

Stigmatization of Individuals Who Receive Mental Health Treatment and the Role of Social Media: A Cross-Generational Cohort Design and Extension

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Abstract : In the past, individuals who struggled with and sought treatment for mental health difficulties were stigmatized. However, the current generation holds more open attitudes around mental health issues. Indeed, public figures such as Demi Lovato, Naomi Osaka, and Simone Biles have taken to social media to break the silence around mental health, discussing their own struggles and the benefits of treatment. Thus, there is considerable reason to believe that this generation would hold fewer stigmatizing attitudes toward mental health difficulties and treatment compared to previous ones. In this study, we explored possible changes in stigma on mental health diagnosis and treatment seeking behavior between two generations: Gen Z, the current generation, and Gen X, those born between 1965-1980. It was hypothesized that Gen Z would hold less stigmatizing views on mental illness than Gen X. To examine possible changes in stigma attitudes between these two generations, we conducted a cross-generational cohort design by using the same methodology employed 20 years ago from the Ben-Porath (2002) study. Thus, participants were randomly assigned to read one of the following four case vignettes employed in the Ben-Porath (2002) study: (a) "Tom" who has received psychotherapy due to depression (b) "Tom" who has been depressed but received no psychological help, (c) "Tom" who has received medical treatment due to a back pain, or (d) "Tom" who had a back pain but did not receive medical attention. After reading the vignette, participants rated "Tom" on various personality dimensions using the IFQ Questionnaire and answered questions about their frequency of social media use and willingness to seek mental health treatment on a scale from 1-10. Identical to the results 20 years prior, a significant main effect was found for diagnosis with "Tom" being viewed in more negative terms when he was described as having depression vs. a medical condition (back pain) [$F(1, 376) = 126.53, p < .001$]. However, in the study conducted 20 years earlier, a significant interaction was found between diagnosis and help-seeking behavior [$F(1, 376) = 8.28, p < .005$]. Specifically, "Tom" was viewed in the most negative terms when described as depressed and seeking treatment. Alternatively, the current study failed to find a significant interaction between depression and help seeking behavior. These findings suggest that while individuals who hold a mental health diagnosis may still be stigmatized as they were 20 years prior, seeking treatment for mental health issues may be less so. Findings are discussed in the context of social media use and its impact on destigmatization.

Keywords : stigma, mental illness, help-seeking, social media

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