

## ОТОБРАЖЕНИЕ ПСИХИЧЕСКОГО ЗДОРОВЬЯ В СМИ: АНАЛИЗ СТИГМЫ, СТЕРЕОТИПОВ И ЗАЩИТНЫХ НARRATIVOB

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**Аннотация.** Рассматриваются способы представления проблем психического здоровья в китайских СМИ и их влияние на общественное восприятие, в частности возникновение стигматизации и стереотипизации. Изучаются основные новостные СМИ, кино- и телепроизведения, социальные сети. Констатируется, что китайские СМИ часто связывают психические заболевания с насилием и чувством нестабильности, чем усиливают общественную дискриминацию и страх. Отмечается важная роль защитных нарративов в борьбе со стигматизацией и стереотипизацией.

**Ключевые слова:** медиальная репрезентация; проблемы психического здоровья; стигматизация; стереотип; защитные нарративы; психическое здоровье; познание; китайские СМИ.

## MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF MENTAL HEALTH: ANALYSING STIGMA, STEREOTYPES AND ADVOCACY NARRATIVES

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**Abstract.** This article examines how Chinese media represents mental health issues and impact of this representation on public perception, particularly the formation of stigma and stereotypes. The study examines mainstream news media, film and television works, social media platforms. It is found that Chinese media frequently links mental illness to violence and instability, reinforcing public discrimination and fear. Advocacy narratives, however, help dismantle stereotypes and reduce stigma.

**Keywords:** media representation; mental health issues; stigmatisation; stereotype; advocacy narratives; mental health; cognition; Chinese media.

### Introduction

In recent years, the discussion about mental health in the media has gradually increased, especially under the social pressure, and the mental health problems of Chinese people have become prominent. According to the data of the Blue book of China's mental health in 2023, the detection rate of depression and anxiety among Chinese adults is 10.6 % and 15.8 % respectively

[1, p. 23]. Only 36 % of Chinese adults rate their mental health as good, with the prevalence of depression reaching 45.1 % among those with poor self-assessed mental health status [1, p. 27]. Worldwide, stigma is recognised as an important barrier to the early diagnosis and treatment of various mental health problems, and the World Health Organisation has highlighted the important

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role of stigma in influencing mental health outcomes, and it has been identified as one of the key targets as early as the 2013–2020 action plan [2].

For the majority of the public outside the professional field of mental health, there is a large reliance on the mass media for mental health related information. The media, through its wide reach and influence, plays a critical role in shaping the public's perception of mental health. However, news coverage of mental illness in the media is often associated with violence and instability. For instance, Chinese mainstream outlets like *People's Daily* have frequently linked depression to extreme behaviours in reporting [3]. According to previous research, stigmatisation in the media can lead to stereotypes, prejudiced attitudes, and discriminatory behaviour intentions.

Therefore, an in-depth study of how mental health issues are presented in the media can be invaluable in removing social stigma around mental health disorders, breaking down stereotypes, and advancing a comprehensive understanding of mental health issues in society. As an effective way to alleviate the stigma and stereotype of mental health issues, advocacy narrative can improve the public's mental health literacy in a story-filled, emotional and imaginative way, thus reducing the stigma of mental health.

This paper aims to disentangle the common mechanisms of stigmatisation and stereotype formation and the performance effects of advocacy narratives by analysing the ways of mental health issues presentation in Chinese media.

### Theoretical foundations of the study

Media representation of mental health is a complex and multifaceted issue that encompasses stigma, stereotypes, and advocacy narratives. Societal stigma – manifested through negative stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes – poses a major barrier to effective psychiatric care<sup>1</sup>. Research has shown that mass media representations of mental illness play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards individuals with mental health conditions<sup>2</sup>. Mass media has the power to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and misconceptions about mental health, leading to increased stigma and discrimination against individuals with mental illness. While much of the existing literature has focused on the concept of stigma in media representations of mental illness, recent studies have highlighted the emergence of «trivialisation» as another important aspect to consider<sup>3</sup>.

Efforts to challenge stereotypes and lessen the stigmatising effects of the media have been explored in various forms, including through television, film, and social media platforms<sup>4</sup>. Calls to action in relation to mental health and the stigma attached to mental illness have been identified as important components of media narratives surrounding mental health<sup>5</sup>. Scholars have emphasised the need for further research and interventions aimed at addressing the perpetuation of stereotypes and

stigmatisation of individuals with mental health conditions in media portrayals. By examining prevalent stereotypes and biases, highlighting accurate and empathetic representations, and exploring ways in which the media can contribute to positive change, researchers aim to promote a more nuanced and inclusive portrayal of mental health in the media<sup>6</sup>.

Historical misconceptions and persistent stereotypes continue to fuel therapy stigma today, impacting media portrayals, public attitudes, and even insurance coverage for mental health treatments<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, the study of media representations of mental health can also shed light on the underlying factors contributing to the perpetuation of stigma and discrimination against individuals with mental health conditions. Efforts to challenge these misconceptions and promote more accurate and empathetic representations of mental health in the media are essential in combating stigma and fostering a more supportive and understanding society<sup>8</sup>. Through an analysis of media content and messaging, researchers seek to identify opportunities for intervention and education to address these harmful stereotypes and biases.

By conducting a rigorous analysis of media content and messaging, this study sought to identify potential avenues for intervention and educational strategies to counter harmful stereotypes and biases.

<sup>1</sup>Ross A. M., Morgan A. J., Reavley N. J. Investigating SANE's programs around stigma in the media: exploring media engagement experience of advocates with lived experience of complex mental illness // Advances in Mental Health. 2024. Vol. 22. Issue 1. P. 24–45.

<sup>2</sup>Parrott S. Media stereotypes about mental illness: the role of the media in nurturing and mitigating stigma // Media stereotypes from ageism to xenophobia / ed.: A. C. Billings, S. Parrot. Bern : Peter Lang, 2020. P. 239.

<sup>3</sup>Tudehope L., Sofija E., Harris N. VentTok: exploring the mental health narrative on TikTok // Stigma and Health : advance online publication. URL: <https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2025-22090-001.html> (date of access: 05.01.2025).

<sup>4</sup>Clark O., Lee M. M., Jingree M. L., et al. Weight stigma and social media: evidence and public health solutions // Frontiers in Nutrition. 2021. Vol. 8. 739056.

<sup>5</sup>Cristiansen A., Craythorne S.-L., Crawford P., et al. Multimodal analysis of stories told by mental health influencers on TikTok // Health Expect. 2025. Vol. 28. Issue 3. e70226.

<sup>6</sup>Hao Zhang, Firdays A. What does media say about mental health: a literature review of media coverage on mental health // Journ. Media. 2024. Vol. 5. Issue 3. P. 967–979.

<sup>7</sup>Historical misconceptions fueling therapy stigma today // Therapy group of DC : website. URL: <https://therapygroupdc.com/therapist-dc-blog/historical-misconceptions-fueling-therapy-stigma-today/> (date of access: 27.12.2024).

<sup>8</sup>Low L. F., Purwaningrum F. Negative stereotypes, fear and social distance: a systematic review of depictions of dementia in popular culture in the context of stigma // BMC Geriatr. 2020. Vol. 20. P. 477.

## Results and discussion

In recent years, with the increase in the discussion of mental health issues in the mainstream media in China, the amount of relevant science knowledge has gradually increased, but there is still a huge possibility for improvement in the coverage of mainstream media on the issue of optimising mental health stigma. Then what role does the media play in shaping public perception of mental health? And what role does advocacy narrative play in alleviating the stigma and stereotypes associated with mental health issues?

### Mainstream media's role in reinforcing stigma.

Mainstream Chinese media – including outlets like *People's Daily*, *WeChat*, and *Weibo* – have increasingly covered mental health topics such as depression. However, previous studies indicate that these platforms often depict individuals with mental illness through extreme imagery, such as associations with violence and instability, framing patients as socially marginalised groups [3]. This framing not only fosters public discrimination and fear but also perpetuates dangerous stereotypes. For instance, journalists frequently link extreme behaviours to mental illness without sufficient context, leading audiences to conflate mental health conditions with inherent danger. Furthermore, while some mainstream media include personal reflections from individuals with mental illness, they often fail to holistically capture the patients' lived experiences, including their emotional struggles and recovery journeys. This superficial coverage results in an «indifferent observer» mindset among the public, distancing audiences from the genuine challenges faced by those with mental health conditions.

**Film and television: trivialisation and negative portrayals.** For the public and the media, film and television works are not only sources of entertainment but also important vehicles for disseminating social concepts and values. They utilise a unique audiovisual language to present social issues directly to audiences, stimulating profound attention and reflection on these topics.

Film and television, as influential media channels, also contribute to stigmatisation. Chinese works, such as Xie Jin's «Hibiscus town» and Zhang Yimou's «Raise the red lantern», often depict characters with mental illness to symbolise societal oppression or anger. However, these portrayals typically emphasise negative behaviours (e.g., erratic actions during episodes) without providing nuanced context, thereby restricting audiences' understanding of mental health conditions. Additionally, comedic works like «Warm hug» trivialise conditions like obsessive-compulsive disorder by equating them with cleanliness and orderliness (the protagonist Bao Bao is portrayed as a character with severe germophobia and obsessive-compulsive disorder, whose home must be cleaned and disinfected daily, clothes neatly folded, and schedules strictly adhered), reinforcing

reductive stereotypes that undermine the complexity of such disorders.

**Social media: a double-edged sword.** On social media platforms, the discourse around mental health presents a paradox. While these platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for individuals to share experiences, reduce stigma, and foster peer support, they also risk spreading misinformation. Notably, a trend among teenage users involves labeling posts with psychiatric terms like «depression» or «attention deficit hyperactivity disorder» as trendy identifiers, often divorced from clinical reality [4]. This casual usage risks trivialising genuine mental health struggles, potentially leading to public dismissal of actual patients' experiences. Furthermore, discussions on social media sometimes attribute mental illness to personal failings, such as moral weakness, rather than recognising biological or psychological factors. For example conditions like sex addiction or bulimia are often mischaracterised as self-indulgence, while depression is oversimplified as a lack of optimism or believing that the depressed person can recover if only he or she is optimistic enough.

The unfair portrayal of mental health by the above three mainstream media (mainstream news, film and television works, and social media platforms) has, to a certain extent, led to the stigmatisation of groups related to mental illness in real life and on the Internet. In social psychiatry, the term «stigma» refers to the set of negative factors associated with people with mental disorders. Specifically, according to the World Health Organisation, stigma represents a sign of shame, indecency, or disapproval that can lead to discrimination, and exclusion from social contexts and situations [4].

One-sided media coverage of mental health issues often leads the public to form stereotypes that closely associate mental health issues with negative labels such as violence and uncertainty. For example, some media tend to emphasise the unpredictability, aggression or abnormal behaviour of people with mental illness when reporting on them, thus creating a stereotype in society that people with mental illness equals dangerous people. This impression not only deepens the public's fear and misunderstanding of mental illness, but also causes patients to suffer unnecessary prejudice and discrimination in daily life such as job hunting and social interaction. Most importantly, these negative stereotypes are not true. P. S. Appelbaum and J. W. Swanson collated several indicators from several data sets and determined that people with mental health problems commit fewer violent crimes than the general population. Only 3–5 % of all violent crime each year can be attributed to people with severe mental health problems, and people with mental health problems are 10 times more likely to be victims of violent crime than perpetrators [5].

**Social exclusion exacerbates patient vulnerability.** Stereotypes often lead people with mental health problems to experience social exclusion. This rejection is not only reflected in emotional isolation and apathy, but also in many aspects of real life. For example, some companies explicitly or implicitly exclude people with mental illness, even those with a history of mental illness, from the recruitment process. This exclusion not only deprives patients of employment opportunities, but also exacerbates their sense of social isolation and makes it more difficult for them to integrate into society. In addition, in social settings, patients often choose to avoid communicating with others out of fear of being misunderstood or discriminated against, further exacerbating their degree of social exclusion and making them increasingly vulnerable.

The stigmatisation of mental illness not only affects patients' self-identity and social status but may also hinder them from seeking help and treatment. Public opinion on social media is often filled with prejudice and misunderstandings, which exacerbates the stigmatisation of individuals with mental illness. When patients with mental illness try to share information about their condition on social networks to seek support or help from others in similar situations, they often encounter many obstacles. Meanwhile, many influential figures in China are also troubled by the stigmatisation of mental illness.

For example, Chinese actress Zhao Lusi was reported to have been hospitalised due to health issues induced by mental illness in December 2024, which sparked widespread public discussion about mental illness in society. According to Zhao Lusi's response on *Weibo*, she acknowledged having depression and described in detail the psychological issues she had been experiencing since 2019. After the news broke, on the one hand, some members of the public held a dismissive attitude towards her stated mental illness, believing that she might be faking it or being melodramatic to exaggerate her condition and avoid work, thereby misunderstanding her illness. On the other hand, in her response on *Weibo*, Zhao Lusi mentioned that she had once felt ashamed and guilty about her psychological issues and was afraid to seek help, showing a tendency towards self-stigmatisation.

### Internalisation of stigma impairs self-perception.

In the face of long-term social exclusion and discrimination, patients themselves confront a dual conflict: on the one hand, they endure the suffering brought about by their mental illness; on the other hand, they are aware that their «condition» makes them the target of stigmatised stereotypes, which exacerbates their distress. This leads to internalised stigma, where individuals convince themselves and attribute the stigmatisation to their own issues. This attitude is associated with extremely low self-esteem and a lack of recognition of one's own abilities, resulting in thoughts (e. g. «I can't control myself», «I'm a loser», «No one will trust me with important tasks»). Patients may even fear seeking treatment advice through formal channels, for fear of confirming that societal prejudices against them are real. These factors can lead patients to seek less help or no help at all, creating a vicious cycle.

In China's media platforms, the focus of attention on the topic of mental health is generally concentrated on the stereotypes related to mental illnesses. The widespread discussion of stereotypes about mental illnesses not only increases people's understanding of this group of mental illness patients, but also attracts the attention and participation of social welfare organisations (including many authoritative media platforms), which helps more people to have a correct understanding of mental illnesses. For example, China's largest image-text social media platform, *Xiaohongshu* launched a mental health care project called «Sunshine rainbow initiative» in October 2024, with the Shanghai Mental Health Centre as its guiding unit. When *Xiaohongshu* users search for keywords such as «suicide», «don't want to live anymore», «life is meaningless», which conform to stereotypes, they will be directed to a mental health care page. This page not only aggregates a wealth of professional psychiatric and psychological content, as well as mental health assistance hotlines, but also continuously shares experiences from ordinary users on how they have combated deep-seated depression and overcome psychological difficulties, providing help to users in need.

Similarly, China's short-video social media platforms *Douyin* and *Kuaishou* have also launched mental health care public welfare projects in recent years. Taking the period from 2020 to 2024 as an example (see table).

Chinese media platforms' mental health care projects

Media platform	Mental health care project name	Event start time	Psychological intervention methods
<i>Xiaohongshu</i> (小红书)	Sunshine rainbow initiative (阳光彩虹行动)	October 2024	User-initiated mutual aid intervention
<i>Douyin</i> (抖音)	Xiao'an comfort warmer (小安暖宝宝)	October 2022	Artificial intelligence and human intervention
<i>Kuaishou</i> (快手)	Sun planting project (种太阳计划)	May 2024	Artificial intelligence and human intervention

Advocacy through storytelling (advocacy narratives) is one of the most effective ways to alleviate the stigmatisation of mental health in China currently. It typically presents this group of people in a way that resonates with audiences' lives, evoking empathy and understanding, and thereby breaking down some of the stereotypes and prejudices about mental illness in viewers' minds. Many film and television works have taken notice of this. For example, the sixth episode of the second season of series «Life matters», a medical-themed documentary produced by Shanghai radio and television station, focuses on the real lives of mental patients in a mental health centre, showcasing their attitudes towards life and existence. By depicting the daily struggles of mental patients against their illnesses and combining this with professional and authoritative education on the diseases, it allows audiences to gain a more objective understanding of this group, thus breaking down inherent stereotypes about mental illness patients to some extent.

Meanwhile, in recent years, not only the discussion around topics such as mental health and mental illness has increased on Internet social platforms, but also more and more netizens have spontaneously shared their experiences of combating mental illness through text, images, and videos. Among them are some well-known celebrities and actors in China. For instance, actor Li Ruotong was invited by *Ifeng Public Welfare* to give a speech titled «My journey with depression: from “Loving” to “Breaking Up”» at the event «Her world: Ifeng women's influence awards – 2024» in April 2024. In her speech, Li Ruotong shared her seven-year mental journey of battling depression, recounting details of her life, providing a real reference for patients and audiences. At the same time, she posted the video of her speech on her personal pages on major social media platforms, and her influence as an actor has also enhanced public awareness and discussion on this topic. She said in her speech: «To friends who were facing emotional issues, I hope today's sharing can be your rope. Even if it can only help you climb a little way up, I think it's worth it»<sup>9</sup>. As an advocate, Li Ruotong feels the importance of her story, experiences the happiness and excitement of sharing her achievements, and expresses deep gratitude for her journey of recovery.

Chinese media have constructed a comprehensive advocacy narrative system through diversified media approaches, addressing the stigmatisation of mental illness from three dimensions: humanising the image of mental health patients, reshaping public scientific understanding, and providing a platform for nationwide participation in discussions. This system has played a positive role in fostering a more inclusive and understanding social environment for mental health patients. This system is specifically manifested in the mentioned below aspects.

<sup>9</sup>Lang Chao. Li Ruotong: I'm only 58, and my lifelong journey with depression from «love» to «breakup» // Phoenix.com : website. URL: <https://gongui.ifeng.com/c/8YQnCPVjefS> (date of access: 15.12.2024) (in Chin.).

Firstly, advocacy narratives humanise the image of mental health patients by showcasing their real-life situations, evoking public emotional resonance and humanistic care. These displays take various forms, including human-interest news reports on the rehabilitation of mental health patients, literary and film works on related themes, television and radio interviews, and documentaries. For example, the sixth episode of the second season of series «Life matters» documented the daily lives of patients in a psychiatric hospital, sparking widespread discussion in society and allowing viewers to intuitively feel the hardships and resilience of this group.

Secondly, advocacy narratives reshape the public's scientific understanding of mental health. New media platforms (e. g. *Tencent News* and *Toutiao*) and public service advertisements explain mental health issues in easy-to-understand language and vivid cases, lowering the threshold for accessing information and enhancing the overall mental health literacy of society.

Thirdly, advocacy narratives encourage the public to actively share and discuss topics related to mental illness on social media platforms. Articles, videos, and images are published on platforms like *Weibo*, *WeChat*, and *Douyin*, or professional knowledge explanations and interactive sharing are provided during lectures and seminars, encouraging those who are or have been battling mental illness to share their journeys. For instance, the mental health assistance programme «Rainbow of unshine» on the *Xiaohongshu* platform provides popular science content, stress relief recommendations, and mental health assistance channels, encouraging public attention and discussion.

Advocacy through storytelling, leveraging narrative, emotional resonance, and ease of dissemination, has become a significant force in promoting social awareness of mental health issues. As M. Merleau-Ponty said, «we indwell language in the same way we indwell our bodies, and through them both we indwell the world» [6, p. 84]. Advocacy narratives not only convey information but also profoundly influence our thoughts and cognition.

From the patient's perspective, exposure to advocacy narratives can provide inspiration on the possibility of resolving their problems. Advocacy narratives provide valuable reference and inspiration for audience members who are patients by showcasing how the protagonists face mental health issues, seek help, and ultimately achieve recovery. This enhances their confidence and courage to overcome the illness. At the same time, some protagonists in advocacy narratives present aspects of their daily lives beyond their illness, demonstrating how they live positively despite their pain. This offers viewers a perspective that mental illness is not the entirety of their lives, which to some extent can alleviate the recovery anxiety of audience members who are patients, enabling them to view their condition more objectively and positively.

From the perspective of advocates, participating in advocacy narratives is also a way to enhance their self-identity. Advocacy narrative opens a path for advocates to express themselves, promote recovery, and enhance their sense of self-worth. By sharing their personal experiences with mental health challenges, advocates not only engage in altruistic and meaningful activities but also form more positive evaluations of themselves [7]. This process of reinterpreting their experiences not only accelerates recovery but also brings about positive emotional experiences such as relief and joy.

Furthermore, advocacy narrative fosters the establishment of social connections between individuals with mental illness and the broader society, enhancing the subjective well-being of advocates. By publicly sharing their personal stories on the Internet or in other settings, advocates increase public awareness and discussion of mental illness. This process not only builds extensive social networks but also deepens understanding of others' situations. At the same time, recognising the importance of their own stories, advocates experience happiness and excitement in sharing their achievements, as well as profound gratitude for their recovery journey.

## Conclusions

This study reveals that perpetuating public stigma: mainstream news, film and television works, and social media platforms often amplify stereotypes such as linking mental health conditions to dangerousness or moral weakness thereby exacerbating discrimination and social exclusion, these patterns of media representation collectively contribute to a distorted public perception of mental illness, potentially hindering help-seeking behaviours and social inclusion efforts. Conversely, advocacy narratives have emerged as a counterforce: by humanising patient experiences, improving public

mental health literacy, and fostering inclusive dialogue, these narratives effectively challenge stereotypes and reduce stigma. The findings underscore the dual role of media in shaping societal attitudes toward mental health and highlight advocacy narratives as a promising strategy for fostering a more empathetic and understanding social environment. This study contributes to existing research by empirically linking media representation to stigma dynamics and demonstrating the transformative potential of narrative-driven advocacy.

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