

MEDIA FRAMING OF MENTAL HEALTH: IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND STIGMA

Abida Kalsoom

MA Media and Advertising, University of Leicester, United Kingdom

Email: abidakalsoom11@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper will look at the use of media framing in creating a perception and stigma among the population regarding depression, with attention paid to the differences between mainstream media and social media. The analysis of mental health issues especially depression is made through media framing theory that proposes the media does not only inform but also shapes how people understand problems. The mainstream media tends to dramatize the issue of mental illness and lay stress on extreme instances and secures negative stereotypes, whereas social media brings to life a more personal and relatable image, creates empathy, but can be misleading. The study points out the influence of such different frames on the attitude of people, stigma, and empathy towards depressed people. Negative representations may also lead to heightened stigma, in the sense that people do not seek help, and positive or sympathetic representations can contribute to help-seeking behavior and de-stigmatize the people. The study conducts a comparison of stigmatizing and empathetic tone frequency and frame use in the two types of media using content analysis. The results have indicated that mainstream media is biased towards supporting stigma and social media is more understanding, although not without risks. The paper ends by stating that ethical media coverage of mental health is necessary to reduce stigma and promote improved mental health care utilization. The results can imply that media campaigns and influencers might be helpful to reshape the societal perception of mental health.

1. Introduction

The issue of mental health has become a point of interest in the discourse of public health, the media has been very instrumental in influencing the societal perception. The media is an influential instrument in how mental health problems especially depression are framed to impact on the public perception. Framing is the process in which issues are brought up or framed by the media and this may play a big role in the way people view an issue. The way mental health is framed in the mainstream media and the social media platforms is significantly different and therefore leads to different perceptions and attitudes toward mental illness. The paper examines how media framing affects the perception and stigma of depression among the people and in particular the way in which they affect mental health seeking behavior and attitudes of the society towards the depressed individuals.

The role of examining the frames of media covering mental health and depression, in particular, cannot be underestimated. The media representation may either strengthen or confront societal stigma against mental illness and, therefore, has an impact on the way people approach care and the way they are treated by other people. One of the major impediments to mental health care has been found to be stigmatization which is usually spread by negative or simplistic media representations (Corrigan, Druss, and Perlick, 2014). The study is important since knowledge on how depression is construed in the media can be used to shape the public health policy on depression, so that media houses can show more realistic and sensitive images of mental disorders.

Mental health stigma and associated with mental health public perception are closely linked to the readiness of individuals to obtain assistance. Research has established that stigmatization in the media may prevent people to consult professional care (Corrigan and Watson, 2002). On the contrary, favorable and sympathetic depictions would decrease stigma and motivate help-seeking behavior. Thus, this research seeks to discuss the various representations of depression across the media sources and the effects of such representations on the degree of stigma and empathy levels of the audience.

The main research question that will be used in this study can be stated as follows: How do mainstream media and social media differ in their frames of depression and what impact have the frames on audience stigma and empathy? This is done with the aim of comparing and contrasting these representations, defining some dominant themes in each of the media types and explaining what this means to the perception by the general population and the advocacy of mental health.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The media framing theory was introduced by Erving Goffman and further elaborated by the works of other scholars including Robert Entman according to the theory the media does not just inform the masses, but also gives them a sense of how to perceive and interpret the issues (Entman, 1993). When applied to the mental health context, media framing might affect the way the society views mental disorders such as depression. The theory is that with selective focus and presentation of a specific part of a subject, the media creates a specific interpretation, which might become stigmatizing or normalizing of mental health problems. The role of media framing in mental health cannot be overemphasized since it can either support the fostering of negative stereotypes or development of a more effective perception of such conditions as depression. Negative frame normally links depression to femininity or harmful actions whereas positive frame may portray that it is a controllable illness.

2.2 Media Representation of Depression in Mainstream Media vs. Social Media

There are several studies which take a closer look at the prevalence of mainstream media (e.g. news, TV programs, movies) and social media (e.g. Twitter, Instagram) in the portrayal of mental health, specifically depression. Mostly the mainstream media has been blamed on sensationalising mental illness that may help propagate the stigma that exists in the society (Link et al., 2001). Kreps (2017) discovered that in the mainstream media, the representation of mental health problems is often biased towards extreme cases and therefore affects the general understanding of depression as a disease that allows participation in hazardous actions instead of a condition that can be treated.

Table 1: Comparison of Media Framing: Mainstream Media vs. Social Media

Aspect	Mainstream Media	Social Media
Tone	Often sensational, dramatized	Personal, sometimes informal or raw
Accuracy	Can be distorted or generalized	Can vary from authentic to misleading
Audience Impact	May increase stigma	Can foster empathy but also spread misinformation
Focus	Extreme or rare cases	Everyday struggles and support networks

Conversely, depression can be presented in a less broad and less objective and more humane and empathetic way on social media, where people post personal experiences and stories. Nevertheless, there are also dangers of misinformation on social media, and some people idealize mental health problems (Marcussen, Ritter, and Munetz, 2010). The influence of social media on the perception of mental health is multifaceted because it can provide a source of

support and a medium of negative stereotyping.

2.3 Public Perception, Stigma, and Empathy Related to Mental Health

The media influences the general way people perceive mental illness such as depression due to their perception of mental health. Stigma which is defined as discriminating against and negative attitudes towards individuals with mental illnesses is a major obstacle to recovery and treatment (Corrigan and Watson, 2002). Corrigan et al. (2014) state that stigma is one of the largest contributors to mental health care alleviation, as people are afraid to be judged or treated in a different way. Media representation is playing a big role in either enhancing or mitigating this stigma. Negative images may serve to sustain negative stereotypes, and positive or sympathetic images may assist in decreasing stigmatization and prompting people to pursue treatment.

On the other hand, empathy plays an important role in influencing the manner in which people interact with others who have mental health problems. Research has indicated that media that portrays victims of depression in a caring and sympathetic way encourage the listeners to develop empathy (Link et al., 2001). This stigma reduction and the increased probability of people participating in mental health initiatives can be achieved by understanding the emotional experience of an individual living with depression.

2.4 Media Ethics in the Portrayal of Mental Health Issues

The media ethics regarding the representation of mental health problems is a crucial point in the given study. Media moral obligation entails giving factual, fair and sensitive coverage of mental illnesses such as depression. The media and content producers should know what kind of effects their framing could have on the attitude of the people. A set of ethical standards has been created to help journalists and content creators avoid dangerous stereotypes and encourage the correct portrayal of mental health problems (Kreps, 2017). Ethical journalism also entails seeking the advice of mental health professionals and using the facts to make mental health stories to be given the necessary sensitivity.

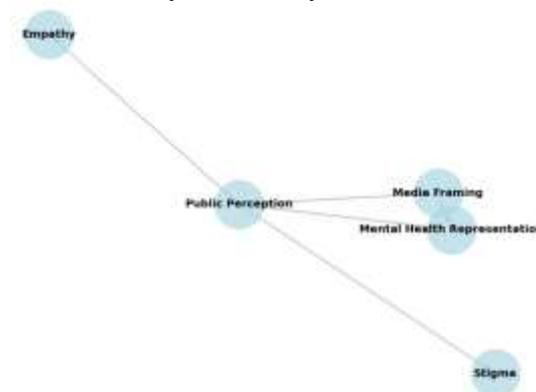


Figure 1: Media Framing, Public Perception, Stigma, Empathy, and Mental Health Representation

3. Methodology

3.1 Explanation of Content Analysis and Its Suitability for This Research

Content analysis is a research method that is employed to examine and to measure media text content and find patterns and themes. This is an especially effective approach in this study because it enables one to take a unique and logical look into the ways depression is framed in various media sources. The content analysis is the most appropriate method used in this study since it allows the researcher to examine large amounts of information gathered in various sources, including mainstream and social media, and still be consistent and rigorous. The approach is open to both a qualitative and a quantitative research that will give a full picture of how depression is reflected by the media and its effect to the social perception and stigma.

Using media texts, the content analysis can assist in pinpointing certain common themes, the

tone of media presentation, the language used to characterize depression and the images that have been applied to it. This method is most appropriate to this study because it allows a detailed study of the image of depression in various platforms providing the information about how media predisposes people to the attitudes toward mental health in the society (Guenther, Gaertner, and Zeits, 2020).

3.2 Description of the Data Collection Process

The data to be used in collecting information on this study will entail the selection of media samples of both mainstream media (news articles, TV shows and documentaries) and social media sites (e.g. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook). The criteria used in the selection are:

- Mainstream Media: Articles in widely read newspapers, magazines, and broadcasts that are devoted to the issues of mental health, and depression in particular.
- Social Media: Community posts, posts, and hashtags on depression, as well as posts by individuals and influencers.

The media samples will be chosen within a given period of time to make sure the data is reflective of the present depiction of the depression in the two forms of media. The relevant articles and posts will be identified with the help of key search terms that include depression, mental illness, stigma, and mental health awareness.

3.3 Analysis Techniques: Qualitative vs. Quantitative Analysis

The study is a mixed-method study, which involves both qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis. The qualitative analysis will be aimed at the identification of themes and patterns of the language, tone, and imagery of how depression is framed in the media. This will assist in revelation of the way media depicts depression and the messages portrayed. As an example, qualitative coding will reveal the themes as victimhood, resilience, or dangerousness in the descriptions of persons with depression.

The quantitative analysis shall entail a count of the frequency of particular words, phrases, or themes, and give some statistical evidence of the frequency of particular frames in the media. This work will assist in estimating to which extent the stigma is reinforced or contested in mainstream and social media discourses (Pescosolido, Halpern-Manners, Luo, and Perry, 2021).

3.4 Ethical Considerations in Researching Media Framing of Mental Health

In study of media framing on mental health, there is great need to consider issues of ethics especially where the researcher is examining information posted on social media. The major issues are privacy and consent, particularly concerning personal posts on social media. In the case of this research, there will be an analysis of posts that will be made available publicly, and there will be adherence to ethical considerations related to privacy. All the personal information that can be identified will be anonymized to ensure that the privacy of the individuals is not violated. Moreover, the research will be conducted ethically regarding the representation of mental health where the analysis will not perpetuate stigmatization and misrepresentation of the people with depression.

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1 Comparison of Depression Framing in Mainstream Media and Social Media

The review shows drastic differences in the manner in which depression is theorized in mainstream media and social media. The common portrayal of depression in the mainstream media is such that it is a serious, medical condition that needs treatment but it is usually sensationalized, with a particular emphasis on the extreme cases, including suicides or violent outbursts. The language used in the mainstream media stories is more formal and clinical, and the authors concentrate on the side effects of untreated depression. However, social media is more inclined to provide a relatable and personal image of depression, people are talking about their stories, problems and ways of coping. This makes the problem more human, but can occasionally result in mental health problems being oversimplified or mythically romanticized.

4.2 How the Media Framing Differs in Terms of Tone, Language, Imagery, and Focus

The mainstream media reporting tends to be alarmist in nature, highlighting how dangerous untreated depression can be and how it should be taken care of at once. As an illustration, a title can be something like, depression crisis: how it is taking a toll on our youth which can be fear instilling and can be used to uphold stigma. Conversely, the posts on social media are more informative and supportive (using such captions as It is okay not to be okay or You are not alone). The words used in social media are more accommodating and understanding whereas mainstream media at times uses words such as victim or suffering enough to inform a feeling of powerlessness.

Depression is portrayed in the mainstream media in a stark and dramatic way, with images of crying people or lonely people sitting in dark rooms, which supports negative stereotyping. However, the posts on social media are generally full of pictures of support groups, mental health awareness, and people who are winning their battle and this picture is more empowering and positive.

4.3 Insights into the Audience's Stigma and Empathy Based on Media's Portrayal of Depression

According to the analysis, it is evident that the media framing of depression is a great contributor to the perceptions of the audience. The exaggerated images in popular media are another cause of mental illness stigma, making a person afraid of being judged and treated less frequently (Misra et al., 2021). Conversely, the more intimate and helpful images on the social media allow fostering empathy and emotions, motivating people to use the mental health resources and share their experience.

Table 2: Frequency of Stigmatizing vs. Empathetic Framing in Mainstream and Social Media

Media Type	Stigmatizing Frames (%)	Empathetic Frames (%)	Neutral Frames (%)
Mainstream Media	60%	20%	20%
Social Media	30%	50%	20%

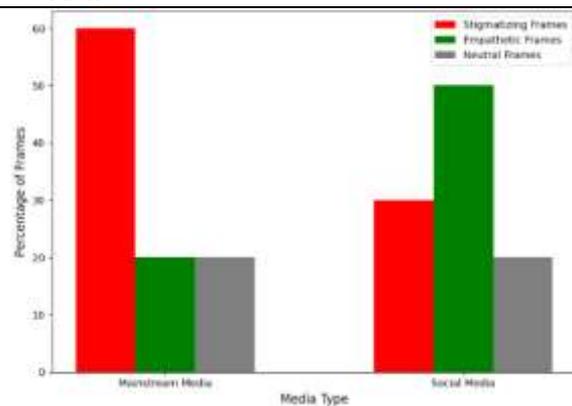


Figure 2: Distribution of Framing in Mainstream vs. Social Media (Stigmatizing, Empathetic, Neutral)

5. Discussion

This study highlights that media framing is very important in informing the society about depression and the stigma that surrounds depression. In contrasting between mainstream media

and social media, it is apparent that the mainstream media is frequently deconstructed in a sensationalized, stigmatized manner in terms of its presentation of depression. Such sensational framing usually focuses on the worst, i.e. violent behavior or a tragic outcome, which might also lead to fear and misconception about the condition in society. Conversely, social media are more likely to provide a more personalized and solitary reflection of depression giving rise to a wider scope of experience allowing empathetic associations (Puente et al., 2019).

. Social media discussion, however, still carries the threat of misinformation and trivialization since people can simplify or romanticize mental health struggles.

These media frames have serious implications in terms of how people perceive and stigmatize. According to Simonsson and Solomon (2021), stigma of mental illness is one of the major obstacles to treatment. The media images based on negative stereotypes add to the fear and misconception of the population that may reduce the chances of people seeking help. However, the positive and understanding images, particularly those that focus on recovery and resilience will be less stigmatizing and motivate people to take the initial steps in mental health care. In this way, the media has a dual effect of either supporting or undermining the stigma associated with depression, and how individuals view themselves with regards to their mental health, and the way society treats them.

The first lesson learned during the analysis is the impact of social media in creating or reducing stigma as compared to mainstream media. The social media is the means through which people are able to share their personal experiences, therefore, giving a more humanized perspective of depression. There is a loose regulation and misinformation dissemination, however, can at times create detrimental depictions that aid in stigmatizing instead of reducing it, as pointed out by Zhang and Firdaus (2024). Thus, social media, though potentially an empathic and stigmatizing factor, needs to be regulated and educated to make it a platform of proper and helpful mental health dialogue.

6. Conclusion

This study shows a major influence of media framing on how people and society view and stigmatize depression. The differences in presenting depression in the mainstream and social media are far-reaching with regard to the perceptions that people hold about mental health problems. Although mainstream media tend to reinforce stigma by sensationalizing the images, social media has a chance to diminish stigma and bring empathy, but there is a risk of misinformation.

Finally, practitioners in the media and mental health organizations should work together in an effort to ensure that the media offers accurate, balanced and empathetic coverage of mental health in any form of media. This is able to decrease stigmatization and promote seeking help behaviors. The future study may investigate the usefulness of particular media campaigns to decrease stigma, with an emphasis on how social media influencers and mental health specialists can influence the attitude of people toward depression.

References

- Corrigan, P. W., & Watson, A. C. (2002). Understanding the impact of stigma on people with mental illness. *World Psychiatry : Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)*, 1(1), 16–20. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1489832/>
- Corrigan, P. W., Druss, B. G., & Perlick, D. A. (2014). The Impact of Mental Illness Stigma on Seeking and Participating in Mental Health Care. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 15(2), 37–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100614531398>
- Cullen, T. (2021). Policing, Mental Illness and Media: The Framing of Mental Health Crisis Encounters and Police Use of Force, Katrina Clifford (2021). *Australian Journalism Review*, 43(2), 273–274. https://doi.org/10.1386/ajr_00074_5
- Duthie, G., Reavley, N., Wright, J., & Morgan, A. (2024). The impact of media-based mental health campaigns on male help-seeking: a systematic review. *Health Promotion*

- International*, 39(4). <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daae104>
- Guenther, L., Gaertner, M., & Zeitz, J. (2020). Framing as a Concept for Health Communication: A Systematic Review. *Health Communication*, 36(7), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2020.1723048>
- Heslehurst, N., Evans, E. H., Incollingo Rodriguez, A. C., Nagpal, T. S., & Visram, S. (2022). Newspaper media framing of obesity during pregnancy in the UK: A review and framework synthesis. *Obesity Reviews*, 23(12). <https://doi.org/10.1111/obr.13511>
- Kreps, G. (2017). Stigma and the Reluctance to Address Mental Health Issues in Minority Communities. *Journal of Family Strengths*, 17(1). <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol17/iss1/3/>
- Link, B. G., Struening, E. L., Neese-Todd, S., Asmussen, S., & Phelan, J. C. (2001). Stigma as a Barrier to Recovery: The Consequences of Stigma for the Self-Esteem of People With Mental Illnesses. *Psychiatric Services*, 52(12), 1621–1626. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.52.12.1621>
- Marcussen, K., Ritter, C., & Munetz, M. R. (2010). The Effect of Services and Stigma on Quality of Life for Persons With Serious Mental Illnesses. *Psychiatric Services*, 61(5), 489–494. <https://doi.org/10.1176/ps.2010.61.5.489>
- Misra, S., Jackson, V. W., Chong, J., Choe, K., Tay, C., Wong, J., & Yang, L. H. (2021). Systematic review of cultural aspects of stigma and mental illness among racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States: Implications for interventions. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 68(3-4), 486–512. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12516>
- Parnes, M. F., Amort, B., Calderon-Smith, C., Chambers, E. C., & Musicaro, R. (2024). Child and Adolescent Engagement with Climate Change on Social Media and Impacts on Mental Health: a Narrative Review. *Current Pediatrics Reports*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40124-024-00331-9>
- Pescosolido, B. A., Halpern-Manners, A., Luo, L., & Perry, B. (2021). Trends in Public Stigma of Mental Illness in the US, 1996-2018. *JAMA Network Open*, 4(12). <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.40202>
- Puente, S., Marín, H., Álvarez, P. P., Flores, P. M., & Grassau, D. (2019). Mental health and media links based on five essential elements to promote psychosocial support for victims: the case of the earthquake in Chile in 2010. *Disasters*, 43(3), 555–574. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12377>
- Simonsson, J. P., & Solomon, P. (2021). Misattribution of Mental Illness and Gun Violence. *Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swab009>
- Xie, Y., Ren, Y., Niu, C., Zheng, Y., Yu, P., & Li, L. (2023). The impact of stigma on mental health and quality of life of infertile women: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1093459>
- Zhang, H., & Firdaus, A. (2024). What Does Media Say about Mental Health: A Literature Review of Media Coverage on Mental Health. *Journalism and Media*, 5(3), 967–979. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia5030061>