



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY
AND COUNSELLING
(IJEPC)

www.ijepec.com



STIGMATIZING CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND
ATTITUDE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: ANALYSIS OF
MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 10.10.2024

Revised date: 27.10.2024

Accepted date: 25.11.2024

Published date: 17.12.2024

To cite this document:

Selamat, T., Bakar, A. A., Zalli, M. M., & Othman, M. S. (2024). Stigmatizing Content on Social Media and Attitude of University Students: Analysis of Mental Health Stigma. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 9 (56), 215-224.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.956014

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Abstract:

Stigma in mental illness happens when someone has an unfair attitude or belief about a person with mental health challenges that causes social isolation, social discrediting and reduced likelihood of staying with treatment. The objective of this study is to see the influence of attitude factors and the effect of social media on stigma towards mental patients among public university students. A total of 350 students around the Klang Valley were involved in this study through simple random sampling. The questionnaires used are Stigma and Self-Stigma Scales (SASS), Community Attitude Towards Mental Illness (CAMI) scale and Effects of Social Media Use on Perception on Mental Illness (ESMUPMI). The findings of the study show that the majority of students show a high level of stigma towards mental patients (65%), medium (24%) and low (11%). This study also found that the majority (84%) of students agreed that social media was their main source of information about mental problems; believe that social media sharing about mental illness is accurate (71%) and believe that social media is influential in changing someone's opinion or perception of this issue. In addition, the findings also show that attitudes and social media affect stigma against mental patients ($\beta=0.276$ & $\beta=0.157, p<0.01$) and the R^2 value is 0.206. Therefore, all hypotheses were accepted. On top of that, the government and institutions need to take steps to control the issue of stigma against mental patients in the community considering that mental illness has become the second highest disease in Malaysia since 2020.

Keywords:

Stigma, Mental Illness, Attitude, Social Media, Education

Introduction

Nowadays, mental health problems have become the second highest health problem affecting Malaysians after heart disease (National Security Council, 2023). Some people label the mentally ill as crazy, dangerous and to be avoided. Mental health is an individual's ability to control emotions that are closely related to his thoughts, feelings and actions when facing various situations. Mental health is closely related to stress, delirium and impaired functioning, breaking social norms and dysfunction (Kring et.al., 2018).

In addition, Mohd Faizul et.al (2018) in their writing have stated that one in three Malaysians have experienced mental health problems with the highest percentage being young people and statistics also show that there are an increase in the number of new reported cases of mental illness. Studies abroad have found that one in four people worldwide experience a mental disorder at some point in their lives, almost two-thirds of those individuals never receive treatment.

Literature Review

Stigma against the mentally ill is a major barrier to self-wellness among the mentally ill (Fox et.al, 2018). The stigma of mental illness has been a widely studied research topic in various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, public health and medicine. Beginning with the publication of an essay by Erving Goffman (1963) entitled *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, research on stigma continues to grow each year, with the majority of stigma research occurring in the past decade.

Goffman was the first to define stigma as an attribute that connects a person with undesirable characteristics (stereotypes). Recent literature adds the perspective of individuals who carry stigmatized attitudes. Therefore, researchers often distinguish between public and personal stigma, both consisting of elements of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. Public stigma refers to the general population agreeing with stereotypes and reacting with discrimination against people with mental illness. Past studies distinguish two types of public stigma: (a) perception of public stigma (also called stereotype awareness) refers to one's perception of other people's attitudes and behavior towards depression, and (b) personal stigma (also called internal stigma or personal approval) refers to self-attitudes towards depression. Accepting society's stereotypes and applying them to oneself in relation to depressive symptoms is described as self-stigma (or self-approval). Different conceptualizations of self-stigma have been used in various studies (Gopfert et.al, 2019).

One million or 4.6 percent of Malaysians over the age of 15 suffer from depression, according to the 2023 National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) data released on 16 May 2024. The number of people suffering from depression doubled from 2019 to 2023. The NHMS also revealed a one in six children aged five to 15 have a mental health problem, and the burden of mental health problems has reportedly doubled since 2019 (Mohd Iskandar, 2024).

Students are also not exempt from exposure to mental illness. Norjuhaida's study (2018) found that students who experience emotional stress are in great need of social support. When stigma occurs, treatment will be the last alternative for patients to seek help from relevant mental health professionals (Robinson & Henderson, 2018). This is because mentally ill people are seen as 'alien beings' to society (Wahl et.al, 2012). Accordingly, seeking help from professionals regarding mental illness will be the last resort for patients because they do not want society to distance themselves from them. Data from the Mental Illness Awareness & Support Association (MIASA) shows that the ratio of psychiatrists to patients in Malaysia is 1 ratio in 200,000 (Malaysia Psychiatric Association, 2020). The data shows how big the ratio gap is between mental patients and specialist nurses and if the number of patients increases, Malaysia will experience a critical shortage of nurses.

This study was conducted on students at Public Institutes of Higher Education around the Klang Valley. According to a report on 10 July 2024, around 3,000 individuals came to seek treatment for mental disorders at Health Clinics in Selangor, especially in the Klang Valley since 2020 until now. This data has been reported by the Exco of Public Health and Nature (Norzamira, 2024). This is the data of patients who seek treatment, what about patients who do not seek treatment due to concerns about stigma. In addition, the Minister of Health reported that the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya recorded the highest depression and anxiety disorders in 2023. Data from the total number of screenings also showed that the Federal Territories recorded 70 percent of depression and anxiety problems, followed by Johor 44 percent; Labuan 33 percent and Sabah 23 percent, while Kelantan recorded the lowest percentage of cases with one percent, followed by Terengganu three percent and Kedah six percent (Suzalina, 2023). The data from the Ministry of Health mentioned above also shows that students of Public Institutions of Higher Education who suffer from mental illness in the Klang Valley area are relatively high and among the reasons stated are extreme stress conditions and isolation from the support network of family and friends as well as stigma in society.

In addition, university students in Malaysia were found to spend an average of six hours a day browsing social media (Norliah et.al, 2017). In addition, the 2018 Communications and Multimedia Commission (SKMM) internet user survey found that the average time young people use the internet is 8 hours a day. Muhamad Muhsin Ahmad Zahri, a psychiatrist at the University of Malaya stated that as a result of stigma and labeling patients as crazy, patients do not want to seek treatment (Mariah, 2016). In addition, research to determine knowledge and attitudes towards people with mental illness is lacking.

Awareness of mental illness is important among university students because learning at university is the most stressful time and is a major transition time in students' lives due to social pressure and academic pressure (Gruttadaro, 2016). Social media and the attitude of university students have been found to have an impact on the social distance of people suffering from mental illness because it affects the perception of people with mental illnesses (Kosyluk et. al, 2020; Bakar et. al, 2022). Although there is coverage of mental illness, it tends to be negative (Aleshinloye et.al, 2019). For example thinking about killing yourself, harming yourself, and being aloof or passive. Therefore, it is appropriate for researchers to study the stigma against people with mental problems. The problem of stigma against mental patients is the reason why patients do not want to seek treatment from specialists (Selamat, et.al, 2023).

Stigma theory was proposed by Erving Goffman. According to Goffman (1963), stigma is any form of physical and social characteristic that reduces a person's social identity, disqualifies that person from being accepted by others. Stigma makes someone different from others like being worse, dangerous or weak. According to him, stigma is a trait that worsens a person's image. Goffman's 1963 stigma theory explains that there are three types of stigma. First, abominations of the body which is abomination to the body. Body abomination stigma is associated with the physical abnormality of an individual.

Second, blemishes of individual character which are individual character defects where stigma is related to individual character damage that is considered weak, dangerous or inappropriate. Goffman gives examples of this type of stigma such as a person suffering from mental disorders, suicide attempts, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, etc. The third is tribal stigma which is tribal stigma. Therefore, stigma against mental patients is categorized in the second type of stigma which is individual character defects (blemishes of individual character). Considering a mentally ill person is weak, crazy and lacks faith is a common stigma in society.

The objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the level of stigma against mental patients among university students.
2. To identify the effect of social media on the perception of mental patients according to the domain of perception regarding the depiction of mental illness on social media, the use of social media and views on mental patients among university students.
3. To identify whether attitude and social media are predictive factors for stigma against mental patients among university students.

Methodology

Respondent

This study involved a total of 350 university student respondents from the Klang Valley, Selangor representing 31.5% males and 68.5% females through a simple random sampling method. Respondents were given a brief description of the research project and the informed consent process was performed. Researchers have chosen all four public universities in the Klang Valley as study locations, namely Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia and Universiti Teknologi Mara (main campus).

Instrument

The instrument that measures stigma consists of 36 items and is categorized into 6 sections namely Stigma to Others, Emotional Stigma, Anticipated Stigma by Others, Self Stigma, Avoidant Coping Strategies and Help Seeking Intention. The original instrument is from a study by Docksey et.al (2022) and has been translated into Bahasa Malaysia through back to back translation through five Likert scales.

Attitudes towards mental patients are measured through the instrument Attitude on People with Mental Illness (AMI) with 17 items was built by Wahl et al. (2012) and has three sub-constructs: Virtue, stereotypes and constraints, and five Likert scales. This instrument was developed to measure attitudes towards people with mental illness. In this study, attitude measurement refers to the domains: Virtue, stereotypes and limitations. Benevolence refers to positive attitudes towards people with mental illness such as learning about mental illness, helping them not to make jokes about mental illness and respect. Stereotyping refers to the

judgment of others who are different from oneself. Limitation refers to the limits of acceptance of individuals with mental illness.

The Effects of Social Media Use on the Perception on Mental Illness is an instrument developed by Fisher (2019) that measures the effects of social media on the perception of mental illness. This instrument measures sub-constructs such as students' perception of mental illness on social media, use of social media and views on mental patients through social media with a total of 20 items and five Likert scales. All three instruments have undergone a back-to-back translation process.

Results

This article covers from the basics of descriptive and inferential statistics, from hypothesis building to sampling and statistical analysis including descriptive and regression. A classical assumption test is performed before testing the hypothesis. Classic hypothesis tests in this study include normality tests and multicollinearity tests. Analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.

Table 1 displays the reliability test of the three instruments. The analysis found that all three instruments got a high Cronbach Alpha value which shows that the instrument works well with the respondents. A Cronbach Alpha value of 0.7 or higher indicates acceptable internal consistency (Byrne, 2010; Bakar et. al, 2022). Therefore, the findings of the study show that the reliability of the instrument is very high, with a Cronbach Alpha value exceeding the 0.7 index.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis

Instrument	Variable	Cronbach Alpha
Stigma and Self-Stigma Scales	Stigma	0.86
Attitude about Mental Illness	Attitude	0.77
Sosial Media on Perception of Mental Illness	Social Media	0.92

The findings of the study show that the majority of the sample practices stigma towards mental patients with a high level (65%), a medium level (24%) and a low level of only 11%.

Table 2: Data Analysis According to The Level Of Stigma

Level of stigma towards mentally ill	(%)
Low	11.0
Moderate	24.0
High	65.0
Total	100

This study also found that the majority of the sample agreed that social media gave a negative picture of mental health (89%), the use of social media in finding information about mental health (84%) and that social media influenced the sample's perception of mental patients (88%).

Table 3: The Impact Of Social Media On Perceptions Of The Mentally Ill

The Impact of Social Media on Perceptions of the Mentally Ill	(%)
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Negative images of mental illness on social media.	89.0
The use of social media.	84.0
Media affects the perception of mental patients	88.0

In addition, this study also found that the majority (84%) of public university students who were respondents agreed that social media was their main source of news about mental problems. In addition, they also believe that sharing social media about mental illness is accurate (71%) and influential in changing someone's opinion or perception of this issue. Therefore, the majority of students in this study use social media as a reference for mental problems.

Table 4: Attitudes And Social Media as Predictor on Stigma for Mental Patients

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.150	.158		12.829	.000
Attitude	0.203	.033	.276	6.191	.000
Social Media	0.112	.034	.157	3.252	.001
R	.325 ^a			Sum of Squares	22.353
R Square	0.206			df	2
Adjusted R Square	0.202			Mean Square	11.176
Std. Error of the Estimate	.67026			F	24.877
Durbin-Watson	1.743			Sig.	.000 ^b

a. Dependent Variable: Stigma

b. Predictors: (Constant), Social Media, Attitude

Anova ^a						
	Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	22.433	2	11.176	24.677	.000 ^b
	Residual	178.684	420	.449		
	Total	211.038	422			

a. Dependent Variable: Stigma

b. Predictors: (Constant), Social Media, Attitude

Table 4 describes the results of the multiple regression analysis. R^2 is the coefficient of determination. It measures the extent to which the forecaster considers the variability in the results, between 0 and 1. Accordingly, table 4 shows the stigma model that explains as much as 20.6% ($R^2 = 0.206$). It shows that the predictor factor for stigma accounts for 20.6% of the variance change for stigma. The findings of the study in statistical analysis also show that the item for attitude and influence of social media ($b=0.276$; $b=0.157$; $p<0.01$) is the significant predictors of stigma. From the beta aspect, for every 1 percent change in the social distancing

item, attitude change, and social media factors are 20.6% and 15.7%. It shows that attitude factors and the impact of social media are predictors of stigma against mental patients among public university students. Therefore, the hypothesis is accepted at the 99% confidence level.

In summary, the findings of the study are:

1. Almost 89% of high and moderate stigma against the mentally ill among public university students.
2. The majority of students agree that information from social media has a significant impact on their perception of mental patients.
3. Attitudes and social media are predictors of stigma towards mentally ill among public university students.

Discussion

Jombo & Idung (2018) stated that views on mental illness have influenced people with mental health problems not to seek psychiatric treatment. Puspitasari et al. (2020) found that 51.29% of university students in Indonesia have a negative attitude towards people with mental health problems, despite having good knowledge about mental health. However, some studies have found that students will change their negative attitudes towards mentally ill individuals if they have experience with patients. Student attitudes improve after being exposed to psychiatric welfare (Alsahali, 2021). Medical students' attitudes were initially neutral and became more positive after clinical experience.

Researchers can conclude from the literature review that such attitudes can result from knowledge about mental illness, interactions with people with mental health conditions, experiences with people with mental health conditions, beliefs and religious factors. However, most previous studies have found that the attitude factor is the factor that most influences the social isolation of mentally ill patients among university students. In addition, social media tends to give a negative image of the mentally ill. It has led to distance of the mentally ill (Selamat et.al, 2023).

Furthermore, more than 150 articles on mental health use a negative tone and 18.5% are linked to violence (DuPont-Reyes et al., 2020) and more from mental patients than physical patients (22.5 %: 19.7%). Social media, on the other hand, gives a negative image of the mentally ill and it has a significant relationship with the stigma against the mentally ill in the community. This study found that the majority of public university students agree that social media is their main source of news about mental health issues. In addition, they believe that sharing social media about mental illness is accurate and influential in changing someone's opinion or perception of this issue. In that regard, Selamat, et .al (2023) also stated that social media can have a great influence on the perception of students related to mental patients whether positive or negative.

Many of the criminal cases reported in the Malaysian media recently have disorders with mental illness including murder. The stigma against mental illness becomes stronger when this condition can lead to an increase in the number of patients with mental health disorders. The significant increase in mental illness over the last decade is due to poor mental health. Mental health is the basis of individual well-being. Recently, most of the crimes reported in all media channels in Malaysia are related to mental disorders, including crimes involving brutal murder. The negative perception or negative stigma towards mental illness has caused this kind of

situation to happen and become a problem in society. As a result, there is an increase in the number of people suffering from mental illness in society. With that statement, it can be illustrated that in the future, stigma in the community will worsen and it needs to be addressed immediately.

In addition, social media coverage of mental illness is increasing. It is proven by Chen and Lawrie (2017) who found a 20% increase in mental illness coverage from 8,614 to 10,000. Additionally, it has a significant impact on the reporting of suicide portrayals in the media. It is evident in the article by Schäfer and Quiring (2015) that in Germany, 87% of the published articles describe cases of individuals with mental health problems negatively by providing a closer description of the family background that increases suicide attempts in society. This means that social media plays an important role as a medium that can be used to reduce stigma and discrimination against the mentally ill.

Accordingly, the researcher would like to suggest the government to review Section 309 of the Penal Code in 2020 so as not to punish individuals who attempt suicide because they are not criminals, but rather suffer from mental illness and they need help.

Conclusion

This study gives implications about the role of public university students' attitudes and the role of social media on the issue of stigma against the mentally ill. Awareness needs to exist in society, especially the educated group where, whether they realize it or not, they are greatly influenced by what is displayed on social media, including negative things. This study also greatly contributes to public health issues in the post-pandemic era of COVID-19 as there is a significant increase in cases of mental problems among Malaysians. This study also helps to raise awareness about the importance of mental patients who need to be given help and support by all of us.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge the generous support of UPSI in financing the publication.

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