Media Representation of Depression and How it is Portrayed by People in General through Self-Driven Photo-Elicitation

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the intricate relationship between media portrayal and mental health, focusing particularly on depression, within a context rife with ambiguity and historical setbacks. Recognizing media's profound influence on societal perceptions and cognitive frameworks, the study highlights the repercussions of its often flawed representation of sensitive topics, including mental health, which can foster stigma and undermine individuals' self-esteem and help-seeking behaviors. Through an exploration of various media sources, the research underscores the diversity in depictions of depression, with some employing questionable methods. Central to the inquiry is the examination of individuals' cognitive processes, shedding light on the ways in which media narratives have shaped collective consciousness in this domain. Employing visual methodologies, particularly photo elicitation, the study engages participants in artistic activities to evoke deeper emotional responses, complemented by structured interview processes. Methodologically, the research adopts a two-step approach, integrating the use of photographs as data in the interview process and subsequent analysis of interview transcripts through text analysis, culminating in the identification of thematic patterns and the synthesis of findings. By elucidating the nuanced interplay between media representation and mental health perceptions, the study underscores the importance of critically examining and reshaping media narratives to foster a more informed and supportive societal discourse surrounding mental health issues.

Keywords: media, mental health, photo elicitation

1   Introduction

Studying culture through photography analyses visual cues that can help us comprehend that particular culture. This idea derives from the groundbreaking work of ethnographic filmmakers who, in contrast to tourists, take pictures for information rather than nostalgia. Visual anthropology, or the study of cultural patterns through representation, is the term used to describe this kind of observational fieldwork. Depending on its methodology, conceptual emphasis, and research tools, it may also fit under the umbrella of a discipline termed visual sociology. Students now have the chance to explore, analyze, and comprehend social and cultural events in their immediate environment thanks to this potent medium.

Visual techniques are employed to comprehend and interpret images, which encompass photography, cinema, and video (Barbour, 2014), advertising, graffiti, sculpture, drawing, painting, collage, and animation. Visual methods are a recent and innovative qualitative research methodology based on conventional ethnographic sociological and anthropological approaches. Recently, there has been increased interest in using visual techniques in qualitative analysis (Barbour, 2014). By gathering rich multidimensional data (Griffiths & Dunn, 2015), statistics (Mah, 2015), and by providing insightful commentary on the daily lives of participants (Barbour, 2014). Researchers use these representations and techniques to produce knowledge (Thomas, 2009), which is becoming acknowledged as beneficial in the study of disease and wellness. Visual approaches improve the richness of the data and aid in the relationship between the

researcher and participant, according to Pain's (2012) evaluation of the literature on the topic. Data enhancement was successful because it improved rapport-building, and communication allowed for the expression of feelings and tacit knowledge (the unsaid or unheard) and promoted introspection.

Photo elicitation is the process of using images to elicit conversation (Thomas, 2009). The researcher or the informant can create the visual images. The practice of employing one or more visual images in an interview and then asking participants to comment on the used images is known as photo elicitation, and it is now commonly practiced (Bigante, 2010). The photovoice method is comparable to auto photography & photo elicitation, in that both include participants and a researcher or researchers, and allow others to view the environment through the participant's eyes.

This research is largely focused on media representations of depression that exist in our society and how it has contributed to moulding our internal stigma about the same. The perception of people has been altered, changed, and manipulated by various aspects that exist in our media and society. These questions are very big in themselves and need to be addressed. The way one perceives depression has a direct impact on the survivors. It can have irreparable damage to such people. The prime focus will be on the existing stigmas, the media representations, and the people's perceptions. To aim at a better understanding and diverse data, self-driven photo elicitation will be used. Photo-elicitation will help collect varied data and information in the form of pictures or images that will give us a deep insight into people's thought processes and why they think about depression, the way they do. An interview on the basis of the image by the participant will help us analyze the image. The analysis will lead to more information and data which will tell us about existing thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

Newspapers, radio, television, and movies are all considered mass media for the purposes of this essay. Studies have been listed that concentrate on one or more of these media, while others look at a mix of media. Although the crucial distinction between news and entertainment media will be highlighted throughout, the reader can 3 understand that the terms "media" and "mass media" cover all of the above where the specific source is not indicated. People's perceptions toward the environment they live in and the people who share it are significantly influenced by the media. Although research shows that media portrayals of mental illness are frequently both false and negative, stories about or references to people with mental health issues are rarely absent from news stories or plotlines in film and television (Diefenbach, 1997).

2   Materials and Methods

We as modern people are poor observers, and photography as a tool in visual anthropology helps in better data collection. (Collier, Collier & Hall, 1990) The data collection is visual and this is a phenomenon of modern observation. The camera is not presented as a cure-all for our visual limitations. It takes systematized and acute recognition to benefit from its mechanistic record of culture, behaviour, and interactions. The book states photography is a viable tool, which when paired with proper methodologies can extend perceptions and yield results (Collier, Collier & Hall, 1990). Factual evidence shows the negative portrayal of mental health illness by the media. Specific negative portrayals of mental illness and stereotypical negative characteristics of people are also explored. More than 70% of information about mental illness is portrayed on TV news magazine shows. (Edney, 2004) According to the PEW Research centre's health survey, in 2006 nearly 49% of people said they watched the news and gained information related to media from the television. This means that TV has a large audience which may be watching broadcast content that may contain certain questionable portrayals of mental illness.

Since media influence can override personal experiences in relation to how mental illnesses are viewed, it can perpetuate negative stereotypes associated with mental illnesses. Often, persons with mental illness are depicted with negative attributes like being unlikable, dangerous, aggressive, violent, asocial, untrustworthy, and incompetent. Research by Klin (2008) shows the analysis that reveals the descriptions of mental illness and the mentally ill are distorted due to inaccuracies, exaggerations, or misinformation. The ill are presented not only as peculiar and different but also as dangerous. Media reports of homicides attributed to the mentally ill seem to be depicted as more stigmatizing to emphasize that they were different from homicides committed by others. Labelling people with mental illnesses as dangerous and violent reinforces the public view of fear and anxiety toward the mentally ill. (Padhy S K, Khatana S, Sarkar S, 2014)

Thus, the media perpetuates misconceptions and stigma. Especially prominent is the absence of agreed-upon definitions of "mental illness" and the lack of research on the inter-relationships in audience studies between portrayals in the media and social perceptions (Klin & Lemish, 2008). The thrill found in a photograph comes from the onrush of memory. It's because it is connected to something that we already know about. The sharper and more isolated stimulus memory receives the more it remembers. Black and white photography is paradoxically more evocative than color photography. It comparatively has a faster onrush of memories than the latter. (Harper, 2002).

Photography is a pure contingency and can be nothing else (it is always something that is represented)- contrary to the text which, by the sudden action of a single word, can shift a sentence from description to reflection- it immediately yields up to those details which constitute the very raw nature of ethnological knowledge. William Klein's picture called Mayday, Moscow: 1959 has been used for reference. "The photographer teaches me how the Russians dress: I note a boy's big cloth cap, another's necktie, an old woman's scarf around her head, a youth's haircut…" (Barthes, 1993).

2.1   Photo- Elicitation

Photo elicitation is the use of photographs to generate verbal discussion (Thomas, 2009). Photo-elicitation is a method of the interview in visual sociology and marketing research that uses visual images to elicit comments. Here the pictures will be clicked by the participants and the sample itself. Hence, auto photography and photo-elicitation are used as double-check methods. Photo elicitation produces a different kind of information as it evokes feelings, memories, and information (Harper, 2002). Photo elicitation can lead participants and researchers toward common understandings (Harper, 2002). The use of photographs in interviews can also act as a bridge between the researcher and the research subjects' social and cultural worlds (Meo, 2010). Photo-elicitation helps to strike meaningful conversations without having to think about initiating and getting to the topic. It acts as a bridge between the researcher and the participant. It has a good effect on the interview process as well as it helps the participants to open up more and be more expressive about their perceptions.

2.2   Interviews

A qualitative study of semi-structured interviews with a sample of people will help understand their issues. The interview will be based on the following theme of questions- hope, hopelessness, emotional damage, choice, control, autonomy, and repressed memories. The limitations in these types of methodology are for the people who severely need help due to mental health problems like schizophrenia and also those who won't communicate with other people easily. Primary research for people with depression has been targeted and hence these methods can be used because such people may be more likely to communicate and participate. Such research may not always be successful for people with severe issues and that represents a gap in the method. The subject heading clearly states the individuals eligible to be in the sample of the

research. The people targeted here for the research are college-going students. An in-depth analysis of the pictures will be done while asking questions to the participants about their meaning and significance. The textual and visual data will be analyzed and will be categorized into themes. Common words and grounds will help establish a relationship with the participants during this interview.

3   Theory and Calculation

The most common phenomenon, visual perception, has remained a major topic of debate in the fields of philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science. Why do we view the world the way that we do? Why, then, are we absolutely undetectable to some things while only being able to perceive others? When we recognize how dependent we are on our sensory organs to control how we behave in the outside world, the worry regarding the nature of visual perception becomes even more important.

3.1   Helmholtz's Perception Theory

Helmholtz's Perception Theory is a theory that talks about perceptions, physical stimuli, and their transduction to nervous impulses and the factors that influence such feelings and emotions. His two hypotheses are the place theory of audition and the trichromatic 19 theory of color perception (Levine and Shefner, 1981). According to Helmholtz's explanations of the physiology of perception, the qualities of sensations "belong only to our nervous system," and we acquire our knowledge of spatial ordering through perceiving an unchanging sequence of sense impressions of the same object. Perception plays an important role when it comes to photography, as how a person perceives a certain image with their sensory organs, and then the nervous system gives a lot of information about what the person is thinking.

3.2   Psychodynamic Theories

According to Freud, there can be tension between the conscious and unconscious elements of the mind, leading to a phenomenon known as repression (a state where you are unaware of having certain troubling motives, wishes, or desires but they influence you negatively just the same). Parapraxes also referred to as Freudian slips or slips of the tongue, are instances in which unconsciously held beliefs and emotions are brought to the conscious mind. When we speak something that wasn't intended, we expose what is on our minds. There are no accidents, every behavior—including slips of the tongue—is meaningful, according to Freud, who also thought that they offer a window into the unconscious mind (i.e., all behavior is determined). While involved in rigorous interview processes and analysis, there is a significant chance for the interviewee to have a Freudian slip. The slip actually helps the research topic in a big way and reveals details that decide the course of the interview.

3.3   Calculation and Analysis

The data collected in this research is in the form of-

- Transcribed Interviews (Textual Data)
- Photographs (Visual Data)

Both visual, as well as textual data, help establish connections to the topic and minimize limitations of miscommunication or less communication. With the understanding that these data sets are linked, this method enables the study of multiple different types of data sets. Rather than treating the data sets as separate entities, the data sets are investigated by going back and forth between them. The participants are questioned about the various aspects of the image, memories related to it, and their take on depression. Other questions in the interview guide also talk about their media perceptions and what they think has pushed them to think the way they do.

4   Results and Discussion

The research was carried out with 6 participants. The pictures they clicked and certain quotes from the interviews will be discussed here.

Figure 1: Life in 2017 by Kausik Das

Kausik connected the phases of his life with gaming and the memories attached with it. For Kausik the picture represents depression because he was at a very vulnerable space when he used to play this game called "PES 2017". *"I relate to a very, uh, a period of my life where I was extremely depressed and it was a phase of my life where I was, depressed and not anxious. I have gone through, phases of anxiety and panic attacks, but the only phase of depression that I can remember was back in 2017 to 2018 and a major chunk of my life back then was this game. I remember playing PES 2017 for 700 hours and,, how my life would be, low blank emotionless the core values of depression. But the only other aspect I had in my life was, this game PES 2017."*- Kausik Das

Figure 2: Obscure Prints by Himalay Mohanty

Himalay talks about a lot of sensitive topics that he relates to with this picture. The participant talks about how his image has "zillion and zillion of layers" to it. *"You're seeking out for that, that space, that peace so, this image, as you can see from all these sites, especially from the corners, especially from the corners, you are crowded. There is no space, it is dark, but then your hand is able to find that light and is calling out for it. It is not able to find it is definitely calling out for it."*- Himalay Mohanty

Figure 3: Window to the blues by Jonathan Michael

"I have read a lot of articles, especially by this one, a psychologist, a friend of psychologist, Emil who studied specific patterns of people committing suicide. And he came to the conclusion that they were not individual, you know, decisions. They had very much societal impact and why they committed suicide. You know, right? Society played a very big role in why their life became what it was and then why they decided to commit, suicide they were not individual decisions, you know, like. Attempts to commit suicide. So yeah, society definitely plays a part."- Jonathan Michael

Figure 4: You can never tell by Jay Pandey

"I really don't know. I guess it's predominantly in our genes that black and white is the color of sadness or, you know, the lack of color could mean a lack of emotion in some people. So I don't know how, but a black-and-white photo looks a little, a little sadder."- Jay Pandey

Furthermore, the participant believes that repressed thoughts and memories are a big factor in depression. Also how a person tackles their mental health has a lot to do with how one is going to get through it. A mention of pop culture and movies is

emphasized again with words like "sad" and "violent tone". Another angle explored in this interview was about "validation", "self-doubt" and "low self-confidence".
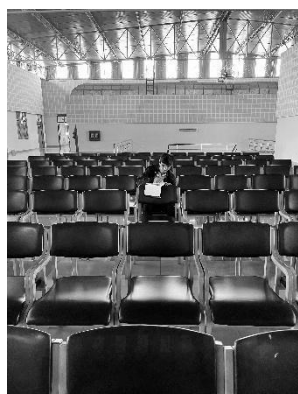

Figure 5: The bubble/ my space by Kimaya Deshmukh

"So this is an image of one of my classmates sitting in, an empty, like a sky view area. We have that in our college. So he was sitting there alone and maybe writing his journal, but that really got to me, and that's why I clicked this. I chose, uh, like a top view angle and I went for the front side of the picture so that I can show that he is writing something like, although he might be enjoying it, he might be writing his heart out but he's still alone. I don't know what he's going through. Nobody knows. Only he knows; maybe he's putting it out in the book. That's why I clicked this picture from the front angle so that the viewer can see it."- Kimaya Deshmukh
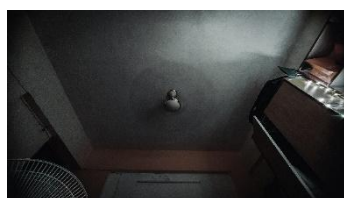

Figure 6: The ceiling by Medha Kartha

"What I do is I stare at the ceiling and my eyes would follow the blade of the fan. I go around and round and round and, uh, that just. I guess my mind goes blank whenever I do that. Okay. So I stop thinking about things that are bothering me. Like I just go, I, I just go numb. I'm already lying down. So can't feel anything, can't hear anything. It's just my eyes following the rotation of the fan and my mind goes blank. So that kind of gave me a little peace as well. So, all I would do is just sad."- Medha Kartha

Table 1: Division of how participants perceive depression on the basis of various themes

Participant	Theme: Family and Societal or Media Impacts	Theme: Emotional Toll, Loss or Death	Theme: Substance & coping mechanism
Kausik Das	-	Depression, anxiety, panic attacks, phase of my life, nervous, overthinking	Gaming, surfing/ browsing on the internet
Himalay Mohanty	Toxic competitive culture, stress, parents forcing careers, stigma related to therapy, bullying, ill-perception by family members	Hope, reach out, seek help, peace, layers, suffering, feelings, acknowledging, escape, crowded, shock & trauma, suicide, gone, handout	Mobile Photography, writing to express inner feelings.
Jonathan Michael	Dogs of society, trapped in the city, considered mad by the society, societal impacts, cultural approach.	Get out of it, darker, gateway, escape, stuck in a void, sadness, place you're stuck in, emotions, feelings, suicide, attempts, mental instability, a breakup	-

Medha Kartha	Only child, male interaction, parents, old school media, tantrum, not seeing the full story	Heartbreak, dark, stare, the mind goes blank, numb, sadness, loneliness, escape, nobody to talk to, suicidal thoughts, nudge me off the roof, depressed, overthinker, white noise, feelings	Binge watch, TV shows, OTT, alcohol, weed, narcotics, drugs, rum, vodka, that buzz, intoxicated, Room as an escape.
Jay Pandey	Culture, pop culture, friends, family, in our genes	Lonely, sad, alone, lack of emotion, hope, ability to fight & look forward, out of the cloud, not alone, black cloud, constant sorrow, repressed memories, repressed thoughts, validation, self-confidence, self-doubt, violent, depression	Validation, be nice- it doesn't cost anything, someone to talk to.
Kimaya Deshmukh	Anybody who cried, Saas Bahu serials, wrong image, fat shaming	Empty, heart out, alone, nobody knows, sad, left alone, seek help, crying, hard phase, fat shaming, underconfident, scared, tough life, express better, learn, grow	Journaling, writing, expressing, everything as an experience, learn new things & bossy, upbeat, confident music

Table 1 has categorized the way people perceive depression on the basis of the pictures submitted by them. The words mentioned have been taken by the textual analysis of the interviews and then have been divided into themes for a better understanding.

Topics like suicide were discussed by 3 participants in the sample which shows that people relate depression to self-harm and suicide. Participants who talked about suicide during the interview were bound to be more emotional during the process, and many emotional cues were clearly visible. The sample as a whole was not afraid of opening up about their feeling, emotions, and thoughts, and they were all in a positive understanding of getting better and wanting the same for others. Common words among participants like "get out of it", "seek help", "get better", "ability to fight", "look forward", "escape", and "reach out" can be found in sample quotes which indicate that they aim to get better and not stagnate at a certain phase or feeling in their life.

"The windows could show the other side that the person is fighting something and there's always another side. There's always something to look out for. There's always something to reach out to. And uh, I believe that that is also part of depression. The ability to fight and the ability to look forward is also an integrated part of depression."- Jay Pandey

5   Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the critical role of employing diverse data collection techniques, including visual aids and in-depth interviews, to enrich the understanding of mental health perceptions,

particularly among depression survivors. The findings illuminate the pervasive influence of media, both traditional and contemporary, on societal perceptions of depression, with a notable emphasis on the detrimental impact of stigma perpetuated by inaccurate portrayals. Substance abuse emerged as a coping mechanism, highlighting the complex interplay between individual experiences and societal influences. Importantly, the research emphasizes the need for media literacy and accurate representation of mental health issues to mitigate stigma and facilitate effective interventions. By promoting a deeper understanding of depression and destigmatizing conversations surrounding mental health, this study advocates for preventive measures and accessible treatment options. Ultimately, addressing the societal stigma and misconceptions surrounding depression is paramount in reducing the burden of the condition and preventing adverse outcomes, including suicide. Therefore, concerted efforts in education, advocacy, and media reform are warranted to foster a supportive environment conducive to mental well-being and holistic recovery.

6 Declarations

6.1 Study Limitations

While conducting interviews for this research, not everyone was comfortable with photographing a picture that represents depression for them. Also, participants were keener on using old photographs that had been clicked by them, but the method stresses on freshly clicked pictures for a better perception of the participants. These methodologies have drawbacks for those who require urgent assistance due to mental health issues like schizophrenia and for those who find it difficult to interact with others. These techniques can be applied because primary research has focused on depressed individuals, who may be more inclined to interact and participate. On the other hand, it is not easy to find participants willing to participate in a research study that targets sensitive topics such as depression. This may be due the stigma that already exists in the society.

6.2 Acknowledgements

6.3 Informed Consent

A consent form was filled by all participants, the format will be provided upon request.

6.4 Publisher's Note

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How to Cite

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