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Effects of Media Exposure on Intention to Seek Mental Health Treatment in College Students

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EFFECTS OF MEDIA EXPOSURE
ON INTENTION TO SEEK MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT
IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Psychology

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Title: Effects of Media Exposure on Intention to Seek Mental Health Treatment in College Students

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Direct to consumer advertising (DTCA) has dramatically increased consumer requests for psychopharmacological treatments for depression. Despite increases in treatment awareness and availability, mental health stigma continues to serve as a significant barrier to help seeking behavior among college students.

This repeated measures experimental design explored the impact of a mock “radio advertisement” intended to simulate a DTCA with or without a directive to speak to a mental health provider about talk, medication and/or combined treatment options, on intention to seek treatment, attitudes towards seeking treatment and perception of self and social stigma. Additionally, the impact of certain personality factors such as openness to experience and neuroticism were explored. Experience with previous treatment including talk therapy, diagnosis, and psychotropic medication were also examined to assess their impact on intention to seek counseling, attitudes towards seeking professional psychological help, and perceived stigma.

Participants included 226 college students enrolled in General Psychology courses at a mid-sized, rural Pennsylvania university. Participant’s perceived stigma, attitudes towards seeking help, and intention to seek counseling in the future were assessed before and after exposure to the DTCA media stimulus.

In general, results support previous research regarding the inverse relationship between perceived stigma and attitudes towards help seeking and intention to seek treatment in the future. As expected, men experience greater stigma and therefore demonstrate more negative attitudes towards treatment and decreased intention to seek treatment. Regardless of treatment group, exposure to DTCA resulted in significant increases in attitudes towards seeking professional psychological help. A positive previous experience with talk therapy, diagnosis, and/or psychotropic medication was observed to have a significant positive impact on attitudes towards seeking help and intention to seek treatment in the future.

As in prior studies, DTCA aimed at medication treatment did increase positive attitudes towards help seeking. Importantly, the psychotherapy and combined messages (never highlighted in traditional psychopharmacological advertising) also showed effects. Future research may consider a focus on crafting very specific health messages aimed at gender differences, stigma reduction, and positive effects of "talk therapy", and testing the real-world impact of these messages on the treatment initiation in counseling and psychotherapy settings.