




**RS Global**  
Journals

**Scholarly Publisher**  
**RS Global Sp. z O.O.**  
ISNI: 0000 0004 8495 2390

Dolna 17, Warsaw, Poland 00-773  
Tel: +48 226 0 227 03  
Email: editorial\_office@rsglobal.pl

---

<b>JOURNAL</b>	International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science
<b>p-ISSN</b>	2544-9338
<b>e-ISSN</b>	2544-9435
<b>PUBLISHER</b>	RS Global Sp. z O.O., Poland
<b>ARTICLE TITLE</b>	NEWSPAPERS PORTRAYAL OF MENTAL HEALTH IN CHINA: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF BEIJING TODAY AND SHENZHEN DAILY
<b>AUTHOR(S)</b>	Amila Lokumannage
<b>ARTICLE INFO</b>	Amila Lokumannage. (2023) Newspapers Portrayal of Mental Health in China: Content Analysis of Beijing Today and Shenzhen Daily. <i>International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science</i> . 4(40). doi: 10.31435/rsglobal_ijitss/30122023/8075
<b>DOI</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.31435/rsglobal_ijitss/30122023/8075">https://doi.org/10.31435/rsglobal_ijitss/30122023/8075</a>
<b>RECEIVED</b>	16 October 2023
<b>ACCEPTED</b>	20 November 2023
<b>PUBLISHED</b>	22 November 2023
<b>LICENSE</b>	 This work is licensed under a <b>Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License</b> .

---

© The author(s) 2023. This publication is an open access article.

# NEWSPAPERS PORTRAYAL OF MENTAL HEALTH IN CHINA: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF BEIJING TODAY AND SHENZHEN DAILY

*Amila Lokumannage*

*Department of Mass Media, Sri Palee Campus, University of Colombo*

*ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6283-7007*

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.31435/rsglobal\\_ijitss/30122023/8075](https://doi.org/10.31435/rsglobal_ijitss/30122023/8075)

---

## ARTICLE INFO

**Received** 16 October 2023

**Accepted** 20 November 2023

**Published** 22 November 2023

---

## KEYWORDS

Beijing Today, China, Mental Health, Newspapers, Shenzhen Daily, Mass Media.

## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzed the how Chinese newspapers portrayal of Mental health in China. The coverage of mental health in media is important as media, usually the main source of information, can familiarize the reader with the topic of mental health in terms of prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation. Objectives of this study were, identify the specific disorders were named in articles in selected newspapers? Understand the overall tone of the articles which were analyzed? Study the frequency of the articles related to mental health and mental illness in two selected newspapers in China? The researcher selected two daily newspapers in China, Beijing Today and Shenzhen Daily in the period between 2015 and 2019 as the population of this study. A total of 397 articles was selected over five year period (2015- 2019) and using quantitative and qualitative methods of content analysis, the researcher came up with the findings that suggest that Shenzhen Daily newspaper lack professionalism in their reporting and contribute to already existing stigmatization of mental illness in China. Beijing Today newspaper only somewhat contribute to overall stigmatization of mental illness in China- only low 8% of all articles examined in Beijing Today newspaper showed to have stigmatizing overall tone.

---

**Citation:** Amila Lokumannage. (2023) Newspapers Portrayal of Mental Health in China: Content Analysis of Beijing Today and Shenzhen Daily. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 4(40). doi: 10.31435/rsglobal\_ijitss/30122023/8075

---

**Copyright:** © 2023 **Amila Lokumannage**. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the **Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY)**. The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) or licensor are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

---

## Introduction.

Depending on how this topic is portrayed by the given media outlet, it can influence the readership to create an opinion about people suffering from mental illnesses. This is important aspect of overall mental health situation in a given society, as public opinion about this matter can impact the way individuals suffering from mental illnesses are treated in the society, as well as the way they go about their mental health problems, which can lead to stigmatization and self-stigmatization, respectively.

In many countries in the world there is an increased concern over the matter of mental health. In 1992, at the initiative of the World Federation for Mental Health, October 10<sup>th</sup> was established as the World Mental Health Day, a day for global mental health education, awareness and advocacy. In 1999, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued an introduction to the health for all policy frameworks for the WHO European Region called *Health21*, in which they targeted twenty one health topics and mental health was one of the twenty one which needs special attention in time to come (WHO, 1999).

Mass media can serve public with all of these functions. Still, certain news media are more suited for certain functions. For example, newspapers usually have informative function, television is suited both for informative and entertainment purposes, the function of radio is foremost entertainment, while informative purpose is less in focus. As it can be noted, all authors would agree that one of the

key roles of media is to identify public problems, as well as to influence society's perception of reality. As with many other topics, the public gets much of its knowledge of mental health from news media, predominately from newspapers and television.

A significant attempt to define the idea of mental health was done by George Eman Vaillant, an American psychiatrist and Professor at Harvard Medical School and Director of Research for the Department of Psychiatry, Brigham and Women's Hospital. His classification was published in the *World Psychiatry* journal, and in this classification he defined seven models for conceptualizing positive mental health (Vaillant, 2012):

1. Mental health as above normal.
2. Mental health as the presence of multiple human strengths rather than the absence of weaknesses.
3. Mental health as maturity.
4. Mental health as the dominance of positive emotions.
5. Mental health as high socio-emotional intelligence.
6. Mental health as subjective well-being.
7. Mental health as resilience.

Still, the dominant and widely accept modern theory of mental health was provided by the World Health Organization, which constitution states: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." In their definition of the mental health, the World Health Organization also adds that (WHO, 1999): Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

Another study of the picture of mental illness in the printed media was the international comparative study in three Central European countries done by a large group of authors. In this research they sampled six most widely read newspapers and magazines in each country during five week-long periods in 2007. Nawková et al. 2012, found that more than half of all articles contained negative statements reflecting stigma toward persons with mental illness. In their research substance abuse disorders were the most frequent mental conditions covered in all three countries (22 %), and psychotic disorders were the most stigmatized.

A textual analysis comparing the coverage on mental illness in international newspapers from China, India, Russia and the United States done by Anisha Patel (2010) aimed "to shed light on varying cultural representations of mental disorders in print media, and how different media portray mentally-ill people". Her analysis found that "the coverage overall presents an ambivalent discourse: while many articles advocate awareness of social stigma as a means for reducing the frequency of cases, they nevertheless portray mental illness as a stigmatic disease". Although the term "mental health" may seem easy to define, there is no single definition that will completely and objectively determine what is mentally normal and healthy, and what is not. With this said, it seems that mental health is the subject of individual approach and understanding, not only when it comes to scientific literature, but also with general public.

Selected two newspapers are currently leading regarding sales and circulations in China. They all have online versions <http://szdaily.com.cn> for Shenzhen Daily and <http://beijingtoday.com.cn> for Beijing Today. Both newspapers are published daily except Sundays. These newspapers are popular icons of English press in China. These newspapers are playing an important role in presenting national and international issues following the editorial policies of their own. Objectives of this study were, identify the specific disorders were named in articles in selected newspapers? Understand the overall tone of the articles which were analyzed? Study the frequency of the articles related to mental health and mental illness in two selected newspapers in China? Research questions of this study were what is the overall tone of the articles which were analyzed? What specific disorders were named in articles in selected newspapers? What is the frequency of the articles related to mental health and mental illness in two selected newspapers in China?

### **Materials and Methods.**

This study was used content analysis method. For the purpose of this research the researcher designed a coding protocol sheet that was used for collecting the following data:

1. The frequency of articles that are related to mental health.

2. The frequency of the specific disorders according to the internationally accepted classification of mental illness provided by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Besides the specific disorders, the researcher also included *other* category, in order to include the content which was not directly related to specific disorders, but still relevant for the research.

3. The frequency of the articles in which the overall tone of the article in regards to mental health is either affirmative or stigmatizing. According to the judgment of the researcher, the articles with the affirmative overall tone were the articles that have the objective approach of reporting and that informs/encourages the reader to. On the other hand, stigmatizing overall tone of the articles is the article in which are used derogatory terms and negative stereotypes when writing about mental health.

4. The number of articles that are related to prevention, treatment and/or rehabilitation as three relevant aspects of mental health. In addition to these three categories, the researcher also added the *Informative* category, which includes the articles that either only provide an information related to topic of mental, or have stigmatizing overall tone, and therefore do not fit any of the above mentioned categories.

### **Research approach.**

This research uses both qualitative and quantitative research approach. In this research, qualitative research approach allowed the researcher to categorize articles in regards to the research questions. Quantitative analysis allows us to examine the frequency of the articles in regards to the criteria found in the research questions.

### **Research Sample.**

The population of the study is defined as “aggregation of the elements in a study” (Babbie 2007, p. 190). The researcher selected two daily newspapers in China, Beijing Today and Shenzhen Daily in the period between 2015 and 2019 as the population of this study. Both Newspapers have good circulation data both papers have e-paper versions.

### **Sampling technique.**

Sampling technique used for this research is non-probability quota sampling technique. This sampling technique is defined as sampling technique in which “units are selected into a sample on the basis of pre specified characteristics” (Babbie 2007, p. 185). The pre specified characteristic in this research was the theme of mental health in Beijing Today and Shenzhen Daily newspapers. By using this sampling technique, the researcher selected the articles that are related to mental health in the chosen period. Through this sampling technique, it was obtained the research sample of 397 numbers of articles thematically related to mental health.

### **Time period selected for the study.**

There are several reasons this period was selected for the research. The first reason is that we wanted to examine the portrayal of mental health in the recent history. The second reason is that the data we have available regarding the public health gives us a good overview of the mental health of the nation in the time period we selected. In addition to this, articles were coded based on the placement in the newspaper (front page, news page, other), and based on the source of the story (local reporter vs. news agency). The news stories were also coded based on the language used in the text. The news stories that used positive or neutral language to describe a person with mental illness, the researcher placed as stories with affirmative overall tone. The news stories with prevalence of negative language, such as labels (identifying a person by his/her diagnostic label) or popular derogatory language (using a popular derogatory words to describe a person with a mental illness) used to describe a person with mental illness, the researcher placed as stories with stigmatizing overall tone.

### **Results and Discussion.**

An overall number of 397 articles were selected for this research in the five year period, from 2015 to 2019.

Table I: Articles per Newspaper.

Number of articles	2015-2019	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
<b>Total</b>	<b>397</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>74</b>
Beijing Today	220	34	48	56	44	38
Shenzhen Daily	177	30	37	41	33	36

Source: Researcher’s coding results, 2020.

The stories were also coded for its placement in the newspaper (front page, news page, other), and whether the story was written by a local report or a news agency. In Beijing Today newspaper, the majority of the news stories related to mental health appeared in the news page section (around 86%), which it was not the case with Shenzhen Daily newspaper: the majority of news stories related to mental health appeared in the Other section, almost 60%. The news stories related to mental health written by a news agency were only 21% of all news stories in Beijing Today, whereas that percentage reached 45% in case of Shenzhen Daily newspaper.

**Q1. What is the overall tone of the articles which were analyzed?**

The news stories that used positive or neutral language to describe a person with mental illness, the researcher placed as stories with affirmative overall tone. The news stories with prevalence of negative language, such as labels or popular derogatory language used to describe a person with mental illness, the researcher placed as stories with stigmatizing overall tone.

Table II: Overall tone of Beijing Today newspaper.

<b>Beijing Today</b>						
<b>Overall tone</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2015-2019</b>
<b>Affirmative</b>	31	43	51	41	37	203
<b>Stigmatizing</b>	3	5	5	3	1	17

Source: Researcher’s coding results, 2020.

Table II shows the number of news stories related to mental health that have affirmative overall tone and stigmatizing overall tone for Beijing Today newspaper. This percentage is notably low for Beijing Today newspaper. Only 8 % of the news stories between 2015 and 2019 can be classified as having stigmatizing overall tone. The majority of articles that were classified as having stigmatizing overall tone were related to substance-related and addictive disorders topic, as well as the topic of suicide.

Table III: Overall tone of Shenzhen Daily newspaper.

<b>Shenzhen Daily</b>						
	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2015-2019</b>
<b>Affirmative</b>	15	17	28	15	20	95
<b>Stigmatizing</b>	15	20	13	18	16	82

Source: Researcher’s coding results, 2020.

Table III reports the numbers for affirmative and stigmatizing overall tone of Shenzhen Daily newspaper news stories related to mental health. As it can be noted, numbers show a high percentage of 46 % of news stories between 2015 and 2019 that have stigmatizing overall tone.

All the articles that were classified as having stigmatizing overall tone were related to substance-related and addictive disorders topic, the topic of suicide, as well as the topic of schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorders. Besides this, there is also a significant number of articles in both Beijing Today and Shenzhen Daily that contain at least one mention of labels and popular derogatory terms (but have affirmative overall tone), and thus could contribute to stigmatization. The percentage of articles that contain at least one mention of labels and popular derogatory terms for Beijing Today newspaper is somewhat higher compared to the one for overall stigmatizing tone, and it adds to 11 % (compared to 8 %). The situation for Shenzhen Daily in regards to the percentage of articles that contain at least one mention of labels and popular derogatory terms is significantly higher to the one for overall stigmatizing tone. This number for Shenzhen Daily newspaper is 83 %, compared to 46 % for overall stigmatizing tone.

## **Q2. What specific disorders were named in articles in selected newspapers?**

The following disorders were found in the articles and were coded for the purpose of this research. The examples of disorder subtypes found in the articles were listed in the brackets.

1. Depressive disorders (including seasonal depression, clinical depression, postpartum depression, melancholic depression).
2. Trauma-related disorders (including posttraumatic stress disorder).
3. Anxiety disorders (including social anxiety disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, different phobias, panic disorder) .
4. Sexual dysfunctions (including hypersexual disorder).
5. Addictive disorders (including gambling disorder, tobacco use disorder, substance abuse and substance dependence disorder) .
6. Gender identity disorders.
7. Psychotic disorders (including schizophrenia, psychosis).
8. Sleep-wake disorders (including insomnia, nightmares).
9. Feeding and eating disorders (including anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating).
10. Body dysmorphia disorders (including tanorexia).
11. Somatic symptom disorders (including somatic symptom disorder).

Besides these specific disorders, the researcher added the other category, which includes mental disorder category and suicide category. Mental disorder category includes all the articles that were not talking about a specific mental disorders, but mental disorders in general. The category of suicide was added as it is considered to be the consequence of certain mental illness.

The following disorder categories were not found during the article research of two daily newspapers, Beijing Today and Shenzhen Daily: bipolar and related disorders, obsessive-compulsive and related disorders, gender dysphoria, disruptive, impulse-control, and conduct disorders, personality disorders, paraphilic disorders. As already mentioned, in this research neurodevelopmental disorders and neurocognitive disorders were not taken into account as they do not portray the way mass media in China (in the case of this research, Beijing Today and Shenzhen Daily newspapers) portray the mental health, as well as because, in the opinion of the researcher, they do not have the same social stigma attached to them as it is the case with other mental disorders.

The breakdown of disorders over the years shows that each year in Beijing Today newspaper pre dominant category was addictive disorders category, with 33 % in 2015, 35 % in 2016, 32 % in 2017, 37 % in 2018, and high 48 % in 2019. In Shenzhen Daily newspaper that number varies with the year. Shenzhen Daily newspaper in 2015 had the equal number of articles for both depressive disorders and addictive disorders (26 % each); in 2016 the most predominant category was suicide, with 24 %; in 2017 it was depressive disorders with 24 %; in 2018 addictive disorders category with 35 %, and in 2019 was also addictive disorders category with 29 percent.



Table IV: Overall breakdown of disorders coded in the selected year.

	<b>Beijing Today</b>	<b>Shenzhen Daily</b>
<b>Specific Disorder</b>		
Depressive Disorders	34	35
Trauma-related Disorders	4	4
Anxiety Disorders	11	10
Sexual Dysfunctions	1	6
Addictive Disorders	64	43
Gender Identity Disorders	4	0
Psychotic Disorders	2	4
Sleep-wake Disorders	5	9
Feeding and Eating disorders	6	4
Body Dysmorphia Disorders	2	3
Somatic Symptom Disorders	1	2
<b>Other</b>		
Suicide	11	16
Mental Disorders (unspecified)	31	20

Source: Researcher’s coding results, 2020.

Table IV shows the overall breakdown for the five year period. Most commonly mentioned disorders were addictive disorders, for both Beijing Today and Shenzhen Daily newspaper. Percentage wise, this number stands at 36 % for Beijing Today newspaper and at 28 % for Shenzhen Daily newspaper. The second most commonly mentioned disorders were depressive disorders (19 % and 22 %, for Beijing Today and Shenzhen Daily, respectively). The general category of mental disorders is the third most commonly mentioned category for both newspapers: 17 % in Beijing Today newspaper, and 13 % for Shenzhen Daily newspaper.

**Q3. What is the frequency of the articles related to mental health and mental illness in two selected newspapers in China?**

The presence of topic of mental health versus the topic of mental illness is also significant for the way media portray the topic of mental health and mental illness in China. The following table represents the ratio between stories about mental health and stories about mental illness in Beijing Today newspaper. During the five year period, Beijing Today published two times more stories about mental illness than the ones about mental health. Percentage wise, this number equals to 67% in favor of stories about mental illness.

Table V: Number of articles that represent about mental health.

<b>Beijing Today</b>						
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2015-2019
<b>Mental Health</b>	14	14	15	15	13	71
<b>Mental Illness</b>	20	34	41	29	25	149

Source: Researcher’s coding results, 2020.

Table VI: Number of articles that represent about mental health.

<b>Shenzhen Daily</b>						
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2015-2019
<b>Mental Health</b>	12	20	17	11	15	75
<b>Mental Illness</b>	18	17	24	22	21	102

Source: Researcher’s coding results, 2020.

Table VI gives an insight in the way Shenzhen Daily newspaper portray the topic of mental health and mental illness. The ratio between stories about mental health and stories about mental illness in Shenzhen Daily newspaper is lower than the one in Beijing Today- 58 % of all stories during period between 2015 and 2019 had mental illness as the topic of the story, and 42 % had mental health.

#### **4. Conclusions.**

After analyzed an overall number of 397 articles in the five year period, from 2015 to 2019, by both quantitative and qualitative means, the researcher found that Beijing Today only somewhat contribute to overall stigmatization of mental illness in China- only low 8% of all articles examined in Beijing Today newspaper showed to have stigmatizing overall tone. Both Beijing Today and Shenzhen Daily newspaper had the prevalence of mental illness stories over mental health stories: 67 % and 58 %, respectively. These percentages give an insight in what the most influential newspaper and the newspaper with the highest circulation favor as their topic of the stories- focusing on the topic of mental illness, rather than mental health. On the other hand, an interesting fact is that the prevalent topic of all stories focuses on prevention of mental illness: for each year in Beijing Today newspaper, prevention was the most dominant topic (with overall 47% of all stories). Shenzhen Daily newspaper did not have prevention as the most dominant topic every year, but as the most prevalent topic overall- 36% percent of all stories, with Information category as the second most frequent topic for all five years.

Other results also give an insight in the way the topic of mental health is presented in media in China. Only 6 articles out of 220 related to the topic of mental health appeared on the front page of Beijing Today newspaper (2.7%), and 2 out 177 articles on front page of Shenzhen Daily newspaper (1.1%). In regards to the mental disorders presented in these two daily newspaper outlets, it seems that the most media's attention had addictive disorders (36% and 28% of all stories, for Beijing Today and Shenzhen Daily, respectively), followed by depressive disorders (19% and 22% of all stories, for Beijing Today and Shenzhen Daily, respectively), and the news stories with unspecified mental disorder (17% and 13% of all stories, for Beijing Today and Shenzhen Daily, respectively).

All the above mentioned results lead to several conclusion and suggestions for further research. Collectively, these findings suggest a need to pay more attention the way media presents the issue of mental health in China. An alarming fact is that the daily newspaper with the highest circulation in the country adds to the existing stigmatization of people with mental illness. Besides this, the findings showed that both newspaper outlets underrepresent most of the mental disorders. In Beijing Today newspaper, addictive disorders and depressive disorders make up 55% of 220 news stories, and only 16% make up the rest of the mental disorder list. In addition to this, there was no mention of the following disorder categories: bipolar related disorder, obsessive-compulsive and related disorders, dissociative disorders, disruptive, impulse-control and conduct disorders, personality disorders and paraphilic disorders.

During five year period, in Shenzhen Daily newspaper addictive disorders and depressive disorders make up 50% of 177 news stories, and 24 % make up the remaining mental disorders, which is 8% higher than in Beijing Today newspaper. However, in addition to bipolar related disorder, obsessive-compulsive and related disorders, dissociative disorders, disruptive, impulse-control and conduct disorders, personality disorders and paraphilic disorders, Shenzhen Daily newspaper neither had the mention of gender identity disorder, which was covered in Beijing Today newspaper.

#### **Declaration of Interest Statement.**

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

#### **REFERENCES**

1. Anisha, P. (2010). The Ideology of Madness in the Media: A Textual Analysis of International Newspaper Coverage of Mental Illness. Retrieved from [http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/cas\\_sites/communication/pdf/thesis10.patel.pdf](http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/cas_sites/communication/pdf/thesis10.patel.pdf).
2. Babie, E. (2007). *The Practice of Social Research Methods. (11th ed.)*. Beijing: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
3. Nawková, L. Nawka, A. Adámková, T. Rukavina, TV. Holcnerová, P. Kuzman, MR. Jovanović, N. Brborović, O. Bednárová, B. Zuchová, S. Mioviský, M. Raboch, J. (2012). The Picture of Mental



Health/Illness in the Printed Media in Three Central European Countries. *Journal of Health Communication*, 17(1):22-40.

4. Veljanovski, R. (2012). *Media System of Serbia*. Belgrade: Cigoja Publishing Company.
5. World Health Organization. (1999). *Health21: an introduction to the health for all policy framework for the WHO European Region*. Regional Office for Europe.  
Retrieved from [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/88590/EHFA5-E.pdf](http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/88590/EHFA5-E.pdf)