ADHD in Mass Media:

How the General Public Views Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

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Introduction

In Stuber, Rocha, and Christian's research, they found that the general public has a predominantly negative attitude toward people with mental disorders. While Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder is considered a mental disorder, it largely became part of a cultural phenomenon in the media as more people became diagnosed with the disorder. Although many journalists and scholars have analyzed mental disorders in media, and how specific disorders are represented, few have studied how the media's perception alters or influences the general public. This study assesses how the general public views ADHD as influenced by mass media. The current hypothesis is, that media's negative portrayal of ADHD causes the public to believe that the disorder is illegitimate.

Literature Review

The Mentally Ill as a Danger

First discovered in the scientific community in 1902, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) was not known to the public until the late 1960s and early 1970s (Garza, 2001, 83). ADHD has now become the most commonly diagnosed behavioral disorder in children, present in 12 percent of males and 5 percent of females from ages 8-15; although the disorder is prevalent in early childhood, more severe symptoms may continue into young adulthood for approximately 86 percent of those diagnosed as children (Eme, 2009, 651). Robert Eme describes ADHD as the following:

> Each of us has trouble occasionally sitting still, paying attention, or controlling impulsive behavior. For some people, however, those problems prove so pervasive, chronic, and

> extreme that they interfere with normal daily activities, such as learning in school, holding a job, and following the rules of society. When symptoms are this extreme, psychology and psychiatry define this condition as a *mental disorder* (Eme, 2009, 650).

Approximately one in five Americans suffers from some form of mental health issue (Keller, 2017, 275). Although ADHD can be excused as mental health disorder, the court system and general public view it in a different manner. According to Bertha Nelda Garza, criminal defendants have begun to use ADHD as a defense using three different approaches:

1) A mitigating factor asserting mental non-responsibility
2) Diminished capacity
3) The Fifth Amendment

However, the criminal justice system does not approve of an ADHD defense, and has routinely dismissed the defense without evaluating expert testimony (Garza, 2001, 84). While the justice system repeatedly turns away ADHD as a defense, the news media portrays all mental health issues in a primarily negative manner, specifically representing those with mental disorders in rampage violent scenarios (Keller, 2017, 274). In most recent rampage violent attacks, mass shooting has been the most prevalent, along with the unfavorable delineations of mental illness. Media outlets tend to dramatize mental illness to capture audience attention, and then question public safety, which causes mass concern. Misleading coverage runs the risk of damaging not only the public's perspective of mental illness, but also of those living

with mental conditions' self-images (Keller, 2017, 273). When the media raises public safety concern, the public then tries to rationalize and therefore sorts the offenders into groups to avoid and disassociate themselves from. Keller explains how the media's use of scare tactics can, and has, negatively affected the general public's awareness and care for those with mental health disorders:

> Through the themes of sensationalism, fear, and mental illness, the media may not only be supporting stigma concerning the mentally ill, but also be missing out on an opportunity to mitigate such stigma. This has implications on the community's perception of mental health, the self-image of those suffering from mental illness, as well as on the propensity of the untreated to seek help. (Keller, 2017,275)

ADHD as an Excuse

In general, surveys in the United States have found that the public has an overarching negative attitude toward people with mental disorders, therefore negative public attitudes may also influence decisions about funding for mental health services (Stuber, 2014, 490). As the general public has a negative outlook on mental health, more stereotypes arise, causing mental health to be viewed as illegitimate. While there are negative stereotypes, there is also a concern about misdiagnosis, especially with ADHD. In a 2012 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study, more than five million children ages three to seventeen were diagnosed with ADHD in the United States. Rachel Ainsworth explains the negative effects of the increased dependence on ADHD diagnosis and medication:

> The recent influx of ADHD diagnoses in the United States has created dangerous dependencies on ADHD medication and has manifested a culture where many parents and teachers are more inclined to seek an ADHD diagnosis and administer ADHD medication than to eliminate unwanted behaviors through exercise and behavioral treatments (Ainsworth, 2015, 453)

The children who are diagnosed with ADHD are then trained to rely on stimulant medication and disability accommodations that possibly restrain them from learning self-control or how to cope with things on their own. As these children who are misdiagnosed, or are reliant on medications and accommodations, move on to higher education, they then apply for the same accommodations that they received in their K-12 years. A Ruhr-Universitaet-Bochum 2012 study concluded that ADHD is over-diagnosed due to heuristic-based diagnoses and that "in order to avoid a misdiagnosis of ADHD and premature treatment, it is crucial for therapists not to rely on their intuition [and] instead to strictly adhere to defined, established diagnostic criteria." (Wylkop, 2012) While many students are legitimately diagnosed with ADHD, others were not given the correct treatment and therefore the increase of disability accommodations in university settings has skyrocketed. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the number of students with learning disabilities (including ADHD) who applied for disability accommodations grew by 766% from 1990 to 2010 (Ainsworth, 2015, 456). As ADHD is being viewed as more of an excuse, it has harrowing effects on those who are legitimately diagnosed. Kristen Aggeler explains what happened to a high school-aged student, diagnosed with ADHD, and was kicked out of school due to his “lack of effort”:

> Nicholas Axelrod Panagopoulous is a student diagnosed with ADHD. He attended the prestigious Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, until the school faculty voted to require him to withdraw during the fall term of his senior year. He struggled, and ultimately failed, to convince a federal judge that his difficulties in school stemmed from his ADHD rather than from a "willful lack of effort." In *Axelrod*, the judge seemed to view the ADHD diagnosis as nothing more than a "handy excuse" for Nicholas. He stated: "The fact that Nicholas has ADHD is not a general excuse for Nicholas' failure to meet academic standards." This comment evidences the individual judge's bias against ADHD, especially since the court had accepted testimony that ADHD affected the student's abilities to organize, memorize, and pay attention (difficulties which were some of the primary reasons he had difficulty turning his school work in on time). (Aggeler, 2000, 459)

In Jennifer Stuber's (2014) survey from a sample of mental health professionals, and general population sample, providers held more positive attitudes and demonstrated less desire for social distance compared with the general population sample. The overwhelming lack of knowledge about mental health in the general public causes an un-comfortability and fear for safety, while mental health professionals have a greater knowledge and understanding of those struggling with mental health disorders.

The Non-Medical Use of Stimulants

As the general public is already mainly skeptical about ADHD, it is not given a better image when people misuse the stimulants used to treat the disorder. Joseph Chien lists four

ways medical professionals can make sure that stimulants are being used properly and effectively:

A physician must:

1) Identify the illness correctly

2) Perform adequate medical screening

3) Prescribe the right medication

4) Ensure the patient uses the medication.

Alternatively, the "non-medical" use of stimulants might be read as an act of taking ownership and control over what one assimilates into the body (Chien, 2013, 197). While it is important for physicians to prescribe the correct stimulant and be assured that it is working correctly, many people take advantage of the beneficially effects of Adderall and/or Ritalin. Specifically in the legal community, substance abuse is well-known, especially stimulants. Many attorneys will consume alcohol and use drugs to help cope with long hours and immense pressure. A 2016 study of American lawyers found that about 61 percent of participants reported anxiety, about 46 percent reported depression, and 11.5 percent reported suicidal thoughts sometime during their legal career (Toabe, 2017, 1038). The reason people use Adderall for non-medical reasons, particularly students in higher education, is because it increases their already above-average brainpower with heightened concentration and speed, improving the rate at which they can complete tasks. (Toabe, 2017, 1039)

ADHD in Mass Media

As most of what the general public knows about mental health is presented to them through mass media, it is important to look at how ADHD has been represented in past years. If print and digital media negatively frame ADHD along with other mental illnesses, it would be likely for the public to have a negative mindset about the disorders. In a study done by Lindsay Ray and Amanda Hinnant, coding magazine coverage on ADHD from 1985 to 2008, they found that there was not a massive shift in tone over time; rather, articles remained informative along with human-interest stories gaining a more sympathetic tone. Ray and Hinnant explain how coverage like this "normalizes" the disorder:

> Both the informative style and the sympathetic style work toward normalizing the disorders by creating a better-informed audience as well as an empathetic one. Furthermore, by using the human-interest stories to primarily evoke empathy, the magazines helped to normalize the disorder by making it seem as though it could happen to anyone, rather than creating a separate "other" entity. (Ray, Hinnant, 2009, 13)

Walking hand-in-hand with positive portrayals of ADHD, are negative and detrimental portrayals. In Juanne N. Clarke's, (2011) study of magazine portrayal of ADHD, she found that while some articles claimed that the illness was not real, others described the symptoms as problematic but overestimated, and diagnosis was given too liberally (267).

Taking a look back into the 80's and 90's as Ray and Hinnant did, Mark F. Schmitz studied the social representations of ADHD from 1988-1997. Similar to Ray and Hinnant's findings, Schmitz found there to be a tone of understanding the disorder, biologically and genetically:

> Key aspects of the representation include a biological and genetic understanding of cause, an emphasis on symptoms of hyperactivity rather than inattention, and a dominant image of young white boys being the most likely persons to have ADHD. (Schmitz, 2003, 400)

As ADHD was generally framed in a positive light from the late 80's to late 90's, the recent incline in ADHD diagnosis in the US may be a way for mass media to frame the disorder as illegitimate, or over-diagnosed.

Method

To best determine if the general public is influenced by mass media's representation of ADHD, convenience sampling was used to answer a questionnaire. Since the general public's opinion is needed to answer this question, I developed a questionnaire to specifically understand what they believe about ADHD, employing a similar method as Stuber, Rocha, Christian, and Link.

Participants

With the unit of analysis being the general public, and using convenience sampling, a questionnaire was sent out on various social media platforms. Convenience sampling was used in order to get an appropriate range of demographics to represent the general public. Participants had to be 18+ to take part in the survey, but ages were compared to see if younger audiences were influenced more than older audiences or vice versa. Education was also compare, from high school, to higher education, and everyday professionals. To get an understanding of their normal news in-take, participants were asked about their preferred

news outlet and how much time each day they believed they are exposed to mass media. Since the question concerns how mass media influences the public's view of ADHD, news was an important concept in understanding the participants' biased/opinion.

Materials

Respondents were to answer a series of questions about their own general knowledge and personal experience with ADHD in the media. A questionnaire was developed on SurveyMonkey and distributed through various social media sites as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and also emailed to participants.

Procedure

Once a participant followed the link to complete the questionnaire, they were presented with an informed consent form. The form briefly explained the purpose of the questionnaire, presented them with contact information, and confirmed the participant's anonymity. Once the participant finished reading, they were to confirm their age as 18 or older by clicking "Yes" to continue. The participant was then asked to answer 21 question at their own discretion, with the ability to skip any question or exit the questionnaire at any time. At the end of the questionnaire, the participant was thanked for their cooperation, and presented with a debriefing that again, briefly described the purpose of the study and the current hypothesis. The participant was given contact information for the faculty advisor, if they wished for a copy of this final paper. Links were also given if the survey was in any way triggering for those with mental health disorders, or if they were interested in learning more about ADHD.

Instructions I

Answer the following yes or no questions to the best of your ability:

How old are you?

Are you a student?

Are you or have you ever been diagnosed with Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD)?

Do you take Adderall, Ritalin, Dexedrine or any other amphetamine/stimulant for ADD/ADHD?

Do you know anyone diagnosed with ADD/ADHD?

Do you believe that ADD/ADHD is a legitimate disorder?

Do you believe that ADD/ADHD is used as a "crutch?"

Have you ever taken stimulants for a non-medical reason?

Have you encountered stories of ADD/ADHD in your normal news outlet?

Do you feel sympathy for those with ADD/ADHD?

Are you diagnosed with any mental health disorder?

Instructions II

Answer the following questions in the way that best reflects your personal life/opinion:

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being not at all and 10 being very, how strong is your understanding of ADD/ADHD?

How many hours per day would you say you consume mass media (i.e. Newspapers, Magazines, Social Media, Television, etc.)?

Do you consider media coverage of ADD/ADHD to be negative, positive, or neutral?

Do you consider media coverage of mental health to be negative, positive, or neutral?

Instructions III

Answer the following open-ended questions to the best of your ability with your own opinion:

Do you believe mass media influences your opinion on some things, how?

Where does your main source of news come from?

What social media sites are you a part of?

How did you find this survey?

Results

The questionnaire that was distributed had an overwhelming 100% completion rate, clocking in at an average of four minutes spent per participant. In total, 65 people responded and completed the questionnaire, 37 coming from social media, 23 from a friend referral, 5 from "other" sources, and 0 respondents coming from email. The results show that 85% of participants believe ADHD to be a legitimate disorder although 50% believe that the disorder is occasionally used as a "crutch."

Questions 2, 3, and 4 grouped the participant into different categories determined from their age, if they were currently in school, and if they were diagnosed with ADHD (See Charts 1-3 in Appendix). Three themes appeared from these beginning questions. The first was 18-24 year old undergrads, the second was 40-60 year old working persons, and third being not

diagnosed with ADHD. These groupings helped to predict how the participant may answer future questions.

Q6 asked the participant to give a rating on a Likert scale from 1-10 (1 being not at all and 10 being very) on how well their understanding of ADHD is. The results showed the average understand of ADHD landed at around 6, which could be considered an average overall understanding. With this level of understanding, it could be expected that participants would be more sympathetic and supportive of the disorder. Although the average understanding of ADHD landed in a moderate area, around 85% of participants claimed to know a person diagnosed with ADHD.

Q12 and 13 asked if the participant believed that mass media influences their opinion and where their main source of news comes from. In general, most participants believed that mass media does influence their opinion, due to bias, false reports, and the constant flow of information. With the majority of participants receiving their news from online outlets, it is difficult to predict if their sources are legitimate; although 41% claimed to have encountered stories of ADHD in their preferred news outlet.

Q15 asked the participant if they believed media coverage of ADHD to be negative, positive, or neutral with 48% believing it is neutral; when asked if they felt sympathy for those diagnosed with ADHD 69% responded that they did. Although 48% believed media coverage of ADHD to be neutral, with negative leading behind at 28%, around 54% of respondents believed that media coverage of mental health is negative.

Q8, 9 and 11 analyzed how the participant viewed ADHD and how many hours a day they are exposed to mass media (See Charts 4-6 in Appendix). The average amount of time

exposed to mass media in a day was 4-6 hours at 49% and 1-3 hours at 40%. As stated previously, an overwhelming 85% of respondents believed ADHD to be a legitimate disorder, while 50% believed that the disorder is occasionally used as a crutch.

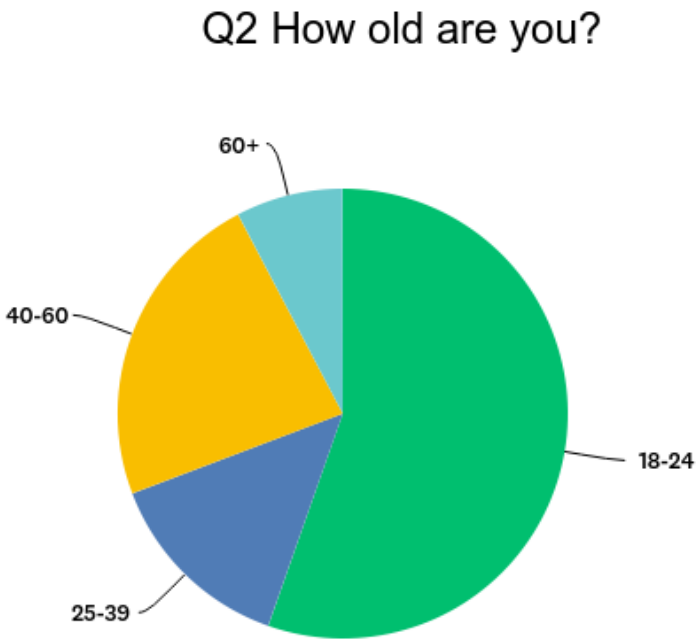
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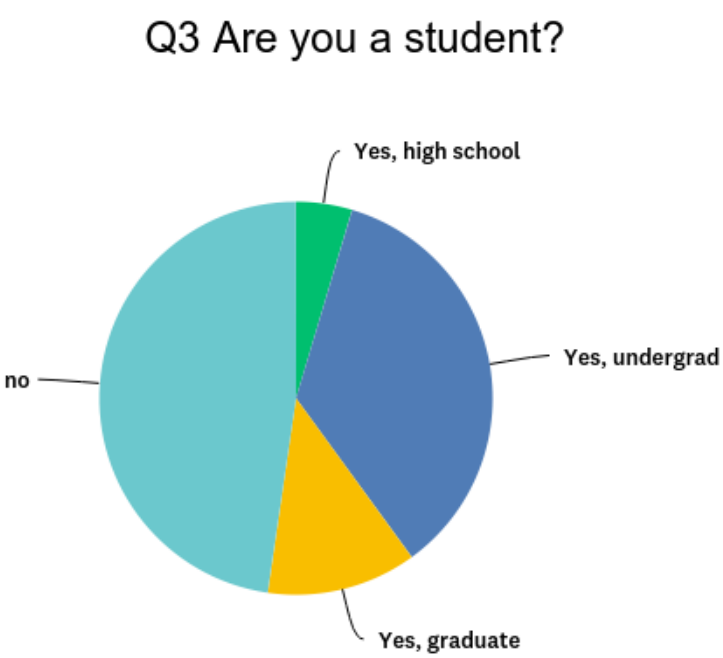
ADHD has gone through many stages in the media and public eye. From being under-represented, stigmatized, to over-diagnosed and disregarded, the disorder has struggled to be viewed in a "positive" light. With the knowledge of the past of ADHD, it could be predicted that the general public has a negative view and low understanding of the disorder. Through this research and questionnaire, it appears that the general public does, in-fact, have sympathy for those diagnosed with ADHD and considers it to be a legitimate disorder. While some respondents believed that the disorder is used as a crutch in some settings, the view of ADHD seems to have become more sympathetic and positive.

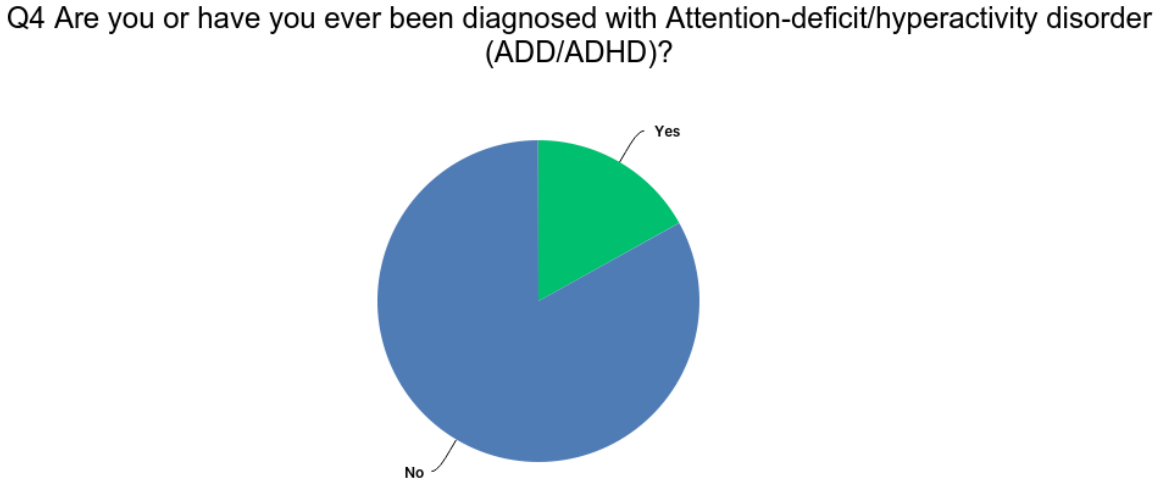
Appendix

Charts 1, 2, & 3

Demographics of Participants



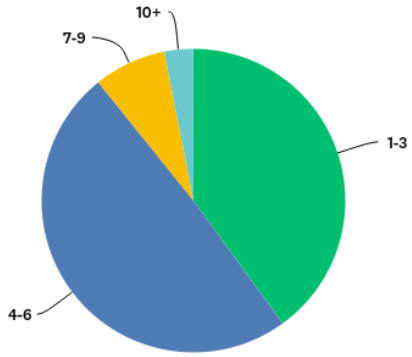




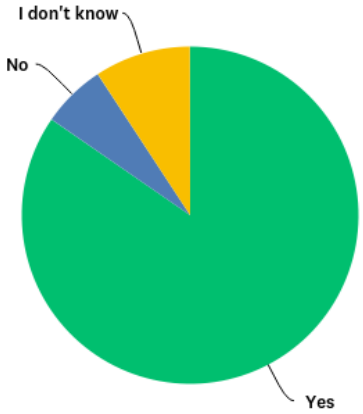
Charts 4, 5, 6

Exposure to Mass Media and Opinions on ADHD

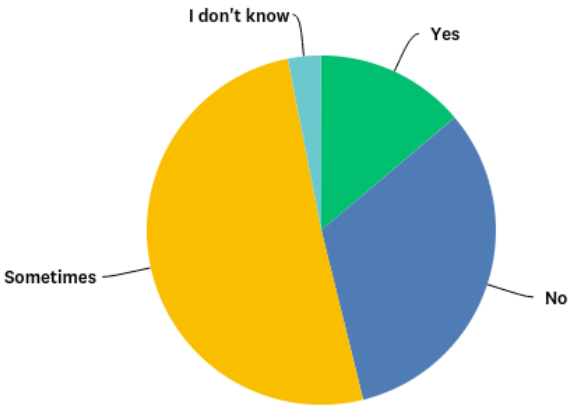
Q11 How many hours per day would you say you consume mass media (i.e. Newspapers, Magazines, Social Media, Television, etc.)?



Q8 Do you believe that ADD/ADHD is a legitimate disorder?



Q9 Do you believe that ADD/ADHD is used as a “crutch?”



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