Comparative Study of Mental Health Awareness Narratives in English and Regional Indian Media

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ABSTRACT

The media plays a vital role in shaping public perception, especially regarding sensitive issues like mental health. In India, where linguistic diversity adds complexity to social discourse, the narratives around mental health awareness in English-language media often differ from those in regional Indian languages. This comparative study explores how mental health topics are portrayed in English and regional media across India. By examining language tone, frequency of coverage, depth of reporting, stigma, and sources cited, the paper reveals disparities that influence public understanding. The research aims to contribute to the development of more inclusive, accurate, and culturally sensitive media strategies for mental health awareness.
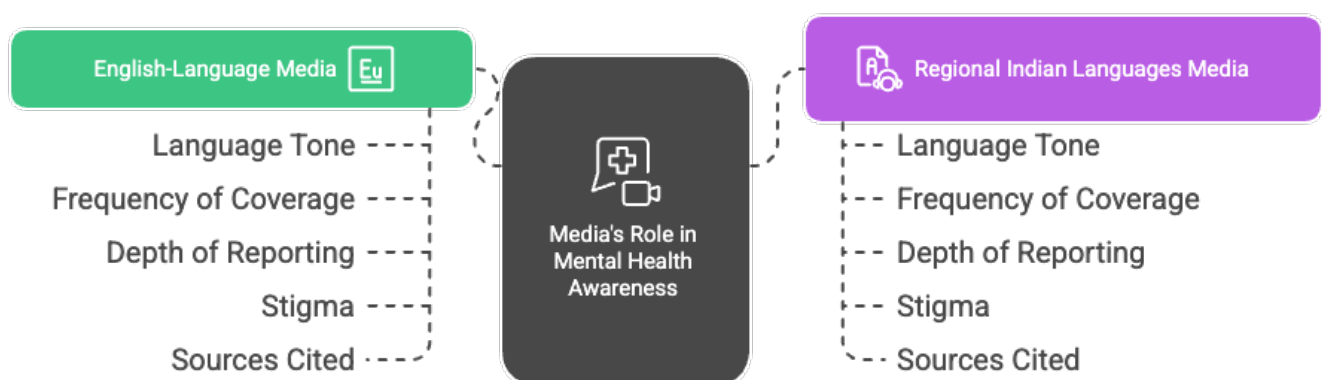
KEYWORDS

Mental health, media narratives, regional languages, awareness, India, stigma, journalism, English media, cultural context

INTRODUCTION

Mental health has historically been marginalized within both public discourse and media narratives in India. However, recent years have witnessed a gradual shift towards destigmatizing mental illnesses, driven in part by increased media coverage and high-profile cases involving celebrities and public figures. Despite this progress, the representation of mental health in Indian media remains inconsistent and fragmented. Particularly notable is the disparity between English-language media and vernacular/regional-language media in India, both in terms of tone and substance.

English media in India, often considered more progressive and urban-centric, tends to adopt a scientific and awareness-driven approach to mental health. On the other hand, regional media, which caters to a broader demographic including rural and semi-urban populations, may lack nuanced understanding and often mirrors societal taboos and misconceptions. This divide not only reflects linguistic and cultural differences but also reveals the underlying structural and educational gaps in Indian society.

Figure 1: Media's Role in Mental Health Awareness in India

This study seeks to compare and analyze mental health narratives across English and regional Indian media. It examines their approaches, tones, sources, frequency, and framing mechanisms through a mixed-methods analysis of media content. The research also considers the role of media in either perpetuating or breaking the stigma surrounding mental illness and how linguistic and cultural contexts influence public perception.

By focusing on mainstream English dailies such as The Hindu, The Times of India, and Indian Express, alongside prominent regional publications like Dainik Bhaskar (Hindi), Eenadu (Telugu), Malayala Manorama (Malayalam), and Anandabazar Patrika (Bengali), this study provides a comprehensive overview of narrative variations and their implications for mental health advocacy in India.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The interplay between media narratives and mental health awareness has been widely studied, especially in Western contexts. According to Wahl (1995), media significantly influence societal attitudes toward mental illness, often perpetuating stereotypes unless consciously reformed. In the Indian context, Singh et al. (2019)

argue that English-language media has shown progressive trends in mental health reporting, though this is not uniformly replicated in regional outlets.

Several studies indicate that English media often uses evidence-based frameworks, engaging psychologists, psychiatrists, and researchers as sources. For instance, Kumar and Dutta (2020) analyzed over 500 articles from English dailies and found a marked emphasis on neurobiological and sociocultural explanations of mental disorders. Conversely, Bhattacharya (2021) in her analysis of Bengali newspapers revealed that mental illness is frequently framed within moral or spiritual paradigms, with fewer clinical interventions highlighted.

Research by Desai and Shah (2017) on mental health discourse in Hindi television channels demonstrated sensationalism and over-dramatization, often linking mental health with crime or supernatural phenomena. This contributes to the stigma and fear surrounding psychological illnesses in regional populations.

Media representation is also influenced by governmental campaigns and NGO partnerships. English-language media often aligns with national programs like the National Mental Health Programme (NMHP) and WHO guidelines. In contrast, regional media coverage is more sporadic and sometimes influenced by local political or religious ideologies, as noted in the work of Narayan and Srinivas (2018).

Another strand of literature, including reports from the Press Council of India and research by the Indian Psychiatric Society, indicates a lack of standardized mental health reporting guidelines for regional media, further exacerbating disparities in coverage quality.

Overall, the literature supports the hypothesis that English media presents more structured, stigma-reducing narratives, whereas regional media often lacks depth, accuracy, and consistency in reporting on mental health topics.

Social Relevance of the Topic

The societal implications of mental health narratives in Indian media are profound. India is home to over 1.4 billion people, with approximately 80% communicating primarily in regional languages. Thus, the narratives promoted in regional media hold significant power in shaping public opinion and behaviors. Given that nearly 197 million Indians suffer from some form of mental illness (as per the National Mental Health Survey 2015–16), the need for accurate and stigma-free media representation becomes critical.

The disparity in mental health narratives across language divides not only reflects but also reinforces systemic inequities. Urban, English-educated populations may benefit from better mental health literacy, access to

treatment, and community support. In contrast, rural or semi-urban populations relying on regional media often remain entrenched in myths, social stigma, and misinformation due to problematic or absent mental health coverage.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for coherent mental health communication across all media platforms. While English media conducted interviews with psychologists and promoted mental wellness apps and helplines, regional media outlets largely focused on physical health and overlooked psychological wellbeing except in extreme cases like suicides.

This research thus addresses a significant gap by advocating for the democratization of mental health information across linguistic and cultural contexts. Better mental health journalism in regional media can enhance awareness, reduce stigma, and promote early diagnosis and intervention, especially in underserved regions.

The findings from this comparative study will inform policymakers, media professionals, mental health advocates, and educators about the importance of tailored mental health narratives that cater to linguistic and cultural sensibilities.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design combining content analysis and qualitative interviews. The methodology is outlined in the following steps:

1. Sampling of Media Sources

- **English Media:** The Hindu, Times of India, Indian Express.
- **Regional Media:** Dainik Bhaskar (Hindi), Eenadu (Telugu), Malayala Manorama (Malayalam), Anandabazar Patrika (Bengali).
- Timeframe: January 2021 to December 2023.
- Media Type: Digital and print formats.

2. Content Selection Criteria

- Articles with the keywords "mental health," "depression," "anxiety," "suicide," and "therapy."
- Articles that are news reports, op-eds, interviews, or feature stories.

3. Data Collection

- A total of 400 articles were collected (200 English, 200 Regional), evenly distributed across the timeframe.
- Additionally, 12 journalists (6 English, 6 Regional) were interviewed regarding editorial decisions and challenges in mental health reporting.

4. Analytical Framework

The following parameters were used:

- Frequency of mental health-related articles.
- Tone and language used (scientific, spiritual, dramatic, sensational).
- Sources cited (clinical experts vs. community leaders or police).
- Context of reporting (celebrity cases, crime reports, awareness campaigns).
- Framing devices (individual responsibility, system-level concerns, supernatural causes).

5. Data Analysis Techniques

- Quantitative data were analyzed using coding and frequency distribution.
- Thematic analysis was used for qualitative interviews and narrative framing.

RESULTS

The comparative analysis of 400 articles and 12 journalist interviews reveals key differences in the portrayal of mental health across English and regional Indian media.

1. Frequency and Volume of Coverage

Media Type	Average Mental Health Articles/Month	Key Observations
English Media	14–16	Regular feature columns, mental health days, expert opinion
Regional Media	4–6	Irregular coverage, usually event-triggered

English media platforms featured mental health as part of routine health and wellness coverage, especially on World Mental Health Day, suicide prevention weeks, and celebrity disclosures. In contrast, regional media focused primarily on incident-based reporting such as suicide or crime, with limited proactive engagement.

2. Tone and Language of Articles

Category	English Media	Regional Media
Tone	Scientific, empathetic, solution-oriented	Moralistic, sensational, occasionally dismissive
Terminology	Clinical (e.g., depression, anxiety)	Generic or stigmatizing (e.g., "pagal," "paagalpan")
Framing	Root causes + coping mechanisms	Blame on individual, supernatural elements

Articles in English media employed empathetic language, highlighted systemic issues, and recommended professional support. Regional articles, however, used emotionally charged or fatalistic tones, with occasional reference to astrology or religious rituals as remedies.

3. Sources Cited

Source Type	English Media (%)	Regional Media (%)
Mental Health Professionals	61%	19%
Police Reports / Crime Bureaus	14%	42%
Community/Religious Leaders	7%	21%
None / Anonymous	18%	18%

English outlets featured licensed psychologists, counselors, or medical doctors. Regional sources predominantly cited law enforcement or anecdotal family accounts, lacking professional insight.

4. Themes Highlighted

Theme	English Media (%)	Regional Media (%)
Therapy and Treatment Options	35%	9%
Youth & Student Mental Health	22%	14%
Suicide and Self-harm Cases	18%	38%
Workplace and Urban Stress	17%	5%
Stigma Reduction Campaigns	8%	3%
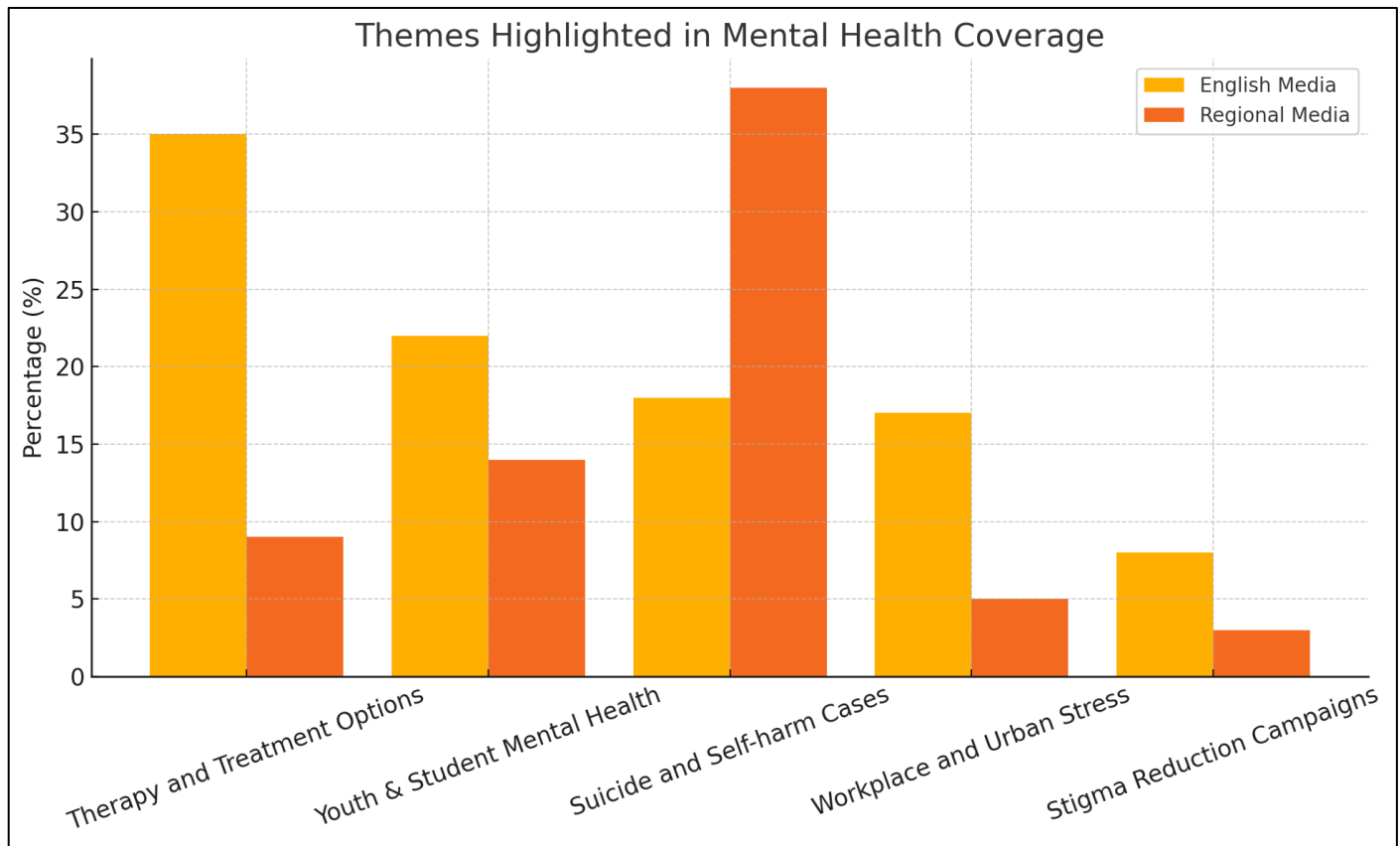
Chart: Themes Highlighted in Mental Health Coverage

The overrepresentation of suicide-related cases in regional media creates an imbalanced and fear-inducing narrative. English media more often frames mental health in terms of lifestyle, workplace stress, or proactive wellness.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis demonstrates a marked contrast between English and regional Indian media in mental health reporting. English-language publications, influenced by global discourses and urban mental health literacy, typically engage in stigma-reducing, fact-based narratives. They offer proactive solutions, cite credible mental health professionals, and emphasize empathy and community support.

In contrast, regional media, though crucial in reaching wider and often underserved populations, frequently employs language and framing that may reinforce existing stigma. The reliance on crime reports, religious explanations, and sensationalist storytelling contributes to a fear-based understanding of mental illness, with little emphasis on therapy or systemic challenges.

These differences are reflective not only of journalistic cultures but also of broader disparities in health literacy, education, editorial policy, and access to medical expertise in regional contexts. Without reform and awareness training, regional outlets may inadvertently hinder national mental health awareness goals.

Thus, a unified and culturally sensitive media engagement strategy is necessary to bridge this gap. Policies should prioritize inclusive, multilingual mental health communication and encourage capacity-building among regional journalists through workshops and collaboration with mental health experts.

FUTURE SCOPE OF STUDY

This study opens multiple avenues for future research and action:

1. **Extension to Audio-Visual Media**: Future studies could analyze television, radio, YouTube channels, and OTT platforms in various languages to assess how mental health is framed in visual storytelling.
2. **Impact Assessment on Audiences**: Surveys and psychographic studies can evaluate how these narratives affect the public's attitude toward mental health—especially in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities.
3. **Policy Evaluation**: Investigation into the implementation and impact of media reporting guidelines issued by the Press Council of India and WHO on suicide reporting could improve editorial practices.
4. **Language-Specific Campaign Models**: Developing mental health communication models tailored to specific languages, dialects, and regional cultures could result in better outreach and inclusivity.
5. **Training Programs for Journalists**: Partnering with journalism schools and media houses to introduce training modules on mental health reporting, ethical storytelling, and sensitive language.
6. **Community-Driven Media Initiatives**: Encouraging regional mental health NGOs to create content and partner with vernacular media could foster more authentic and localized reporting.
7. **Interdisciplinary Research** Combining insights from psychology, communication studies, and regional studies can help create a nuanced approach to mental health media literacy.

Ultimately, the aim should be to create a media ecosystem that supports mental wellness through culturally resonant, accurate, and empathetic journalism across all linguistic spectra in India.

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