

Analysis of Media Image of Autism Patients in Social Media

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Abstract: Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder with unclear pathogenesis, characterized mainly by social disorders and repetitive stereotypical behaviors, often accompanied by ADHD, sleep disorders, or gastrointestinal problems. In recent years, the incidence rate of autism worldwide has increased at an alarming rate. The general public lacks a comprehensive understanding of the autism population, resulting in biases, discrimination, and stigmatization. Social media has played an important role in accurately presenting and shaping the image of autism for the public, greatly affecting the social situation of patients. In the study, content analysis is used in the study to get the data. 32 previous papers are selected from CNKI and foreign websites to analyse in this study. The time span for selecting samples is from 2009 to 2022 and the samples are mainly about stigmatization, stereotypes, and media image of autism. Through the analyse, media images on autism generally exhibit negatively and are generally one-sided, mostly drifting between the polarization of "genius" and "idiot".

Keywords: Autism, content analysis, media image, media

1. Introduction

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by social disorders and repetitive stereotypical behavior, often accompanied by ADHD, sleep disorders, or gastrointestinal problems [1]. In recent years, the incidence rate of autism has increased significantly. The global incidence rate of autism is about 1/160; According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the incidence rate of autism in 8-year-old children is 1/36; The incidence rate of males is about four times that of females. At present, there is no drug or intervention that can completely cure this disease. With the increase in the incidence rate and the uniqueness and complexity of autism, the autistic group has begun to enter more people's vision and become the focus, and at the same time, it has become a major social problem to be solved.

The mass media is one of the main sources of information in public life. By shaping the information environment, the media outlines the state of people's living world and constructs social reality. The social status attribute of mass media will bring social attention to the people or things being disseminated, thereby improving their social status. Therefore, media coverage affects the audience's normal and differentiated judgment of the autism spectrum group, and the selective topic setting of the media can affect the public's interpretation of information, easily amplifying the problems of people with autism spectrum disorders and deepening the negative impression of the public [2]. With the expansion of the incidence rate of autism, autism appears more frequently in

mass media than ever before, and the content of media text affects the relevant information obtained by the public.

In order to establish a correct understanding of individuals with autism and promote the formation of a social support atmosphere of friendly acceptance, it is particularly crucial to examine and reflect on existing media reports on autism. This study aims to explore the main media images of autism patients in social media through content analysis, providing reference opinions for the better integration of autism groups into society, and helping the public form objective and fair understanding and emotional attitudes.

2. Literature review

The general public lacks a comprehensive understanding of the autism population, resulting in biases, stigmatization, and other phenomena. This greatly hinders the social integration of the autistic population. Liu Yingna et al. conducted a survey on 471 preschool teachers using an autism knowledge questionnaire and found that the error rate of autism knowledge mastered by teachers was as high as 83.0% [3]. Li Xingyu and Li Liya found that the majority of college students believe that the lack of family care and damage to the brain and nervous system leads to the development of autism, and they also believe that the symptoms of autism are manifested as psychological and social communication disorders [4]. John et al. used a core group discussion method that lasted for about an hour to investigate the understanding and views of undergraduate, master's, elderly, and community populations with different educational backgrounds, ages, and contact experiences on the autism community. They summarized seven major misconceptions and fallacies regarding the autism community: all individuals with autism are not interested in social relationships, do not like to interact with others, are introverted Unable to feel excluded or stigmatized, possess special talents, danger, or psychological barriers [5]. The research results of Hussein et al.'s short article testing and interview interviews show that parents not only express their lack of understanding and understanding of autism, but also describe that their children and their families are subjected to ridicule and humiliation, prejudice, discrimination, labeling, and stigmatization from those around them, and these experiences and feelings affect their integration into society [6]. Zheng Di analyzed a total of 223 news samples from the New Beijing News from 2003 to 2019, and summarized that there are two metaphors of devil and genius in the media's construction of the image of autistic individuals. Highlighting the negative behavior of autistic individuals will further exacerbate the stigmatization of autism [7]. Wang Junrui, based on framework theory, analyzed a total of 1289 reports on autism on Sina from 2010 to 2020, and found that the most common images of autism patients in Sina's autism topic reports were victims, caregivers, and gifted individuals [8].

Denise believes that autism is often seen as a mysterious and puzzling disease in mainstream media (MSM). The media blindly interprets autism with conflicting manifestations of 'autism', which deprives autistic individuals of their rights, highlighting the inability of autistic children to protect themselves from the invasion of 'autism' and the powerlessness of child caregivers, amplifying the defective characteristics of such children [9]. Jessica Wendorf et al. believe that news reports related to autism often have negative effects on individuals with autism, which reinforces the label of "burden" on individuals with autism and isolates them from the normal social order [10]. Sandra and Valerie investigated reports on autism in Australian print media between 1996 and 2005 and found that media reports reflected a dual stereotype of autism being labeled as dangerous and uncontrollable, as well as unloved and abused [11]. Farnall and Smith investigated the relationship between television programs and movies related to individuals with disabilities and audience reactions and found that positive narratives presented by the media can make audiences more sensitive to discrimination against people with disabilities [12]. Based on the important role played by this news media in strengthening minority stereotypes, Jones and Harwood further studied and proposed that the

stereotypical images of individuals with autism shaped by media coverage will have a profound impact on the audience through long-term exposure and unforgettable descriptions. Sarrett proposed that mass media highlighted the themes of schizophrenia and "imprisonment" in children with autism in their descriptions by analyzing news media reports and scientific literature on autism in the 1960s and 21st century, and repeated them in the text. And most of these images created by nonautistic individuals conflict with personal descriptions from autistic individuals and their families [13]. Jaci and Robert summarized that the sensational negative label of autism and its misunderstanding and abuse were important features of media coverage in British newspapers from 1999 to 2008. Autistic individuals are described as victims of the condition of "autism," and existing reports fail to reflect the heterogeneity of individuals with autism, often presented in a standardized and homogeneous manner [14]. Brooke Weberling selected autism reports from The New York Times and The Washington Post from 1996 to 2006 and found that most reports organized within a human framework, which tells stories about individuals with autism and their families, raise awareness of this type of disorder and may ultimately affect policy decisions. In 2006, the United States Congress passed the Combating Autism Act, which plans to invest nearly \$1 billion over five years in research and related activities on autism. The policy shift has led to many articles on autism reporting focusing on changes in educational policies and issues, which on the other hand demonstrates the relative "novelty" of educational issues related to children with autism in the education system [15]. Seok Kang, based on the issue of autism in American television news from 1990 to 2010, proposed that television news tends to avoid negative information compared to print media, and emphasized the need for news media to adopt a more personal and social participation perspective, comprehensively reporting on social health issues such as autism from a broader perspective [16].

The media images of autism groups are mainly divided into five categories: "lonely star children", "problem children", "heavy burdens", "idiots and geniuses", and "vulnerable groups", with less exposure to their desire for communication, rich and optimistic inner side in reality. At the same time, most reports start from the perspective of suffering, placing the autism group in a relatively passive position, leading to the problem of their image being masked and one-sided. Overall, it is not realistic, comprehensive, and three-dimensional, which may affect the audience's correct understanding of the group. The reasons for these differences include specific news framework constraints, social stereotypes, and mainstream ideological requirements [17].

3. Research design

This study used Content Analysis to summarize and infer the connections and organizational levels between various conceptual elements in the text.

This article selects domestic and foreign papers on CNKI and foreign websites that involve stigmatization, stereotypes, and media image of autism as the research subjects, with a total of 32 reports. The time span for selecting samples is from 2009 to 2022. In terms of research methods, this article mainly adopts the content analysis method, analyzing the media image of the current autism population through existing literature.

4. Analysis results and reflection

Yang Ye's "Research on the Construction of Media Images for Autism Groups" uses news reports on autism groups from Southern Metropolis Daily, Yangcheng Evening News, and Chutian Metropolis Daily from January 2012 to December 2013 as research samples to analyze the problems that mass media faces in reporting on autism. The article argues that there are serious stereotypes, polarization tendencies, and a serious trend of "spectacle" in media coverage of autism groups. Another paper, "Analysis of Media Image of Autism Groups - Taking Chutian Urban Daily as an Example," is similar

to the previous one. By analyzing the news coverage of autism groups in Chutian Urban Daily in 2012, the article analyzes the characteristics of mass media coverage of autism groups and explores the problems that mass media has in reporting. When reporting on autism groups, the media should pay attention to enriching the reporting format, deepening the reporting content, emphasizing the scientific and rigorous nature of the report, and assuming social responsibility.

Sandra C. Jones and Valerie Harwood's paper, *Representations of autism in Australian print media study the autism spectrum disorders from 1996 to 2005*, published in *Disability and Society*. Key findings include relatively limited factual information and a dual stereotype that individuals labeled with autism are either dangerous, uncontrollable, or not cared for and treated properly. The article concludes by discussing the nature and tone of autism reporting, as well as its potential impact on individuals with autism, their families, caregivers, and the entire community.

Yu Xiaoyue's paper "Research on Media Image Presentation and Media Integration Education View of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders" screened 187 reports related to autism from 2010 to 2020 in *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily*, and *China Youth Daily*, and adopted content analysis method. The paper synthesizes the content of media texts and summarizes the media images and presentation characteristics of children with autism. There are three main opposing types of media images of children with autism that often appear in the media, namely shackles and helpers, ability deficient individuals and ability progressive individuals, outsiders and integrators. There are two extreme metaphors in the media image of children with autism: mysterious beauty and alternative genius, helplessness, despair, and heavy burden. The media usually exhibits three characteristics when shaping the media image of children with autism: firstly, due to the influence of media culture on audience cognitive convergence, the pseudo concept of autism is prevalent in media platforms; Secondly, the problem of 'disorder' in children with autism is influenced by inherent social cognitive judgments and discrimination, which leads to their stigmatization; The third is the tendency of children with autism to tend towards "normal" shaping in social culture, which is actually a further disguise of their disadvantaged position[18].

5. Conclusion

The majority of research methods used in the media presentation of autism patients in China in the past were content analysis and text analysis. The research subjects are also traditional media such as newspapers, television, and movies. However, in today's era of the Internet, the rise of portal websites and new media has largely squeezed the dissemination space of traditional media. There is a lack of research on the media presentation of autism phenomena, including online media. Existing research has found that news media reports on autism generally exhibit a negative tendency, and there are certain misunderstandings in describing the characteristics, abilities, and causes of autism. The image of autistic individuals portrayed by news media is generally one-sided, often drifting between the polarization of "genius" and "idiot". The research on the media image of autism groups in foreign countries started early and covered a long time range. Framework analysis, content analysis, and discourse analysis are commonly used methods in media image research. The existing research covers a wide range of communication media, including newspapers, television news, social media platforms, and video websites. But stereotypes also exist.

People cannot maintain direct contact with everything in the external environment, and can only perceive it through the mimetic environment constructed by the media. Most people's understanding of autism patients is through the mimetic environment provided by various media, so media coverage of autism will greatly affect the audience's cognition, views, and attitudes towards autism. Media is essentially serving the public interest and committed to solving social problems. Therefore, relevant media should build a platform for autism patients to speak out, gain understanding and support, and help eliminate social bias and discrimination.

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