

Comparison of Progressive and Conservative Representations of Men's Mental Health in Written News Media

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SUMMARY

During most recent years, mental health has come to the forefront in the media. However, men's mental health is still often stigmatized. This is concerning as men are less likely to receive treatment for mental health conditions.¹ Throughout this paper, we will be investigating the representation of men's mental health in progressive versus conservative news media, as society is often reliant on media.

Based on our criteria, progressive news media scored higher than conservative news media on their support of men's mental health. However, both political landscapes had few articles covering the topic between the years 2010 and 2020. Less than half the total number of articles provided external resources for men struggling with their mental health.

Although our findings suggest a better representation of men's mental health in progressive news media, there is still a limited overall representation. Men's mental health should be further discussed in written news media and the appropriate resources should be provided within each article. It is crucial that further research be conducted with larger sample sizes to determine whether these differences are widespread, and what the consequences of these differences are.

ABSTRACT

Men's mental health has long been stigmatized in Western society. The media plays a substantial role in emphasizing the importance of mental health; however, a gender disparity exists as men are often less highlighted than women in regard to this subject. This study investigated whether a difference in men's mental health portrayal exists between progressive and conservative news media in the United Kingdom. Using Factiva, eight news articles were analysed; these included: The Guardian, The Daily Mirror, The Daily Telegraph, and The Times, yielding a sample size of 32. Five criteria were established to score the articles on a Yes (1) or No (0) scale. An ANOVA and a t-test were used to determine the statistical significance of the results. The analyses showed significantly higher scores for progressive news media than conservative news media, whereby The Guardian had the highest percentage of articles that included criteria 1 through 4. The findings revealed a significant difference between how men's mental health is portrayed in progressive versus conservative news media. Specifically, there was a better representation of men's mental health in progressive news outlets. Since a limited number of papers were analysed, further research should be conducted to better understand the portrayal of men's mental health in the media.

Keywords: Male, mental health, progressive media, conservative media, written news media, stigma

INTRODUCTION

According to the National Institute of Mental Health,¹ the prevalence of mental illnesses is lower among men compared to women. However, men are also less likely to receive treatment for their mental health conditions. This poses an interesting question as to whether men actually experience fewer incidences of mental illness, or if they are more likely to dismiss and conceal their mental health conditions due to internalized stigmas.

Gendered ascriptions of stoicism to men and emotional vulnerability to women have long been the convention in Western society. However, enforcing certain attitudes and behaviours as primarily male or female can have damaging mental health effects on people of all gender identities. An example of this, which is specific to American men is demonstrated by their suicide rate, which was 3.73 times higher than that of American women in 2019.² Coleman et al.³ suggest that this disparity may be linked to high traditional masculinity (HTM), which is a set of attitudes and behaviours normally associated with men. These include emotional

restriction, physical fitness, and aggression. The researchers found that HTM men were 2.4 times more likely to commit suicide, but 1.45 times less likely to report suicidal ideation compared to non-HTM men.³ Societal representations of masculinity can therefore affect mental health outcomes for men, as many men internalize these stereotypes and strive to act in accordance with them. It is important to analyse how the news media portrays men's mental health issues. The media has, the potential to shape the public's perception of these topics in a way that can either empower men to openly discuss their struggles and seek therapy or, alternatively, to suffer in silence.

Research on news coverage of mental health disorders (MHDs) in men is limited.⁴ Currently, our proposed study on how politically progressive versus conservative news outlets portray men's mental health issues is a novel avenue of research. Previous studies have focused on the general news coverage of MHDs in men and found that, as a whole, these types of articles tend to convey a negative tone and link MHDs with violence.⁵⁻⁷ With political polarization being a deep-seated issue in the United Kingdom,⁸ it would be interesting to decipher whether progressive or conservative news outlets in this region are perpetuating this stigmatization of men's mental health issues. Current literature has illustrated that individuals who hold conservative political beliefs are more likely to stigmatize mentally-ill individuals.^{9,10} The present study expands upon this body of research by uniquely examining the role of political biases within news media and how that has influenced their portrayal of mental health issues, specifically in men. The purpose of the study was to elucidate whether certain types of news outlets promote harmful portrayals of MHDs in men, thus highlighting an area of news coverage in need of reform.

We specifically examined how supportive progressive news media outlets in the United Kingdom were compared to conservative news media outlets when reporting on the topic of men's mental health within a 10-year time period between the years 2010 to 2020. The four outlets we chose to focus on were: The Guardian (TG), The Daily Mirror (TDM), The Daily Telegraph (TDT), and The Times (TT). The first two are progressive and the latter two are conservative. Since previous research indicates that people with conservative political beliefs carry more negative views about men's mental health issues, we hypothesized that conservative news media outlets would be more likely to cast the topic of men's mental health in a negative light compared to progressive news media outlets.

METHODS

Data Collection

Factiva was used to search for news articles for our research study. Factiva is a database, which allows one to search for current and archived publications from news media outlets. Eight news articles about men's mental health, which were published between the years 2010 and 2020, were selected from each of the following popular U.K. news outlets: The Guardian (TG), The Daily Mirror (TDM), The Daily Telegraph (TDT), and The Times (TT).

Search Criteria

To search for articles in Factiva, we inputted "men's mental health" into the search bar entitled "this exact phrase," followed by "man, men, male, males" into the search bar entitled "at least one of these words", so that our search results would also encompass these synonyms. We searched for articles published by the four news outlets mentioned earlier; we then further refined our search by only including articles that were written in English within the timeframe of January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2020. We excluded duplicate articles as well as blog posts and focused solely on news articles for this study. The total sample size was 32 articles, with eight articles from each news outlet.

Scoring System

First, we briefly read through all of the retrieved news articles to determine if the theme of the articles was about mental health in general or specifically men's mental health. All articles that discussed mental health in a general setting, were deemed inappropriate for the analysis and were excluded. The remaining articles were further analyzed, and scores were given to the articles based on the criteria mentioned below.

Approach

Two individuals assessed each article. The content of each article was analyzed in light of five criteria. For each article, we went through each criterion and stated "yes" if the article met the criterion and "no" if the article did not. For each "yes" given, one point was awarded, and for each "no" given, a score of zero was awarded. A total score out of five was given to each article. After analyzing the articles from each news outlet, we totalled the scores of all the articles from the progressive and conservative outlets separately. We then subsequently divided them by their respective number of articles in order to obtain an average article score for each side. The side with the higher score was determined to have greater support for men's mental health.

The criteria used to analyse the articles and constitute a “yes” designation (i.e. 1 point) were as follows:

1. Claims made about male mental health are supported with quotes from mental health experts or institutions
2. Personal experiences from men with mental health conditions are included
3. Themes of recovery, rehabilitation, and systemic issues regarding the shortage of institutional resources and poor quality of mental health care are conveyed
 - Possible key phrases to look for include: “in need of support,” “not alone,” “destigmatize,” “empathize,” “lack of services,” “more funding required”
4. Themes of violence, criminality, and personal failings are **NOT** conveyed
 - Possible key phrases to look for include: “crazy,” “shocking behaviour”, “needs to be locked up”, “danger to society”, “acting selfishly”, and “personal responsibility”
 - Note: Since these phrases are indicators of violence, criminality, and personal failings, we ensured their absence in order to determine that a given article did not convey the aforementioned themes, and was therefore supportive of men’s mental health
5. Links to mental health resources are included

Statistical Analyses

Using the Prism GraphPad software, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to determine statistically significant differences between the average article scores, as well as the percentage of news articles containing each criterion across all four news outlets. A t-test was then conducted using the same software, in order to determine statistically significant differences between the average article score of the progressive news outlets compared to the conservative ones.

RESULTS

Comparing average article scores for each news outlet provides an understanding of men’s mental health portrayal in progressive versus conservative news media. ANOVA was utilized to explore between-group differences for each news outlet, while an unpaired t-test was used to determine the differences between progressive and conservative news outlets.

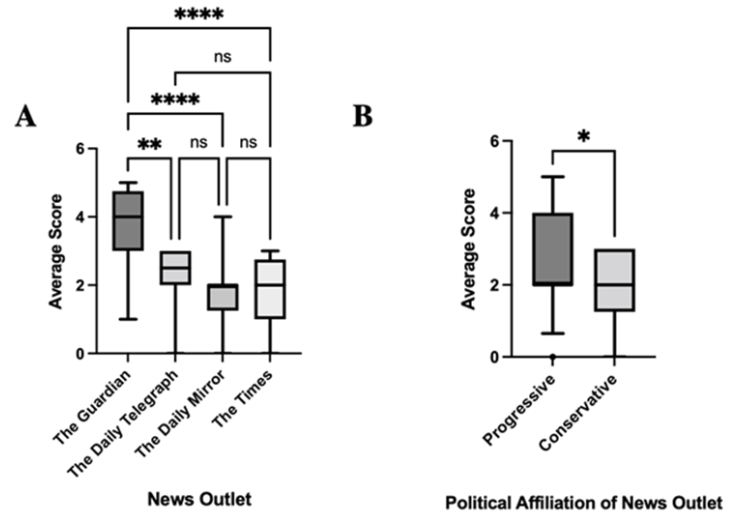


Figure 1. Average article scores for news media based on five criteria. (A) Box plot representing average scores for individual news outlets (n = 8). **(B)** Box plot representing average scores based on political affiliation of news outlets (n = 16). The scores for TG and TDM are grouped as progressive, whereas the scores for TDT and TT are grouped as conservative. In both graphs, scores are out of five and averaged among two raters. Error bars represent standard deviation. Statistical significance is denoted by asterisks, and no significance is denoted by “ns”.

The mean average scores were 3.625, 2.250, 1.875, and 1.813 for TG, TDT, TDM, and TT, respectively. TG was statistically significant compared to the other three outlets (TG vs TDT: $p = 0.0023$, TG vs TDM: $p < 0.0001$, TG vs TT: $p < 0.0001$). All other between-group comparisons were not significant (TDT vs TDM: $p = 0.7387$, TDT vs TT: $p = 0.6358$, TDM vs TT: $p = 0.9982$). TG had the highest mean score, while TT had the lowest. Based on Figure 1B, there was statistical significance between progressive and conservative news media ($p = 0.0207$). The progressive news media mean score (2.750) was significantly higher than conservative news media (2.031).

Comparing the percentage of articles with each criterion across the four outlets provides an understanding of what each news outlet prioritizes when reporting men’s mental health. ANOVA aided in exploring the differences between groups for each outlet based on individual criterion.

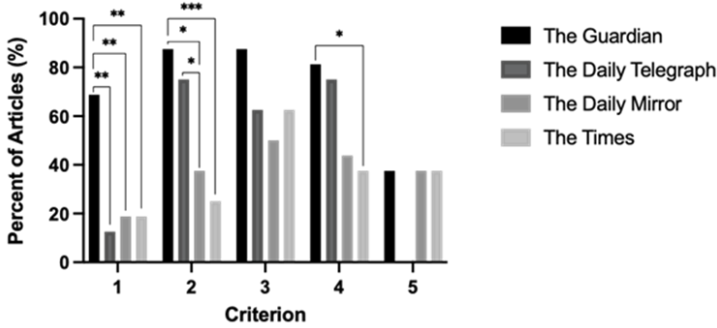


Figure 2. Percent of news articles that portray criterion 1 to 5 (n = 8). Statistical significance is denoted using asterisks.

Based on Figure 2, TG had the highest percentage of articles that included criterion 1 through 4. For criterion 1, only TG was statistically significant compared to the other three outlets (TG vs TDT: $p = 0.0014$; TG vs TDM: $p = 0.0055$; TG vs TT: $p = 0.0055$). For criterion 2, TG was statistically significant compared to TDM ($p = 0.0105$) and TT ($p = 0.0009$), and TDT was statistically significant compared to TT ($p = 0.0105$). For criterion 4, TG was statistically significant compared to TT ($p = 0.0496$). All other between-group comparisons were not significant.

Comparing the percentage of articles with each criterion across the two political groups provides an understanding of what progressive versus conservative news media prioritize when reporting on men’s mental health. ANOVA was utilized to explore between-group differences for the two types of outlets based on individual criterion.

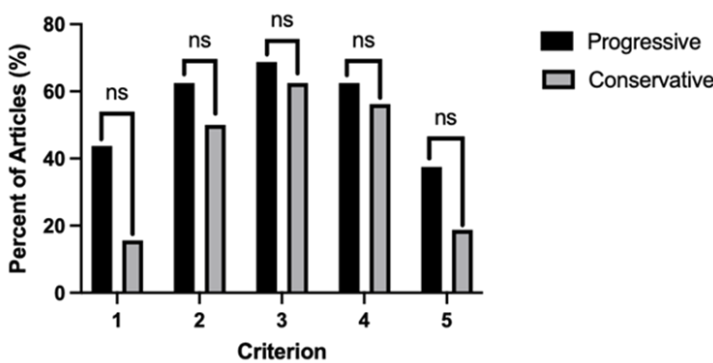


Figure 3. Percent of news articles that portray criterion 1 to 5 based on political affiliation of news outlet (n = 16). Statistical significance is denoted using asterisks.

According to Figure 3, a larger percentage of progressive outlets scored higher on all criteria. No statistical significance exists ($p = 0.2094$) between progressive and conservative news media for each criterion.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of Results

Our hypothesis that conservative news media outlets are more likely to negatively portray men’s mental health compared to progressive news media outlets was supported by the significant score differences in the t-test between these two types of outlets (Figure 1B). Another notable finding was that The Guardian scored significantly higher than the other outlets- even compared to The Daily Mirror, which is also progressive. As shown in Figure 2, articles from The Guardian were significantly more likely to satisfy the first two criteria, meaning they contained information supported by mental health experts and incorporated more personal experiences from men who have mental health issues. This could be due to the fact that The Guardian is only owned by The Scott Trust, a trust established solely for ensuring the quality and the journalistic freedom of The Guardian.¹¹ Therefore, The Guardian can publish articles that focus on quality of content rather than the views of shareholders or organizations.

Moreover, The Guardian scored higher than the other outlets for criteria 3 (Figure 2), meaning that its articles were more likely to discuss the shortage of institutional resources offered to men and the poor quality of men’s mental health care. Although the differences in the scores were not significant, these findings align with previous studies which reveal that conservative parties have a greater negative outlook on mental health.¹² Current literature also reveals that people with conservative beliefs are more likely to stigmatize mentally-ill individuals.^{9,10} This aligns with our findings from Figure 1B, as progressive news media outlets scored significantly higher than conservative news media outlets resulting in a more supportive portrayal of the mental health issues discussed within their articles.

Furthermore, previous research has found that conservative news outlets tend to portray mentally ill individuals as a danger.¹³ In our study, Figure 2 shows that there was a significant difference between The Guardian’s (progressive) score for criteria 4 compared to that of The Times (conservative), indicating that The Times’ articles were more likely to include themes of violence, criminality, and personal failings when discussing men’s mental health. However, there was no significant difference when comparing this criterion among progressive versus conservative outlets as a whole (Figure 3).

Interestingly, future plans of the Labour (progressive) and Conservative parties in England have indicated that although the Labour Party claims to support mental health on their platforms, they have not followed

through with their intentions. During the 2010 election in England, the Labour Party's platform mentioned the need to increase mental illness support. However, the Conservative Party only followed through with their plans by investing money in mental health support and reforming the Mental Health Act.¹⁴ This suggests that although progressive political beliefs may lead to supportive discussion around mental health topics, it may not translate to taking action to help the cause. A similar finding was noted in our study when looking at the scores for criteria 5 in Figures 2 and 3. The four news outlets scored similarly with low scores across the board, indicating that few articles provided links to mental health resources.

Limitations and Next Steps

Within this paper, there are some limitations that should be addressed. There were only eight articles used for each of the four news outlets for a total sample size of 32 articles. This is a relatively small sample size, resulting in a low statistical power. Additionally, the ANOVA test assumes that the data collected is normally distributed. However, since our variables are discrete, they cannot be normally distributed. Thus, the p-value may not be exact. In future research, more news articles should be used from various different news outlets. This will provide a larger sample size to allow for stronger statistical power and the ability to generalize results. Furthermore, by looking at more news outlets, trends can be better understood.

Another limitation is human bias regarding the collection of data. Although each article was reviewed by two individuals in order to reduce bias, this bias is still present. Moreover, although the articles were scored by two individuals, it was a different pair of individuals for each article. To eliminate this bias, future research can utilize programming software to sift through and score written news articles. This will also allow more articles to be covered and therefore provide a larger sample size.

The final limitation involves the type of media that was used. In this paper, only written news articles were used to represent the coverage of men's mental health in the media, but there are other forms of media that cover men's mental health and including them would allow for the findings of this research to be more generalizable. As a next step, research should look at different media outlets, such as Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and other social platforms. Looking at other platforms will allow for a more rounded understanding of how men's mental health is portrayed and communicated in media.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our findings suggest that there is a statistically significant difference between the way men's mental health is portrayed in progressive versus conservative written news media, with progressive outlets being more supportive in their reporting overall (Figure 1B). Progressive news outlets also scored higher than conservative news outlets when compared using individual scoring criteria; however, these differences were not significant. Although our findings suggest that there is a better representation of men's mental health in progressive news outlets, further research with larger samples of news articles and more types of media would be needed to determine whether this difference in reporting is widespread and what its consequences are.

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