

DOCTORAL THESIS

Understanding Mental Help-Seeking: Stigma, Psychological Factors, and Media Effects

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ABSTRACT

This thesis empirically investigated the influencing factors that influence individuals' mental help-seeking and draw an overall summary of how people presented mental illness on social media platforms plus how former studies have done regarding the study object. First, I conducted a meta-analysis based on three major theories in behavior change prediction to explore the effect size of cognitive factors such as attitudes, self-stigma, motivation, public stigma, perceived norms, and perceived severity in predicting individuals' professional mental help-seeking. According to the analysis of 69 papers, it provided a comprehensive summary of studies. For example, they found that attitudes were the most significant factor in leading individuals to seek mental help, following by education level, income, experience, descriptive norms, and self-stigma. Additionally, I also found that most of the existing studies investigating the mechanism behind mental help-seeking focused on stigma and cognitive factors instead of the influence of social media. However, exposure to social media significantly influenced individuals' cognitive factors based on existing studies. Therefore, this thesis first found that research gap and thus further decided to explore social media exposure on individuals' mental help-seeking.

To better investigate the influence of social media exposure, a clear understanding of social media platform presentation is necessary; I used content analysis to summarize the environment of social media regarding mental illness, taking Xiaohongshu, one of the major social media platforms in China, as the study site. Results indicated that most of the contents were about commercial promotion, movie advocacy, and other groups that make use of the concept of mental illness but were selling courses that have no scientific evidence. Moreover, among the messages that strictly describe mental illness, stigma is much less than what former

studies had presented. However, stereotypes remain a large ratio of all the posts that strictly describe mental illness. Social media serves as a place that provides lots of encouragement and support because I found a large volume of social support provision among the messages. The most prevalent type was informational social support, followed by emotional, social support provision, and instrumental social support provision. Additionally, I also found that although there were about one-third of the messages described specific treatment, very few of the messages mentioned completely recovery or situation turning better. I also included other findings such as that relatively few messages by professional sources and different causal attributions detail within the thesis.

Meanwhile, I adopted the theory of planned behavior (TPB) as the theoretical framework and conducted a survey to empirically test the relationship between TPB constructs, self-stigma, and mental help-seeking. Different from former studies, I also included social media exposure as the antecedents of the whole process. By conducting the structural equation modeling (SEM), I found that self-stigma significantly mediates social media exposure on attitudes towards mental help-seeking. Social media exposure also significantly increased self-stigma, attitudes, descriptive norms, and injunctive norms. At the same time, self-stigma significantly decreased individuals' attitudes towards mental help-seeking. Therefore, when in the face of social media, people with higher self-stigma tend to have negative attitudes towards mental help-seeking compared with individuals who have lower self-stigma. Moreover, attitudes, injunctive norms, and self-efficacy significantly explained 39% of the variance of the intention of mental help-seeking. The limitations and strengths are at the end of the thesis.

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