representation of mental illness in the media. Axes of analysis are generally focused on the types of representation produced, but ethical considerations have been neglected in the context of pragmatic prescription. There are ways to advocate for the portrayal of mental illness in a more constructive manner, and extensive recommendations for this purpose have been compiled. The most pertinent recommendations are distilled here. Topics accorded with these recommendations emphasise the importance of collaboration between interest groups in overcoming the ingrained barriers to good representation of mental illness by media. Such barriers consist of, among other things, a lack of knowledge about media and mental health and, overall, a lack of adequate training. Enumeration of appropriate avenues for lobbying is also described. It is important to note that these recommendations are a summary of discussions and are not all equally relevant to all locales. In refocusing the critique of media on collaborative prevention, a general framework is found, but there may be no single set of recommendations that are important for all locales. The hope is that this study inspires organisations devoted to mental health and/or the media in their own ways [19, 20].

Regulatory Frameworks

For us to work towards destigmatisation of mental illness we as a society will have to work media to provide more accurate, sensitive and affirming images of mental illness. Collaboration between communities, government agencies, news agencies is key to improve efforts in destigmatising mental illness through the media and social support. If there are breaches in what is considered appropriate conduct by news and media agencies complaints can be made to broadcasting standard councils or other relevant agencies. It is equally important to recognise good practice and promote it by providing accurate and up to date information to people in the media industry. Mental illness as a concept is convoluted enough already without the views of various types of interest groups having a saying in what these types of illnesses entail. Information about mental illness being disseminated by people and through media without consultation from those with appropriate expertise in this field leads to the development of misinformation and idiosyncratic stereotypes, which are rampant in social and media dialogue. Remedying this situation will take a combined effort across agencies of various levels and the community. Among the social problems in the world mental illness is one of the leading causes of disability. Stigma plays a large part in augmenting the level of disability and quality of life of those affected by mental illness. It is imperative that efforts are made across countries to deal with the development and contribution of stigma in relation to mental illnesses [21, 22].

Cultural Differences in Representation

Research indicates that media representation of mental illness exhibits discriminatory behavior in various cultures. A study analyzed news articles from four countries over six months, revealing similar trends: most articles focused on those needing treatment and acknowledged resource shortages. Despite visible mental illness in the U.S., this was less prominently featured, leading to a wider variation in articles. Causes of mental illness were debated, with U.S. articles leaning towards chemical imbalances while others cited spiritual or social issues. Some articles highlighted recovery and advocated for raising awareness of mental illness, rights, and the harmful effects of stigma, but many still portrayed it as uncontrolled and stigmatized, lacking sufficient discussion on treatment. Two studies examined New Zealand print media's representation of the mentally ill, noting negative themes like criminality, danger, unpredictability, and social isolation. Positive themes often focused on preserving human rights. While some themes indicated protective qualities like intelligence and creativity, derogatory portrayals were more common, contributing to mental illness stigma. Positive representations were rare, and when critiqued quantitatively, the analysis of representation appeared poorly executed and inconsistent [23, 24].

The Influence of Celebrity Culture

Celebrity culture profoundly influences contemporary society, raising public awareness and sparking discussions on various issues. Celebrities dealing with mental illness face a unique challenge, balancing vulnerability and responsibility in the spotlight. Their public representation of mental health can reduce stigma but occasionally leads to negative effects. While these portrayals promote awareness, they are often not wholly accurate and can skew public perceptions. Some representations alter understanding of specific mental illnesses, warning against stigma and fostering sympathetic discourse that can combat prejudices. The impact of a celebrity's portrayal is influenced by the media's format and its saturated celebrity culture, where public figures can shape audience perceptions. However, such discussions can also lead to increased harassment of celebrities or sensationalized views of mental health. Thus, the role of celebrities in shaping societal understanding of mental illness is complex and contingent on their approach, audience, media type, and cultural background. These factors create intricate discourse interactions, enhancing media scrutiny while presenting diverse interpretations and efforts to reshape public understandings of mental illness [25, 26].

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Narratives

The perceptions of mental illness on social media impact audiences' understanding and attitudes. This study examined tweets from media or health professionals discussing mental illness from January 2018 to February 2020. Results showed that different narrative formats, sources, and characters on social media affected perception expectations and stigma. Traditional posts and tweets were similarly influential in shaping expectations, while meta-narratives and social narratives were effective in inducing calmness. Media and health professional narratives equally shaped perceptions, but media narratives were particularly effective for stigma, demonstrating a notable impact. Narratives from professionals, especially from media, can provoke concerning attitudes, indicating that media disclosures may influence preference and stigma. These findings are significant for scholars investigating amateur narrative dissemination and for practitioners implementing narrative interventions on social media. Although much existing research focuses on media portrayals of mental illness and related stigma issues, the specifics of social media narratives have been underexplored. These narratives differ from traditional media in formats, characters, and sources, thus exerting greater influence on audience perceptions, raising concerns about mental illness, and offering insights for future social media practices [27-31].

Future Trends in Media Representation

From their control of public language to the images they project to technological innovations, the media landscape is rapidly changing, as are the landscapes for mental health discourse. With such change comes opportunity for greater understanding of mental illness, better representations in the media, and improved care and support for mental health and mental illness. At the same time, new challenges arise for users and professionals alike. Some systemic changes can seem alarming, destabilizing, even dystopian, while opportunities for action can be lost before they are seen. A review of issues likely to shape the media representation of mental illness and mental health in the near future is presented, as well as some thoughts about their implications. Four key issues are proposed out of the formal and informal conversations about the media representation of mental illness. The future of media representation of mental health is enough to fill a book, while the four issues are stated below: 1) the race for attention and the hygiene of social media discourse; 2) wellbeing and the re-choreographed relationships between mental health professionals and the media; 3) the entry of new actors and actors' dynamics; and 4) the

idiomatic shifts and declines of prominence of certain kinds of media. Each issue outlines a complex discussion and articulated views on how to move forward. Sociopolitical conditions raised the need for new thinking about the media representation of mental health. Collaboration and conversation among media, mental health professionals, consumers, and communities are paramount, while places for them to happen are to be opened and created [32-35].

CONCLUSION

Media portrayals of mental illness significantly influence societal attitudes, often reinforcing harmful stereotypes that lead to stigmatization, discrimination, and reduced help-seeking among affected individuals. While historical representations have largely emphasized danger, dysfunction, and victimhood, contemporary shifts have introduced more balanced and empathetic narratives. However, these positive portrayals remain limited and inconsistently applied across platforms. This analysis reveals that meaningful progress requires sustained collaboration between mental health professionals, media creators, policy makers, and advocacy groups. Ethical considerations, informed storytelling, and public education must guide future media productions to ensure that mental illness is portrayed with the complexity and dignity it deserves. Moving forward, strengthening media literacy and accountability frameworks will be essential in transforming media from a source of stigma into a catalyst for societal change and mental health awareness.

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