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# Stigma against mental illness and mental health: The role of social media

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the pervasive stigma against mental illness and mental health, emphasizing the role of social media in shaping public attitudes and perceptions. Stigma, historically rooted in negative attitudes and discriminatory practices, continues to pose significant barriers for individuals with mental disorders. The article highlights various forms of prejudice, including those against mental illness, and examines the cultural, personal, and experiential factors contributing to these biases. The concept of stigma is dissected to reveal its cognitive, affective, and behavioral components, as well as its historical origins and contemporary implications. Social media serves as a double-edged sword in this context: it can foster supportive communities and reduce stigma through shared personal experiences and increased awareness, yet it also risks perpetuating harmful stereotypes and misinformation. The dual impact of social media is analyzed, showing its potential to both alleviate and exacerbate feelings of social isolation, loneliness, and inadequacy, particularly among vulnerable populations. The study discusses the negative effects of idealized representations, negative social comparisons, and cyberbullying, which can amplify anxiety, depression, and self-stigma. Conversely, social media can offer a platform for positive change, encouraging open discussions and mutual support. Concluding, the paper underscores the need for continuous public education, challenging harmful stereotypes, and fostering inclusive environments. Addressing the misconceptions propagated through social media is crucial in reducing stigma and promoting a compassionate, empathetic approach to mental health.

**Take-home message:** Addressing mental health stigma is vital for a compassionate society. This commentary underscores the impact of prejudice and social media on public perceptions. Researchers should explore targeted interventions and regional stigma variations, while policymakers need strategies to combat discrimination and utilize social media for positive change.

**Keywords:** Mental illness; mental health; prejudice; social media; stigma.

## INTRODUCTION

In social psychology, prejudice is a negative attitude toward a person belonging to a specific social group or a condition that is assumed to influence interpersonal relationships negatively [1]. Prejudice can take various forms: (a) Ethnic prejudice [2]; (b) Sexism [3]; (c) Sexual prejudice (homophobia) [4]; (d) Ageism [5]; (e) Prejudice against people with obesity [6]; (f) Prejudice against individuals with mental disorders [7]; (g) Prejudice against physically disabled people [8].

The causes of prejudices and stereotypes may be traced back to cultural factors (dominance of a conservative and authoritarian viewpoint), personal factors (lack of empathy and inability to engage), and past experiences (negative relationships with individuals with mental disorders) [9,10]. Prejudice arises a priori, even before knowing or directly interacting with a person. As an attitude, prejudice includes a cognitive component (stereotype), an affective component (emotions arising from a specific civil context), and a behavioral component (intentions of group members leading to discrimination) [11,12].

This commentary aims to explore the various forms of prejudice, analyze the causes and consequences of the stigma associated with mental disorders, and discuss the impact of social media on public perception of mental health.

## DISCUSSION

In Greek, stigma can be defined as a sort of "*mark*" or "*sign*" that the ancient Greeks used to distinguish slaves from free men. The Greeks introduced the term "stigma" to highlight, through physical signs, a deplorable condition of the personality of those who bore them [13]. These marks were incised with a knife or burned into the skin to clarify that the marked person has to be excluded, deprecated, and not socially accepted.

In social psychiatry, the term stigma refers to a set of negative factors associated with individuals with a mental disorder. Specifically, according to the World Health Organization, stigma represents "*a mark of shame, disgrace, or disapproval that leads to rejection, discrimination, and exclusion from social contexts and situations.*" [14,15].

Stigma related to mental health issues is prevalent in collective thinking, widespread, and difficult to modify. Common behaviors among people include fear of interacting with individuals with psychological issues due to their perceived unpredictability and reluctance to assign important roles to them because they are considered unreliable [16]. These situations inevitably cause additional suffering to those affected, adding to an already acute state of distress. These individuals face a dual conflict: awareness of being "ill" and thus differently abled and being targets of stigmatized stereotypes, exacerbating their distress and leading to greater exclusion and discrimination, resulting in an increasing vulnerability [17].

This results in the "internalized stigma," where the individual convinces themselves that societal prejudices about them are true, resulting in self-perceptions like "I have depression *because I am lazy*." This attitude is linked to very low self-esteem and a lack of recognition of one's abilities, leading to thoughts like "*I am worthless*," "*I am a failure*," and "*no one will ever trust me with an important task*." [18]. In this vicious cycle, the psychiatric patient is less likely to seek specialized care for fear of confirming the "crazy" and “hopelessness” label assigned by society [19].

***Stigma in healthcare systems***

An aspect not to be underestimated is "*diagnostic overshadowing*," the underestimation of physical ailments in people with mental disorders [20]. Often, psychiatric patients seeking medical help for any health issues separate from their mental problems are quickly dismissed by healthcare providers who attribute the physical condition to the mental disorder, rendering their complaints less credible. Discrimination occurs from the triage stage, where they receive little attention and wait long before being attended to.

In parallel, *overprotective behavior* develops. Healthcare providers, considering the patient incapable of understanding, make decisions for them, surpassing supportive attitudes and leading to patient passivity, making them feel like a child. Another significant aspect is "*protective benevolence*," where doctors' overly accommodating behavior to maintain the patient's psychological balance can be perceived as disrespectful and dishonest [21]. The patient feels deceived by promises of something in exchange for accepting therapy, only to find these promises unmet.

Regarding mental health issues, two aspects must be considered: psychological difficulty and psychiatric disability. In both cases, the individual faces inhibition in achieving their goals serenely and a discriminative situation due to ongoing external prejudices. Concepts like self-stigma and social prejudice prevent these individuals from living without issues and represent enormous barriers to overcome [22].

Historically, these individuals' lives were heavily influenced by social prejudices, leading to increasingly acute discrimination [23]. To prevent individuals with mental disorders from facing continuous restrictions, it is essential to limit prejudice related to these specific issues. Understanding the causes of stigma, eliminating the idea that people with mental disorders pose a societal threat [24], and abolishing commonly used terminology to describe mental disorders are necessary.

***Stigma and social media***

The representation of mental disorders on social media is a topic of growing interest and debate, reflecting the evolution of our understanding and approach to mental health issues in modern society [25]. Social media platforms play a powerful role in informing, raising awareness, and influencing public perceptions of mental disorders.

On the one hand, they provide an unprecedented platform for sharing personal experiences, reducing stigma, and promoting mutual support among individuals facing similar challenges [26-29].

On the other hand, there is a risk that these platforms can spread misleading information, harmful stereotypes, and sensationalistic or sanitized representations, negatively impacting public perception and affecting individuals' well-being [30].

Constant exposure to social media can have both positive and negative repercussions on individual mental health. Recent literature has shown that social media use can amplify feelings of isolation and loneliness, especially when virtual connections replace face-to-face interactions, leaving individuals without the emotional support and warmth that real relationships offer. This isolation can be exacerbated in those already suffering from mental disorders, making it more challenging for them to seek help or connect with others in meaningful ways [31].

Additionally, the often curated and idealized nature of life presented on social media can distort users' perception of reality, leading to negative social comparisons, personal dissatisfaction, and increased feelings of inadequacy. These dynamics can exacerbate conditions of anxiety and depression, especially among young people and adolescents who are particularly sensitive to social pressures and self-image [32].

Pathological online behaviors, such as cyberbullying or the spread of harmful content, can also stem from unexpressed inner distress or sadistic tendencies. These acts not only harm the victims but also reflect and reinforce the disturbed mental state of the perpetrators, creating a vicious cycle of negativity and suffering [33]. Without appropriate intervention measures, such as content moderation and psychological support, social media can become an echo chamber for these behaviors, exacerbating problems instead of providing a way out [34].

The pressure to maintain a perfect public image can also induce stress and anxiety, leading individuals to hide their true struggles for fear of judgment or not meeting perceived standards. This masking of real difficulties hinders honest and open communication about mental well-being, hampering efforts to raise awareness and reduce the stigma associated with mental disorders [35-40].

## CONCLUSION

The stigmatization of mental health issues remains pervasive despite advancements in understanding and awareness. Reducing stigma requires continuous efforts to educate and inform the public, challenge harmful stereotypes, and promote inclusive and supportive environments for those affected by mental disorders [41,42]. Addressing the prejudices and misconceptions perpetuated by social media and other platforms is crucial in this endeavor, as is fostering a more compassionate and empathetic society that values mental health as much as physical health. For this reason, policymakers should develop targeted strategies to combat mental health discrimination and leverage social media as a tool for positive change.

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