

https://dspace.org/

The portrayal of mental illness in South African online news

Mogotsi, Mpho Sharon

2022
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/35502

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

ABSTRACT

Background

Mental illness affects people of all ages worldwide and South Africa has an adult lifetime prevalence of 30.3%. Depression and anxiety account for the largest prevalence of people with mental illness and disability is high. People living with mental illness who are subjected to stigma have negative health outcomes. The literature indicates that the media portrayal of mental illness across the world has been largely negative and stigmatising with some positive portrayal seen recently. With the media remaining an important source of information for the public, how they portray issues such as mental illness can affect the audience's perception and attitude about the issue. Online news platforms have gained popularity and are a source of information for millions of South Africans. Understanding how online news websites report on mental illness and people with mental illness, is an important step in exploring the portrayal of mental illness in the South Africa news media.

Aim

The aim of the research study was to describe and explore how South African online news sites IOL and TimesLive portray mental illness and people with mental illness during the period of January to December 2019.

Methodology

A content analysis study using both quantitative and qualitative approaches was implemented. All online news articles from IOL and TimesLive that covered mental illness substantially during the period of study were included. A media monitoring database available through Meltwater was used to access news articles for the period of January to December 2019. All articles discussing mental illness or people with mental illness from the study period were analysed. The online articles were captured and coded using Microsoft Excel. The quantitative data was analysed using STATA 15. The results were presented as frequencies and percentages.

Fifteen purposively selected articles were analysed thematically. Codes were developed based on reading of the articles and then the codes were applied to all selected articles. The findings were discussed, and quotes were utilised to support the findings.

Results

A total of 244 articles on mental illness were identified for the period under study. The month with the largest articles was October and the articles were commonly found in the news/ current affairs section of the online news site. Stories covered the most prevalent common mental disorders, including depression and anxiety. The top three most quoted sources of information for articles on mental illness were research or academics, health care professionals and non-governmental organisations. The results indicated that overall, the online media articles on mental illness had a neutral and positive tone, with many articles covering causes of mental illness, awareness campaigns that aimed to increase prevention as well as discussing common mental illnesses and psychological treatment. The people with mental illness mentioned were females and the youth (15-24 years). The predominant frames that the online media used were explaining different mental illnesses, including definitions, causes and management of mental illness, mental illness consequences, and the health system crisis.

Conclusion

Overall the study indicated that the portrayal of mental illness in online news in South Africa is following the positive portrayal trend from other countries. It highlighted that the online media is cognisant of the various causal factors that contribute to mental illness; may contribute to increasing the public's mental health awareness; and to decrease stigma associated with mental illness. The study may provide insights for improving public mental health communication interventions and further strengthen the online news portrayal of mental health and illness in South Africa.