

Depiction of mental health issues during Covid-19 pandemic in media: an analysis framework model and a pilot study (the cases of Australia, Germany and Lithuania)

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Abstract

Aim of the study: To present the new model for the depiction of mental health issues during Covid-19 pandemic in the media

Subject or material and methods: A unique 11-item framework was created for the analysis of the articles and the pilot study was conducted.

Results: 365 online media articles related to mental health and Covid-19 from multiple news websites in Lithuania, Australia and Germany were included in the pilot study, which showed the power of the proposed model for depicting the mental health issues during Covid-19 pandemic

Discussion: The authors suggest that the proposed model could be used for further studies gathering not only the newspapers but also the other sources of media (podcasts, TV news, radio) to have a wider scope for analysis and interpretation. As a lot of information nowadays is being gathered through social media, this could also be used as a source in future studies, especially to those relating to the younger generation.

Conclusions: As indicated in our pilot study, many articles tend to focus on the adverse effects of the pandemic. Moreover, the news also lacked statistical information, a detailed explanation of the events and solutions to address the issues presented in the articles. With such a high flow of negative information, it is unsurprising that some experts estimate the mental health problems to rise rapidly in the upcoming months and years.

mental health, Covid-19, Sars-Cov-2 ; media

INTRODUCTION

The world has changed significantly since the last pandemic, Spanish flu, threatened it. The in-

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ternet provides us with an endless stream of information, and the continuous updates of Covid-19 is not an exception. Furthermore, with the rapid development of Covid-19 across the globe, and with its effect on various industry sectors as well as individuals, there is a dire need to find evidence-based information, as well as to understand the necessity and reasoning behind the actions of adapting specific health measures to deal with the pandemic. [1] However, this could

be a difficult task, as there are so many different sources of information to choose from. The primary source that people tend to consult is the news, nowadays usually accessed through online websites. Such news portals have a significant number of articles published every day, and depending on the source, might not always provide scientific evidence-based information.

The recent research showed that information overload could have a significant negative impact on individual coping perceptions and is a concern for people living alone as well as for those living with their families [2]. Moreover, the correlation between cyberchondria and current virus anxiety was observed, suggesting that information about the pandemic could serve as a buffering factor for the development of anxiety [3]. According to this, it is more important than ever to supply individuals with factual information.

The unique 11-item analysis framework was created and pilot study was conducted, comparing the media reports on mental health issues during Covid-19 quarantine across three countries (Germany, Australia and Lithuania), evaluating the credibility of these articles from the scientific, evidence-based perspective. This, in turn, allowed to highlight some issues of the mental health portrayal during Covid-19 quarantine and provide some recommendations for policymakers, media providers and readers.

COUNTRY CONTEXT

Australia is the largest country in Oceania, with a 26 million population. Australia consists of six states with varying COVID-19 cases and different lockdown durations. As this research used WA lockdown period (25/03/20-06/06/20), a number of cases at the end of the lockdown in WA accounted for 596 in total. According to the latest statistics, one in five (20%) Australians aged 16-85 experience mental health problems [4].

Lithuania is a country in Central Europe with a 2,8 million population. At the end of the lockdown period (16/03/20-16/06/20), the number of registered Covid-19 cases was 1778. Lithuania distinguishes as the country with a very high suicide mortality rate. In 2017, amounting to 31,5 cases per 100.000 inhabitants [5].

Germany is a country in Western Europe with 83 million population. At the end of the lockdown period, a number of Covid-19 cases were 170.508 [6]. Germany has the highest number of psychiatrists in Europe, amounting to 27 per 100.000 inhabitants [7].

METHODS:

An 11-item framework was created for the analysis of the articles (see Table 1).

Table 1. 11-item analysis framework : Depiction of mental health issues during Covid-19 pandemic in media

Question	Explanation	Answers option
The main topic of the article	The content of the article focuses on the specified topic and does not deviate from the specified subject.	Mental illness / Covid-19 impact on mental health / Health policy/ Crime / Personal coping strategies to deal with COVID impact /COVID impact on various areas on one's life /A specific initiative to fight MH problems during COVID
Mental health and covid is mentioned in the headline	The term 'mental health' or its equivalent translation in German and Lithuanian is mentioned in the headline of the news article. COVID, COVID-19, pandemic and coronavirus are treated as interchangeable terms.	Yes/ No/ Mental Health only
The headline is sensationalised	The article's headline is exaggerated or sensationalised with the use of bold statements or phrases; however, the content of the article does not share the same dramatic sentiment.	Yes/No

Information on mental health services is provided	The article provides information on mental health services (i.e., hotlines for psychological help or information of mental health service providers) in Australia, Germany or Lithuania.	General information on AVAILABLE professional MH support is provided/ Information on AVAILABLE MH support in the community is provided/ Article is based on general advice/ No information on MH services provided/ Article focuses on LACK of MH support/ Articles focuses on PLANS to EXPAND MH services
Statistical information about mental health is provided from the official source	The article provides information from an official source about mental health statistics in Australia, Germany or Lithuania.	Yes about both / None About MH only / About COVID only
The article is based on the opinion of mental health expert	The article is based on the opinion of a mental health expert (i.e., psychiatrist, mental health service provider), rather than solely written by the journalist.	Yes/No
Source of information	The information presented in the article is obtained from the patient interview, discussion with the health care specialist, government announcements or the use of other statistical data, otherwise the article is based on journalist opinion entirely.	Covid-19 patient/ Mental health patient / Governmental institution Political / Police Relatives / Academic / Representative of non-governmental organization / Regular people / Journalist / MH service provider / CEO / Doctor / Other
Focus of the article's narrative	A critical evaluation of the narrative from the problem vs solution standpoint	Problem focused approach / Solution focused approach / Combination of both / Generic fact statement / Other

In order to shortlist articles for inclusion in the study, the following set of criteria has been applied: 1) Main search terms for the articles were *COVID* and *mental health*. Such terms as *COVID*, *coronavirus*, *pandemic* were used interchangeably. Search terms *mental health*, *mental health issues* were treated as meaning the same. 2) Articles were published during COVID-19 quarantine as per dates specified in Table 1. 3) The focus of the article was mental health during the pandemic.

The article was included only if it met all specified criteria. The title of the article and the date of the publication were also recorded. Articles were excluded if: 1) They did not focus on mental health. 2) In which term mental health was noted as a side topic in a conversational manner.

In order to validate the response agreement between the researchers, the primary study was

conducted before the analysis phase of this project. All researchers in this study were bilingual in at least two out of three languages required for the analysis (English, German, Lithuanian). Therefore, for each country, 5 articles were selected and independently analysed by two researchers based on the 11-item analysis framework. Only when 100% agreement between all study's researchers was reached, the pilot study commenced.

The pilot study analyzed media articles from news websites in Lithuania, Australia and Germany. Based on the unique visitor per month statistics, the 3 most popular news portals in each country were selected. Only articles that fell within the primary lockdown period in each country were included in the sample. A total number of 365 was analyzed. Detailed information for each country is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Statistics by country

Country	Lockdown period	News portals	Total # of articles
Germany	19/03/20-12/05/20	BILD, Süddeutsche Zeitung, FAZ	104 (28.5%)
Lithuania	16/03/20-16/06/20	15min, Delfi, Lrytas	144 (39.5%)
Australia	25/03/20-06/06/20	ABC, News, SMH	117 (32.1%)

RESULTS

Out of the total 365 media articles related to mental health and Covid-19, 22% appeared in March 2020, 39% in April, 34% in May and 5% in June. At the beginning of the lockdown, in March, most articles focused on advice on how to cope with mental health issues; in the second half of April experts started providing their estimation on the potential harm done by isolation for the public mental health, and diverse policy and community initiatives were launched. Finally, from the end of May, the journalist focus shifted towards challenges related to returning back to regular lives.

In most media articles (36,2%), both mental health and Covid-19 were mentioned in the headline, however, neither of them appeared in 27,9% of the headlines, albeit these articles were discussing Covid-19 related subjects. A high increase in Covid-19 related publications is expected, as the world has faced a new challenge that has not been encountered for decades. However, when investigating the specifics of those publications, most of them (52,6%) appeared to focus on Covid-19 impact on mental health, including comments by the national and international mental health experts. The rest of the analyzed articles concentrated around health policy issues (11,8%), such as government initiatives and programs to provide additional financial measures for the public mental health, mental illness (6,8%) and personal coping strategies (5,8%). Almost a quarter of the headlines (23,2%) were formulated in a sensationalized manner, such as “Poland is shocked: Corona infected doctor has killed himself” (LT, 2020-03-22) or “Mental health toll of coronavirus to create ‘second wave’ of pandemic, experts warn” (AU, 2020-04-30).

A third (32,4%) of analyzed articles provided information on available professional mental health services, such as online psychiatric counselling while 12,6% focused on mental health

support in the community, as part of the informal response to the crisis. The second most common category (30% of articles) related to general advice about how to take care of one’s mental health during the pandemic. These articles mainly named such typical measures as healthy nutrition, less stressing news, avoiding alcohol, keeping social contacts and similar. An almost equal number of articles were related to the alarming fact that there is a lack of mental health services (13,7%) and plans to expand them (12,4%). Finally, almost one-fourth of all articles did not include any type of information about mental health services at all.

Only 3,8% of articles provided statistical information both about mental health and Covid-19, such as for example, considerably increased symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorders during the months of the pandemic. 7,4% of the articles included statistics only about the Covid-19 and 26,3% only about mental health. However, the vast majority of the articles (62,5%) failed to provide any statistical data. On the other hand, with little statistical data for journalists at hand, they very often tended to approach mental health experts. Almost 2/3 of the articles included or were based on the opinion of a mental health expert, most often psychologist or psychiatrist.

The most frequent source of information was a mental health service provider (in 47,1% of the articles), followed by the representatives of a government institution (23%) or academia (21,1%). Representatives of non-governmental organizations were also quite visible in the media (their opinion, mainly criticism towards mental health measures taken was presented in 15,6% of the articles). Almost equal numbers of articles (31,2%) had a problem-focused approach and observed the negative consequences of the pandemic, including increased numbers of suicide, violence, unavailability of professional support, and others. A slightly smaller number of

publications (29,3%) were based on a solution-focused approach, such as online psychological counselling, governmental financial programs or community self-help. The rest of the articles (34%) contained a combination of both.

The comparison between the three countries:

The comparison between three countries revealed that in all three countries the main source of information was a mental health service provider, following governmental institutions in Lithuania and Australia, whereas the second main source of information in German newspapers was a journalist him/herself. Comparing the provided statistical information in the analyzed articles, the significant shortage was noticed in German newspapers. In Lithuania, the percent was as high as 67,4%, while in Australia only 31,6% of articles had no statistical information. Talking about the problem/solution-focused approach, the numbers in all three countries were quite similar, the majority of the articles had the combination of both approaches. In Lithuania, the solution-focused approach was slightly more frequent as a problem-focused, whereas the problem-focused approach took over against the solution-focused in Australia and Germany.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Relevant and fact-based information can help the public to make informed decisions and to reduce potential panic, which often arises as a result of the crisis event, making communication crucial during the crisis [8]. Moreover, given that the crisis already has many damaging effects on people's lives (i.e., job loss, health concerns, increased uncertainty), apposite communication has a real potential to help the public by providing clear, timely and accurate information. Global leaders, policymakers and media, all have a role to play in the provision and spread of such information. As indicated in our pilot study, many articles tend to focus on the adverse effects of the pandemic. Moreover, the news also lacked statistical information, a detailed explanation of the events and solutions to address the issues presented in the articles. With such a high flow of negative information,

it is unsurprising that some experts estimate the mental health problems to rise rapidly in the upcoming months and years [9]. The comparison of three countries revealed a significant lack of statistical information in German and Lithuanian newspapers. This phenomenon requires further investigation.

DISCUSSION

Media, as a provider of knowledge, has an opportunity to shape the public's opinion. This flow of accurate information is especially critical during the crisis, such as the global pandemic, as it works as another tool to deal with the harmful effects. Solution and fact-based articles could help to deal with outcomes and contribute to the betterment of society's mental health. The strength of this model and our pilot study is a comparison between the three countries. As all of the three countries have different main mental health issues, the comparison between three countries has revealed surprisingly similar numbers on some issues, especially talking about the sources of information and solution/problem-focused approach. This could be explained through the international flow of information, as all three countries are democratic, and there are no limits for the freedom of the press. The limitation of this pilot study was a relatively small number of articles analyzed which was due to selecting a specific time period – hard lockdown – as a period for the analysis. The authors suggest that the proposed model could be used for further studies gathering not only the newspapers but also the other sources of media (podcasts, TV news, radio) to have a wider scope for analysis and interpretation. As a lot of information nowadays is being gathered through social media, this could also be used as a source in future studies, especially to those relating to the younger generation.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions

All the authors agreed on the final draft before submission.

Ethical Approval

The ethical approval was not required for this study, because the analyzed information is freely available in the public domain.

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