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## The Effects of Social Media Use on the Perceptions of Mental Illness Among College Students

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**The Effects of Social Media Use on the Perceptions of Mental Illness Among College  
Students**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of Sociology and Criminology

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Brea Elizabeth Fisher

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined individuals' use of and perceptions of social media networking sites (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) on their perceptions of mental illness. Previous studies have consistently found that media, by means of TV shows, movies, and news reports, depict distorted views of the mentally ill. Previous studies have also consistently found that these media depictions are related to increased stigma of mental illness and the mentally ill. This current study goes a step further by examining the role of social media networking sites on individual's perceptions, since they are newer and more widely used forms of social media today. This study aimed to answer the research question, "does the use of social media networking sites, and the negative posts on them, perpetuate the stigma of mental illness?" Data was collected using a survey asking participants about their social media use, perceptions of, and attitudes about mental illness, as well as posts they have seen on social media about mental illness. Participants were 183 undergraduate college students at Butler University. The majority of the sample were female, upper-class, Liberal Arts and Sciences students. Using regression analyses, the results of this study showed no significant relationship between social media and mental illness perceptions as hypothesized. Social media use was found to be positively correlated with social media views, and additional analyses indicated that the more one uses social media, the more often they see posts regarding mental illness, as well as see posts involving mass shootings. Gender was found to have a significant relationship with mental illness perceptions. This finding indicated that males, on average, reported higher scores on the mental illness perceptions index, indicating that they hold more stigmatizing views of mental illness in comparison to females.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Have you ever wondered what effects social media has on a person's mental health? Are mental illnesses commonly discussed in posts on social media networking sites accurately? These are just two questions that come to mind when thinking about the topic of social media and mental illness. Previous studies on this topic have examined news reports, TV programs, movies, and mental illness perceptions. However, there is a lack of research examining the effects of social media networking sites (i.e. Twitter and Facebook) on perpetuating the stigma of mental illness. This study serves to add to the existing literature by broadening the research field of "social media" from just involving film and TV to incorporating social media networking sites that use the internet into the discussion. Because social media networking sites are a relatively new thing that affects our daily lives, this study has the potential to add to our understanding of how media can affect mental illness perceptions.

Past research has examined the effects of stigma on the mentally ill and has found that this stigma creates barriers for these individuals. "People suffering from mental illness are among the most stigmatized, discriminated against, marginalized, disadvantaged, and vulnerable members of society" (Overton and Medina 2008:143). In his early work on spoiled identities, Goffman (1963) defined stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting." Goffman's definition of stigma has been the leading force in research on the stigma of mental illness. The stigma of mental illness can be described as involving discrimination, mistreatment, and prejudice and can affect different parts of daily life such as applying for jobs or accessing healthcare (Overton and Medina 2008). Stigma is seen as a process that involves the recognition of a mental illness, activation of stereotypes, and the discrimination against the mentally ill person (Overton and

Medina 2008). Stigmas and stereotypes of mental illness exist and are problematic to those with a mental illness.

Today, entertainment media seems to hold on to and portray the most sensitive stereotypes of mentally ill individuals. Crime dramas often make the mentally ill characters the perpetrators of violent crimes, when the mentally ill are, in fact, more often victims of crimes and violence in real life. In reviewing previous literature, several studies look at depictions of the mentally ill in the media, focusing on TV programs and movies. Negative media images of mentally ill characters help to perpetuate stigma (Stuart 2006). Parrott and Parrott (2015) found that one in two characters with a mental illness committed a crime, which is compared to the one in five in the general population. About 60% of the mentally ill characters in crime dramas are the perpetrators of crimes, when compared to only 19% in the general population (Parrott and Parrott 2015). The mentally ill characters in crime dramas lead to the overall public perception that the mentally ill are dangerous (Parrott and Parrott 2015). By using mentally ill characters, TV programs and movies are emphasizing that the seriously mentally ill are dangerous or violent, which gets generalized to the whole umbrella term of “mental illness.” But these few violent events committed by the seriously mentally ill are not common to all but result in the targeting and stigmatizing of the entire group.

By examining the effects of TV programs and movies on the stigma of mental illness, findings suggest that these shows perpetuate stereotypes. When depicted in crime dramas or movies, mentally ill characters are more violent than other characters and often associated with violent crimes such as murder, rape, or armed robbery (Diefenbach 1997). By repeatedly linking mentally ill characters to violent crimes in entertainment media, the viewers generalize that to their understanding of mental illness. Media perpetuates the stigma of mental illness because the

mentally ill characters are represented as two-dimensional and unrelatable to audiences (Overton and Medina 2008). To further examine this, in a study by Johnson and Riles (2018), participants were asked to recall a time when mental illness was depicted in the media and describe the symptoms and behaviors that they thought of when they heard “mental illness.” The most common characteristics participants listed included depression, anxiety, mania, hallucinations, impairment, and crazy (Johnson and Riles 2018). When people describe mentally ill individuals, they often use stereotypical characteristics, which is influenced by the media depictions.

Television viewers find characterizations of mentally ill individuals in shows to be more compelling than factual sources which provide mental health information (Overton and Medina 2008). Mass media’s depictions of mental illness are easily accessible and create great storylines, which leads people believe that they are accurate sources of information. Specifically looking at this, when surveyed, individuals reported getting their information from classes or friends, but 20% reported TV or movies as their main source (Aguiniga, Madden, and Zellman 2016). When the mentally ill are portrayed in TV programs or movies, they are almost always more offensive than accurate (Aguiniga et al. 2016). Movies almost always portray the mentally ill in a negative light, lacking accurate information. Even though mental illness is not accurately portrayed in entertainment media, the depictions become a part of viewers’ understanding of the topic.

Movies such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* have dramatized mental illnesses to show the need for confinement, psychotherapy, and electroshock as treatments due to the portrayal of these illnesses as being unpredictable and dangerous (Stuart 2006). In a study done by Wahl (1992), college students were assessed on the effects of media depictions of the mentally ill after seeing the film, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. After viewing this film, attitudes toward the mentally ill were more negative than those who had not seen it, strengthening the assumption

that negative media portrayals create stigma and negative perceptions (Wahl 1992). These stigmatizing views are even primed into viewers minds starting in early childhood. Even in children's media such as cartoons, mentally ill characters are shown as unattractive and violent (Overton and Medina 2008). Multiple studies have examined references made to mental illness in children's TV and film media. About 85% of all Disney animated movies reference mental illness, having 21% of all characters displaying a mental illness (Stuart 2006). Kids as young as first grade understand the meaning of "crazy" in relation to describing someone with a mental illness, and the media teaches that the mentally ill are failures in life (Overton and Medina 2008). Entertainment media has strong effects on viewers of all ages' understandings of mental illness as well as perpetuates the stigma surrounding it.

Media portrayals of mental illness are often sensationalized and exaggerated, reporting on the rare violent acts done by severely mentally ill individuals, therefore, not discussing other mental illnesses. Most research on the effects of news reports on the stigma of mental illness have examined mass shootings. The seriously mentally ill, such as schizophrenics, may have a higher tendency toward criminality, but serious mental illness only accounts for about 3% of all mental illnesses (Diefenbach and West 2007). Often, when discussing crimes involving persons with schizophrenia in the news, the term "schizophrenia" is often misused, creating a negative connotation, which inadvertently worsens the stigma that already exists, relating it to a sense of danger (Vahazadeh, Wittenauer, and Carr 2011). The mentally ill are most often victims rather than perpetrators of crimes and violent acts, and the media leaves out the fact that those who have a mental illness that commit crimes is well below 14% (Klin and Lemish 2008). Nonfiction news media such as newspapers, report stories attributed to those with a mental illness accounted for about 40% of the entire report (Ma 2017). Even news reports, which are supposed to be



informational, fail to provide viewers with accurate information. By reporting inaccurate information or overemphasizing the role that mental illness plays in mass shootings, viewers are more likely to hold the belief that the mentally ill are more violent than those without a mental illness. One story has the power to create a negative understanding of mental illness that gets generalized beyond this one uncommon event involving the mentally ill.

News coverage is sensationalized and creates the perception that the mentally ill are dangerous, unintelligent, and dysfunctional. Most news reports involving the discussion of mental illness are reports on gun violence or mass shootings which creates in viewers' minds a correlation between mental illness and violence. Depictions in news coverage of the mentally ill involved in violent crimes most often involves suspects being presented with some form of psychosis, primarily schizophrenia (Klin and Lemish 2008). With news coverage like this, the stereotypes and the violent stigma of those with a mental illness are further perpetuated. Media presents severe psychotic disorders most often, while depicting the persons displaying them as unlikeable, dangerous, and unemployable (Stout, Villegas, and Jennings 2004). There is a gap in the media presentation of mental illness because of the lack of empirical evidence that serves as a link between mental illness, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that can affect stigma (Stout et al. 2004). Attention have been given to the fact that media sources need to display more accurate information to the public in order to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness.

If news media displayed more accurate information and involved more educated screenwriters and news reporters, there could be increased knowledge and positive attitudes regarding mental illness among viewers, as well as having experts such as psychiatrists for sources of information to aid in the presentation (Stout et al. 2004). A correlation has been previously found between the display of mental health histories and perceived dangerousness of

the mentally ill, and articles that discuss accurate information were associated with less positive attitudes about the dangerousness of mentally ill persons (Wilson, Ballman, and Buczek 2015). When viewers are given more background information on the subjects and the mental illnesses involved, they are less likely to stereotype them as being dangerous.

There is a lack of research examining the depictions, discussions, and portrayals of mental illness and mentally ill individuals on social media networking sites. In a study done by Joseph in 2015, the use of #schizophrenia on twitter was studied, and the researcher rated the occurrence as either medically appropriate, inappropriate, or non-medical. “Schizophrenia” was more often used inappropriately and sarcastically than when it was used accurately, medically, and appropriately (Joseph 2015). Sarcasm contributes to the stigma existing around mental illness by creating open discrimination and belittling of the suffering of symptoms associated with schizophrenia (Joseph 2015). In contrast to negative social media posts regarding mental illness, most tweets on Twitter have been found to express support in relation to the discussion of depression, and posts were more likely to create helpful or supportive comments rather than perpetuate the stigma (Ma 2017). The misuse of mental illness terms on social media perpetuates the stigma surrounding it.

Overall, whether looking at TV programs, movies, news reports, or social media networking sites, the way that the mentally ill are presented or depicted results in the stigmatizing and stereotypic views that the mentally ill are violent or dangerous, therefore, creating a desire for social distance. This stigma also results in the mentally ill being less likely to seek out help or treatment for their mental illness, and the less comfortable they feel with discussing it with other people. Findings of several studies suggest that mental illness is more likely to be stigmatized when it is poorly understood, and the resulting negative perceptions strengthen that stigma.

### *Study Purpose*

The purpose of the current study is to expand on our knowledge of how social media affects the stigma and perception of mental illness by examining the use of social media networking sites. The aim of the study was to investigate if social media use perpetuates the stigma of mental illness. I hypothesized that social media use would be the main source of information regarding mental illness by which subjects would access on a daily basis. I hypothesized that the information given on social media about mental illness would be mostly inaccurate but highly influential, resulting in strengthening the negative stigma surrounding it. When considering demographic variables of class level, gender, and university college, I hypothesized that upper-class, Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) students would hold the least stigmatizing views of mental illness. I hypothesized this because LAS students would be more open-minded and understanding of stigma because of certain classes they may have taken within certain departments such as psychology, criminology, and sociology. I also believe that the older a student is, the more they have learned about the topic, and more open-minded they become.

## METHODS

### *Research Design*

This study involved a quantitative research design that utilized a survey to assess the research question, how does the use of social media networking sites affect the stigma of mental illness? This design was chosen because the study is examining social media use, perception, and attitudes regarding mental illness, therefore, self-reports would be the most reliable use of measurement.

### *Participants*

Participants were sampled from Butler University's undergraduate population, with participation being voluntary and anonymous. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling, by means of sending out an electronic copy of the survey via email to each university colleges' majors' departments, which was then sent out via a large listserv to students.

Participants did not receive any form of compensation. Survey data was collected from a total of 183 participants. The participants were undergraduate Butler University students from a variety of different majors. The sample was made up of 22.4% males, 76.0% females, and 1.6% self-identified other gender. The sample also contained 32.8% under-class participants (first-years and sophomores) and 67.2% upper-class participants (juniors and seniors). When looking at university college: 48.4% of participants were from Liberal Arts and Sciences, 7.7% from Business, 7.1% from Communication, 6.0% from Education, 13.2% from Jordan College of Arts, 17.6% from Pharmacy and Health Sciences.

### *Measures*

The survey contained 23 questions, 20 of the questions assessed the main variables of interest, and three demographic questions assessed the control variables. The survey questions assessing the main variables were answered on an interval scale with five choices, however, the demographic questions used a nominal scale. A copy of the survey used in this study can be found in appendix A.

### *Dependent Variable*

The dependent variable of interest is students' perceptions of mental illness. Mental illness was operationalized as any mental health disorders or problems that affect one's internal states and behaviors. The perceptions of mental illness include stigma, which was operationalized as a negative connotation given to mental illness. The survey measured

participants' perceptions of mental illness based on common stigmas and ideas surrounding it (i.e. stigma of the mentally ill being violent). The responses to the survey questions that assessed the perceptions of mental illness were summed together to make an index ( $\alpha = .656$ ). This index included seven questions, with response choices of 1= strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neutral, 4= disagree, and 5= strongly disagree. The survey questions included in this index are listed here:

- I think individuals with a mental illness are more likely to engage in violence than those without a mental illness.
- I think the mentally ill are more often the perpetrators of crimes rather than the victims.
- I think those with a serious mental illness (i.e. Schizophrenia) are always violent.
- I think serious mental illness is the most common of all mental illnesses.
- When I hear "mental illness," what comes to mind first is serious mental illness (i.e. Schizophrenia).
- I think those with a mental illness are less intelligent than those without a mental illness.
- I think those with a mental illness are less competent workers.

Perceptions of the representation of mental illness on social media was also measured using the following questions:

- I see posts on social media regarding mental illness frequently.
- When I see posts regarding mental illness, it commonly involves mass shootings.
- When I see posts about mental illness, they are informationally accurate.

### *Independent Variables*

The independent variable in this study is social media networking sites (i.e. Facebook and Twitter). The variable of social media networking sites included social media use and social media views. Social media networking sites were operationally defined as any means of online,

electronic communication to share photos, messages, and information. Survey questions involving these variables were assessed on an interval, Likert-Type Scale, with response choices of 1= strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neutral, 4= disagree, and 5= strongly disagree. Responses to the survey questions that measured social media use were summed together to make an index ( $\alpha = .595$ ). This index included two questions:

- Social media (i.e. Facebook or Twitter) is my main source of news.
- I access social media on a daily basis.

Lastly, all responses to questions that measured social media views were also summed together to make an index ( $\alpha = .532$ ). These items originally had response choices of 1= strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neutral, 4= disagree, and 5= strongly disagree. This index included three questions:

- Social Media is influential in changing one's views on social issues.
- I think social media can be beneficial in promoting a social life.
- I think social media is a good source for social support.

### *Control Variables*

The current study included three control variables: class level, gender, and university college. Class level included two categories, which were originally coded as 1= under-class (i.e. first-year or sophomore) and 2= upper-class (i.e. junior or senior). Gender included three categories, which were originally coded as 1= male, 2= female, and 3= other. Lastly, university college included six categories, which were originally coded as 1= Liberal Arts and Sciences, 2= Business, 3= Communication, 4= Education, 5= Jordan College of the Arts, and 6= Pharmacy and Health Sciences. These variables were assessed on a nominal scale. Upon analysis, control variables were recoded as dummy variables making the values for each be 0 or 1.

*Data Analysis*

Data from a total of 183 participants was analyzed using SPSS. Each survey response choice was recoded so that higher numbers represented more agreeableness. This recode made the responses: 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, and 5= strongly agree. Four variable questions were omitted from analysis, as they did not reliably fit in the mental illness perceptions index, the social media indexes, or serve as reliable measures. These questions included:

- I think depression and anxiety are the most common mental illnesses.
- I am comfortable having a close relationship with a mentally ill person.
- When I read about mental illnesses, they are not discussed accurately.
- Social Media has made me feel self-conscious.

Descriptive statistics were run on the indexes of mental illness perceptions, social media use, and social media views. Bivariate correlations were run on the indexes and the control variables. Data analysis was then conducted using linear regressions, looking for a significant *p*-value of less than .05.

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1. The range of responses for the mental illness perceptions index was 7-35, and the range computed was 19.00 (M= 14.10, SD= 3.29). The mean for this index indicates that responses to questions assessing mental illness perceptions were leaning more on the “disagree” side of the scale. The range of responses for the social media use index was 2-10, and the range computed was 8.00 (M= 7.90, SD= 1.85). The mean for this index indicates that responses assessing social media use were leaning toward the higher “agree” to “strongly agree” side of the scale. The range of responses for the social media views

index was 3-15, and the range computed was 11.00 ( $M= 10.89$ ,  $SD= 1.90$ ). The mean for this index indicates that responses to questions assessing social media views were leaning toward the higher “agree” to “strongly agree” side of the scale. Overall, these means suggest that the participants hold few stigmatizing perceptions of mental illness, frequently use social media networking sites, and hold positive views of social media.

Before conducting linear regressions, bivariate correlations were run on the indexes and the control variables. The results from the bivariate correlations can be found in Table 2. Social media use and social media views were not found to be correlated with mental illness perceptions. Social media use was found to be positively correlated with social media views ( $r = .221$ ). This finding suggests that as more people use social media, they are more likely to view social media positively. Gender was also found to be positively correlated with social media use ( $r = .265$ ). This finding indicated that females use social media more often than males. Gender was also found to be negatively correlated with mental illness perceptions ( $r = -.165$ ). This finding indicates that males hold more negative perceptions of mental illness than females.

Table 3 displays the results from the linear regressions. Three main models of regression were run. The first model included the control variables on the dependent variable of mental illness perceptions. The second model included the control variables and the index of social media use on the dependent variable. The third model included the control variables, the index of social media use, and the index of social media views on the dependent variable of mental illness perceptions. An additional fourth regression model was run to include the control variables, social media use, social media views, and three additional survey variables: “I see posts on social media regarding mental illness frequently,” “when I see posts about mental illness on social media, they are informationally accurate,” and “when I see posts regarding mental illness, they



commonly involve mass shootings.” Table 4 displays results from this additional regression model.

With a significant value of  $p < .05$ , only gender was found to have a significant relationship with mental illness perceptions. Class level was close to significance. The independent variables of social media use and social media views were not found to be significant. Gender was the only variable that remained significant in all models of linear regression. This finding indicates that gender is the strongest predictor of the dependent variable of mental illness perceptions, with males holding more stigmatizing views of mental illness. The series of dummy variables for class level and gender were used and the dependent variable, mental illness perceptions, was measured on an interval scale recoded as 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. When looking at the variable of gender, all three main models, as well as the additional model showed significance. Male, under-class, and LAS served as the comparison variables in the analysis. The first model of linear regression found a significance ( $B = -1.435$ ,  $SE = .619$ ,  $p < .05$ ), as did the second model ( $B = -1.369$ ,  $SE = .645$ ,  $p < .05$ ), the third model of linear regression ( $B = -1.354$ ,  $SE = .646$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and the fourth, additional model of linear regression ( $B = -1.529$ ,  $SE = .662$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The B-values obtained indicate that as more participants self-identified as males, they were more likely to select higher scores, indicating more agreeableness. This finding means that males hold more stigmatizing views of mental illness than females.

Class level, although not significant at the  $p < .05$  level, is important to note. With under-class as the comparison variable, the first model ( $B = -1.078$ ,  $SE = .560$ ), the second model ( $B = -1.080$ ,  $SE = .562$ ), the third model ( $B = -1.096$ ,  $SE = .563$ ), and the additional fourth model ( $B = -1.066$ ,  $SE = .566$ ) showed a close significant value for class level. However, these models showed a  $p$ -

value of slightly greater than .05, making them not significant. If they were found to be significant at the  $p < .05$  criterion level, this would indicate that upper-class participants were more likely to respond with “strongly disagree” to the mental illness perception variables.

Additional analyses were run on two survey question variables set as dependent variables in linear regressions to further examine the relationship between social media and mental illness. The comparison variables for these regression models included males, under-class, and LAS. The first model of linear regression included the independent variables of the control variables, social media use, and social media views on the dependent variable of “I see posts on social media regarding mental illness frequently.” Table 5 displays results from this model of linear regression. This model found significance of the social media use index ( $B = .131$ ,  $SE = .041$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and gender ( $B = -.402$ ,  $SE = .184$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These findings suggest that the more one uses social media, the more often they see posts regarding mental illness. The second model included the independent variables of the control variables, social media use, and social media views on the dependent variable of “when I see posts regarding mental illness, they commonly involve mass shootings.” Table 6 displays results from this model of linear regression. This model found significance of class level ( $B = -.548$ ,  $SE = .616$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This finding indicates that upper-class participants, in comparison to under-class, commonly see posts regarding mental illness that involve mass shootings.

In summary, correlational relationships were found between social media use and social media views, as well as between gender and mental illness perceptions. However, there were no significant main effects of social media use or social media views on the dependent variable of mental illness perceptions. The significant results of gender indicate that male participants were more likely to select higher agree scores on the mental illness perception survey questions. This

finding indicates that males hold more stigmatizing views of mental illness than females. Further analyses conducted found that the more one uses social media, the more they see posts regarding mental illness, as well as commonly see posts regarding mass shootings.

## DISCUSSION

Stigma continues to exist around mental illness, and past research has shown that many forms of entertainment media perpetuate this stigma. Past studies have found that certain TV shows like crime dramas are the most likely to perpetuate the negative stigma, depicting the mentally ill as violent perpetrators of crimes, as well as incompetent workers (Parrott and Parrott 2015). Previous studies have focused on social media in the form of TV shows, movies, and news reports, however, there is a lack of research on social media networking sites (i.e. Facebook and Twitter). This current study aimed to find the effects of social media networking sites on the stigma of mental illness, in order to fill in this missing gap in research.

The following hypotheses were made: 1) social media, being used on a daily basis, would be the main source of information regarding mental illness and 2) social media use would be inaccurate and highly influential, resulting in the strengthening of the negative stigma surrounding mental illness. Regarding the control variables, the following hypothesis was made: 3) upper-class, Liberal Arts and Sciences students would hold the least stigmatizing views of mental illness. The hypotheses involving the variable of social media were not supported by the findings of the current study. However, a relationship was found between social media use and social media views, indicating that those who frequently use social media networking sites consider them to be positively influential. The hypothesis regarding class level of upper-class was not supported by the findings, and university college was shown to have no significance.

Gender was found to have the most significance on the dependent variable of social media perceptions. The findings indicate males hold more stigmatizing views of mental illness.

Class level may not have been found as significant due to the way it was measured in this study. Class level was originally coded on a 1-2 scale. However, if class level were coded on a 1-4 scale, then there would be more variability, possibly leading to significance. The results indicated that class level was close to significance in the linear regression models. If the measurement was changed, a significance among the class level variable would probably be found. If significance was found, one thing that could potentially account for differences in class level is that as students progress into upper-class levels in college, they become more open-minded. By being in college, students experience new things, new people, and get involved in different activities. Because of this, junior and senior students have more experiences and have had more learning opportunities.

Gender was found to be significant, indicating that males hold more stigmatizing views of mental illness. There could be a few different reasons that could account for the finding that males were more likely to select “agree” on questions regarding mental illness perceptions. One explanation for this finding could be that males are not as likely as females to be personally affected by posts on social media and stories that people tell about mental illness. Due to this, males could be less likely to seek further, more accurate information regarding mental illness. Future research should look at an interaction between gender and social media in order to explain this difference in finding.

Finding no significance regarding the social media variables could be accounted for by turning to previous literature for possible answers. Previous literature has shown that social media networking sites can be a positive platform for bringing about change regarding social

issues. One study investigating the consequences of negative media depictions of mental illness found that media could be used to improve recovery possibilities, as well as reduce the stigma surrounding mental disorders (Stuart 2006). Stuart (2006) states that media may “be enlisted as a formidable ally in helping to challenge public prejudices, initiate public debate, and project positive, human interests about people who live with mental illness.” Other studies have looked at the impact of mental illness campaigns that are intended to increase empathy and understanding of the mentally ill. A study done by Yeh, Jewell, and Thomas (2017) found that certain strategies such as including celebrities, historical figures, and athletes with a mental illness speaking out about it has been successful in reducing the stigma. The important finding of studies similar to these, is that media professionals need to change the look of mental illness into a more positive one in order to successfully reduce the stigma and give people accurate information regarding mental illness.

There were some limitations to the current study. One main limitation, already mentioned, is related to how class level was measured, leading to less variability, potentially affecting the significance of the relationship found. The indexes created in this study had alpha levels on the lower end of the scale, suggesting that the measures used lacked strong internal consistency and reliability. Another limitation of this study was that there was no control of testing conditions for all participants. The survey was available online for students to complete, therefore, some environments might have been more distracting or could have affected some students’ responses differently than others. Relatedly, the survey was 24 questions long, which took an average of 10 minutes to complete. Some participants may have gotten bored or tired of responding to the questions, resulting in lower response rates. Some participants may have not answered completely honestly due to the social desirability effect. Even though the responses were

collected anonymously, some participants may have felt uncomfortable answering some of the questions honestly or at all due to being a touchy subject. This study also asked students about their perceptions of the portrayal of mental illness on social media, as opposed to looking at the content of social media posts as it relates to the depiction of mental illness.

Lastly, convenience sampling was used to get responses to the survey; therefore, the findings are not able to generalize beyond undergraduate students at Butler University. The survey was sent out to the secretaries of each university college department, asking for them to forward it on to their students. This becomes another limitation of the study because not all departments may have forwarded the email on to all students within their majors' listservs. For example, the Psychology Department has a policy to not forward research participation opportunities on to students unless they are available online through the psychology labs participant recruitment website. Because of this limitation, the sample may not have included many psychology majors, unless they were combined majors. This makes the findings less generalizable, as well as less representative of the college population at Butler University and other colleges.

As stated in the introduction section, the topic of the effects of social media on the perception and stigma of mental illness has not been studied much in the past. Past research has focused on different types of entertainment media's effects on stigma, such as through TV shows, movies, and news reports. Because of the lack of research on social media networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, it is important to expand this study into future research. Future studies could look directly at the portrayal of mental illness on social media, instead of just participants' perceptions. By doing this, researchers could examine if mental illnesses are misrepresented on such sites, similarly as in entertainment media. In future research, researchers could visually incorporate images of social media posts regarding mental illness and have participants report

their perceptions of mental illness based on the posts they view. Future research could also expand further to conduct longitudinal studies to examine the consistency of perceptions of mental illness, as well as for the frequency use of social media, overtime to see if there have been any changes. The research could study if a correlation between the variables changes from the first year in undergraduate school to post-graduate school. By doing this, comparisons of mental illness perceptions could be made between undergraduate and graduate students. Lastly, future research could expand and make the study involve different colleges, different locations, and all college grade levels. By doing this, the data would become more representative and could generalize to the bigger population of “college students.” Although there are some shortcomings in the current study, modifications of them can serve as a basis for future studies to expand on the topic of social media networking sites.

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Table 1

*Summary of Means and Standard Deviations for Study Indices (n= 183).*

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<b>Variables</b>	<b>Means (Standard Deviations)</b>	<b>Range</b>
Mental Illness Perception Index	14.10 (3.29)	7-35
Social Media Use Index	7.90 (1.85)	2-10
Social Media Views Index	10.89 (1.90)	3-15

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Table 2.

Correlations between Social Media Use, Social Media Views, Control Variables, and Mental illness Perceptions (n= 183).

	Mental Illness Perceptions	Social Media Use	Social Media Views	Other	Female	Upperclass	LAS	Business	Communication	Education	JCA	PHS
Mental Illness Perceptions	1	-.069	-.057	-.068	-.165*	-.111	-.036	.094	-.012	-.047	.007	.013
Social Media Use		1	.221**	-.064	.265**	-.031	-.123	-.021	.093	.036	.105	-.003
Social Media Views			1	.009	.096	-.073	-.069	-.090	.041	-.117	.103	.107
Other				1	-.229**	-.002	-.039	.125	-.036	-.033	.077	-.060
Female					1	-.093	.072	-.276**	.054	-.141	-.051	.019
Upperclass						1	-.152*	.156*	.192**	.126	-.216**	.073
LAS							1	-.279**	-.265**	-.245**	-.377**	-.447**
Business								1	-.080	-.073	-.113	-.133
Communication									1	-.070	-.108	-.128
Education										1	-.099	-.117
JCA											1	-.180*
PHS												1

\*\* . Correlation significant at .01 level

\* . Correlation significant at .05 level

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Table 3.

Estimated Effects of Social Media Use, Social Media Views, and Control Variables on Mental Illness Perceptions (n= 183).

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE	Sig.	B	SE	Sig.	B	SE	Sig.
Female	-1.435	.619	.022	-1.369	.645	.035	-1.354	.646	.038
Other	-3.069	1.975	.122	-3.079	1.980	.122	-3.030	1.985	.129
Upper-class	-1.078	.560	.056	-1.080	.562	.056	-1.096	.563	.053
Business	1.107	.994	.267	1.143	1.001	.255	1.109	1.004	.271
Communication	.446	1.001	.656	.489	1.010	.629	.515	1.012	.611
Education	.101	1.073	.925	.114	1.076	.916	.040	1.083	.971
JCA	-.050	.767	.948	-.006	.777	.994	.034	.781	.966
PHS	.317	.683	.643	.330	.685	.631	.380	.690	.583
Social Media Use				-.053	.139	.704	-.033	.142	.818
Social Media Views							-.090	.136	.508

Table 4.

Linear Regressions Depicting Mental Illness Perceptions (n= 183).

	B	SE	Sig.
Female	-1.529	.662	.022
Other	-3.031	1.986	.129
Upper-class	-1.066	.566	.061
Business	.883	1.028	.392
Communication	.375	1.018	.713
Education	-.180	1.099	.870
JCA	-.092	.787	.907
PHS	.384	.691	.579
Social Media Use	-.015	.147	.921
Social Media Views	-.068	.137	.617
I see posts on social media regarding mental illness frequently	-.134	.269	.620
When I see posts about mental illness, they are accurate	.398	.314	.206
When I see posts regarding mental illness, they commonly involve mass shootings	.178	.252	.482

Table 5.

Linear Regression Predicting Seeing Mental Illness Posts on Social Media Frequently (n= 183).

	B	SE	Sig.
Female	-.402	.184	.030
Other	.044	.565	.938
Upper-class	.212	.160	.187
Business	.266	.286	.354
Communication	-.087	.288	.763
Education	.092	.308	.766
JCA	-.227	.222	.308
PHS	-.010	.196	.961
Social Media Use	.131	.041	.002
Social Media Views	.050	.039	.193

Table 6.

Linear Regression Predicting the Frequency of Seeing Mass Shootings Posts on Social Media (n= 183).

	B	SE	Sig.
Female	.013	.200	.947
Other	-.378	.616	.540
Upper-class	-.548	.175	.002
Business	-.474	.311	.130
Communication	.303	.314	.335
Education	.130	.336	.700
JCA	-.577	.242	.180
PHS	-.099	.214	.646
Social Media Use	-.028	.044	.503
Social Media Views	.044	.042	.325

## APPENDIX A

Instructions:

Please rate these questions based on how you currently feel by selecting the most accurate choice option. Remember that the answers to this survey are anonymous, so please be completely honest.

1. I think individuals with a mental illness are more likely to engage in violence than those without a mental illness

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

2. Social Media (i.e. Facebook or Twitter) is my main source of news

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

3. I think the mentally ill are more often the perpetrators of crimes rather than the victims

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

4. When I see posts about mental illness on social media, they are informationally accurate

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

5. I am comfortable having a close relationship with a mentally ill person

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

6. I access social media on a daily basis

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

7. I think those with a serious mental illness (i.e. Schizophrenia) are always violent

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

8. Social media is influential in changing one's views/perceptions on social issues

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

9. I think serious mental illness is the most common of all mental illnesses

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

10. I think social media can be harmful to those with a mental illness

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

11. When I hear “mental illness” what comes to mind first is serious mental illnesses (i.e. Schizophrenia)

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

12. I think social media can be beneficial in promoting a social life

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

13. I think those with a mental illness are less intelligent than those without a mental illness

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

14. I think social media is a good source for social support

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

15. I think those with a mental illness are less competent workers

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

16. Social media has made me feel self-conscious

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

17. I think depression and anxiety are the most common mental illnesses

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

18. I see posts on social media regarding mental illness frequently

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

19. When I read about mental illnesses, they often are not discussed accurately

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

20. When I see posts regarding mental illness, it commonly involves mass shootings

1= strongly agree 2= agree 3= neutral 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree



21. What class are you currently in at Butler University?

Under-class (i.e. First Year or Sophomore)

Upper-class (i.e. Junior or Senior)

22. What is your gender?

Male

Female

Other

23. What university college are you in?

LAS

Business

Communication

Education

JCA

Pharmacy and Health Sciences