

Is mental health normalised in Norwegian news media? How mental health was framed in VG.no and NRK.no, 2018–2021

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Abstract

*News media can influence audience opinions. Thus, the media have enormous potential and responsibility when writing about societal issues, such as mental health. Mental health coverage has traditionally been criticised for creating stigma, as the topic is often presented in combination with violence and crime. Since the 1990s, researchers have found that more positive representations challenge negative portrayals, and that such representations change the audience's attitudes towards the issue. Few studies on the topic have been conducted in Norway; therefore, one cannot confirm or deny whether the exact coverage change is occurring. Using a quantitative framing analysis, this study argues that mental health issues were normalised in the two most-read online news sources, **Verdens Gang (VG.no)** and **Norsk Rikskringkasting (NRK.no)**, in 2018–2021.*

Keywords

Mental health, framing, normalisation, news media, stigma.

Introduction

News media has a long history of portraying mental health news in sensationalist stories, often involving violence and crime. They often frame mental health as involving unusual, deviant, or possibly dangerous behaviour. In addition, people with mental health issues are seldom represented in the news, thus they are denied the chance to explain their experiences. Instead, professionals and authorities tell their stories for them, using professional jargon and dehumanising their issues. For such reasons, the media have been said to stigmatise people with mental health issues (Jones & Corrigan, 2014; Morlandstø, 2010; Philo et al., 1994; Wahl, 2003).

Recent research suggests that news coverage of mental health in Western countries has become less stigmatised, as people with mental health issues are represented in the news and more positive frames are being used (Ohlsson, 2018; Paulsen, 2018; Roslyng, 2020; Van Beveren et al., 2020). Moreover, news articles on mental health are no longer predominantly related to crime or violence. Mental health is instead often represented by celebrities and laypersons with mental health issues fighting for their right to health-care. In addition, people with mental health issues are presented as “ordinary people” with understandable problems, as the causal factors of mental health issues are explained (Henson et al., 2009; Roslyng, 2020; Van Beveren et al., 2020). The “new” ways to portray mental health in the news media suggest that mental health has become more normalised.

There is a lack of research on mental health coverage in Scandinavia, particularly in Norway. Therefore, I conducted a quantitative framing analysis of news texts on mental health issues published in two online news sources, *Verdens Gang* (VG.no) and *Norsk Rikskringkasting* (NRK.no) between 2018 and 2021 ($N = 497$). This study argues that Norwegian news media portray mental health issues more positively and normally without stigmatising the topic. To elucidate *how* mental health news is normalised, this study answers the following research questions: 1) How is mental health framed in news sources? 2) Who is depicted as being responsible for mental health disorders? 3) What are the causal factors affecting mental health? 4) Are people with mental health issues presented in the news and, if so, how are they represented?

This article reviews previous studies on mental health issues in Western countries, focusing on the Scandinavian context. Here, the research questions will be contextualised and motivated, and the meaning of stigma will be elaborated. The second part introduces the theoretical framework, which explains what normalisation implies in this study and how news sources frame mental health as contributing to stigma and normalisation. In the Methods section, I present how the study was conducted, how the research questions were operationalised in the analysis, and which frames were used. Finally, I show the results and explain how the research questions support this study’s argument that mental health issues are normalised in VG.no and NRK.no. The article ends with a discussion and

conclusion, where I highlight further research gaps and this article's contributions to the literature.

From stigma to diversity

Scholars argue that the stigmatisation of mental health issues in news media can lead to social stigma, structural stigma, and self stigma (Jones & Corrigan, 2014; Schomerus et al., 2009; Van Beveren et al., 2020). Social stigma means that people discriminate against individuals and groups because of a presumption that their character is blemished (Goffman, 1986). Structural stigma means that discrimination is institutionalised as formal or informal. Studies have shown that stigmatising content makes people less likely to hire someone with mental health issues. This can lead to resistance to community care and increased forced treatment (Schomerus et al., 2009; Van Beveren et al., 2020). Self stigma is also known as internal stigma. People with mental health issues are not visibly marked; they can conceal their stigmatised attributes because the stigmatised attributes "are" their characters. An example is that people with such issues are afraid to "show" their perceived stigmatised characteristics to the extent that they avoid seeking professional help or support from their families (Bengts et al., 2008; Schomerus et al., 2009).

Earlier studies on mental health issues in news media have predominantly focused on whether and how mental health is stigmatised. However, newer studies show signs of normalising discourse, "where mental problems are represented as something common in combination with claims that mental illness is less associated with stigma today" (Ohlsson, 2018, p. 306).

The most common criticisms are summarised by Wahl (2003) and McGinty et al. (2016), who have conducted studies on the portrayal of mental illness in the mass media in the U.S. between 1995 and 2014. They found that violence and crime were the most frequently mentioned mental health topics. The "coverage has continued to emphasise interpersonal violence in a way that is highly disproportionate to actual mental illness" (McGinty et al., 2016, p. 1121). Furthermore, stories of recovery are rare (Wahl, 2003). The study of Van Beveren et al. (2020) on media coverage of mental health in six European countries showed that in contrast to five other countries (Cyprus, Belgium, Netherlands, Sweden, and Greece), crime was not one of the top five topics in relation to mental health in Norway. That was *celebrity and personal narratives on mental health issues*. However, this does not mean that crime stories or negative portrayals of people with mental health issues have disappeared. Instead, stories coexist with positive personal stories (Ljuslinder et al., 2009; Ohlsson, 2018; Paulsen, 2018). To determine whether crime stories are the most frequently told, my first research question was how mental health issues are framed in NRK.no and VG.no. The question will reveal how many news texts frames mental health as an issue involving criminal actions.

Another criticism is that people with mental health issues are seldom interviewed or used as sources (Clarke & Gawley, 2009; Philo et al., 1994; Wahl, 2003; Zhang et al., 2016). Instead, sources of information tended to be professionals and other authorities, who described mental health issues with professional jargon and gave a dehumanised impression of mental health issues (Ljuslinder et al., 2009; Morlandstø, 2006). Wahl (2003) called for news stories that include the perspectives of people with mental health issues. Their stories can challenge negative portrayals and public attitudes by providing audiences with a better understanding of their issues. Recent studies have shown that personal narratives have become increasingly widespread. Morlandstø's (2006) study on mental health issues in Norwegian newspapers only found a handful of personal narratives about celebrities or ordinary people who told their stories in easily understandable, human ways, thereby making them more relatable.

Sixteen years later, Paulsen's (2018) study of depression in Norwegian newspapers found that the most-used source of depression in VG and the regional daily newspaper *Bergens Tidende* was people who struggled with depression. Research from Australia showed that almost half of TV news items had positive human-interest stories. Henson et al. (2009) concluded that the human-interest stories portrayed people with mental health issues as part of "us", not as "others", a sign that people with such problems are presented as "one of us" in society. When people with mental health issues are used as sources of information, there may be an inclusive effect. The fourth research question was about whether people with mental health issues were present in news stories and how they were represented.

Personal stories can have adverse effects. A study of public and media responses to mental awareness weeks in Australia found that critics distanced themselves from focusing on individuals who tried to maximise their mental health, instead of discussing structural and societal issues (Holland, 2017). Major (2018) found that stories about individuals "lead the public to blame the individual in the story" (Major, 2018, p.18). This criticism is reflected by scholars who ask if the topic is becoming too individualised to the extent that mental health has become depoliticised and structural and societal factors, such as the healthcare system, are ignored (Roslyng, 2020; Zhang et al., 2016). Based on the previous discussion, the second research question queries who is portrayed as responsible for mental health issues: the individual, the public, or both. Asking this indicates where the news sources are responsible, regardless of whether the news story includes personal stories. The third research question asks what news sources are presented as causal factors for mental health issues. Are there individual factors? Or is the cause seen as predominantly structural, involving, e.g., lack of resources in the healthcare sector?

Framing can contribute to destigmatising and normalising mental health

As the previous section shows, many studies on mental health issues have shown that news media portray the topic negatively. The same studies have elaborated on what stigmatisation entails and the consequences it can have for individuals and groups (Jones & Corrigan, 2014; Morlandstø, 2006; Wahl, 2003). More recent studies have suggested that the portrayals of mental health issues have become more normalised (Henson et al., 2009; Van Beveren et al., 2020). However, there is a lack of definition of what normalisation means in relation to the news portrayal of mental health.

For Morlandstø (2006), normalisation means more nuanced articles where people with mental health issues get to tell their own stories. McGinty (2016) and Wahl (2003) favour stories of people living productive and usual lives because of decreased levels of social stigma. This perspective aligns with the findings of Van Beveren et al. (2020), who found that personal stories create understanding and identification and can contribute to the development of mental health issues in the media.

Ohlsson (2018) found multiple perspectives on mental health issues in the news. This suggests that mental health should not be presented as one-sided, especially if only one side connects mental health to crime. For the audience to see how mental health is both a societal and individual issue, a diversity of frames should be found in news media. This resonates with Major's (2018) conclusion that one size does not fit all when framing mental health.

McGinty et al. (2016) believe that the causal factors of mental health should be presented because the audience will understand the importance and complexities of the issue. Such recognition allows readers to determine which policy actions and resources are required. Major (2018) found that individuals in news stories motivate public responses and make the audience consider the societal causes of depression. However, the discussion remains on where responsibility should be placed: on the individual or the public system.

In other words, even though the normalisation of mental health is not defined, research has shown that for mental health to become more normalised in the news, the aforementioned qualities should be present. The number of stories connecting crime to mental health and other negative portrayals should be lower, and people with mental health issues should be present in news stories and define their own experiences. However, mental health should not be presented solely as an individual responsibility. This issue has both social and societal components. Journalists and news sources should frame mental health and highlight the political and societal obligation to provide healthcare and sufficient resources for the care of citizens.

This study suggests that the normalisation of earlier and stigmatised topics lies in combining personal and political/societal perspectives, providing both bottom-up and top-down insights into this topic. This allows the topic to be discussed with logical arguments and provides insights into experiences and subjective feelings, also called pathos

and ethos appeals. Thus, the topic is *allowed* into the public sphere, discussed in society's formal institutions, and involves people in their daily lives. Both perspectives provide insights into different but equally important aspects of the topic.

The focus in personal news reports is not logical arguments; instead, the arguments are the experience and the subjective feelings. Such news reports contain everyday descriptions "that may contribute to normalising the experiences of the sources" (Dahlstrøm, 2020). Pathos appeal can engage readers by creating emotional resonance and generating bonds based on compassion (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Personal stories can also work as a tool to explain complicated phenomena (Dahlstrøm, 2020). Bottom-up stories tell us something about reality and are more about how we *would* react in specific situations than how we *should* react.

Top-down stories tell the audience another aspect of the same reality. Thus, the political/societal perspective must also be present for an earlier stigmatised topic to become normalised. When a topic is openly discussed in the news media, it is not *silenced*. Public discussions are a sign that the topic is no longer seen as taboo or so "blemished" that it needs to be hidden from public eyes and ears. Public discussions indirectly invite people to form opinions on a topic. The political and societal perspective opens a space for discussing ethical dilemmas, resources, and principles, often less important in personal stories (Dahlstrøm, 2020).

News coverage has the opportunity to shape public discourse on societal issues, not only by reporting news but also because news coverage reflects "public discourse by reporting on the views and positions of policymakers [...] members of the public, and others who engage in issue debates" (McGinty et al., 2016, p. 1121). News media reflect and shape public discourse. One way to understand this two-way street is through framing theory.

In this article, how mental health is framed in news media guides readers' understanding of the issue. Thus, the stories readers receive about mental health and how such issues are described in media texts will influence how they understand and deal with them. In addition, how people with mental health issues are represented can affect their own perceptions of those who struggle with mental health. Frames select certain aspects of reality and "hide" others. In line with this, media texts about mental health issues should highlight textual qualities that normalise mental health instead of attributes said to be stigmatising.

However, news frames are not created in a vacuum. Frames are embedded in individuals, journalists, and audiences and shape the meaning and perception of news items. The culture and society in which the news text is created will also influence the content, because every society and culture has its own values, norms, and pre-understanding of societal issues. In addition, a newsroom's practices and resources also affect what is written in the news. Thus, framing mental health in the news is not just a matter of selecting the "right" qualities in a mental health story; framing mental health is a complicated pro-

cess heavily influenced by factors other than the journalist. The surroundings shape texts about mental health issues, and the text shapes public views (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Van Gorp, 2007). For the frames to contribute to the normalisation of the topic, they must resonate with the public, and vice versa.

Framing consists of several components: it promotes the definition of a particular issue, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and placement of responsibility (Entman, 1993). The components of a frame can influence the audience. Research has shown that news media mentions of the causal factors of an issue influence perceptions of the case. The placement of responsibility can endorse policies or individual options when facing the same problem. Depictions of specific individuals who exemplify the issue can change public attitudes towards people affected by mental health (McGinty et al., 2016). Factors contributing to the normalisation of mental health are *placed* in causal factors and responsibility attributions, and a positive representation must be understood based on the depictions of people with mental health issues.

The four research questions in this study highlight responsibility attribution, causal factors, representation, and the overall frame, not just because they are the components that influence the audience but also because qualities in a text contribute to normalising or stigmatising the topic found in those components.

Method

This study used quantitative framing analysis to answer the main research questions and sub-questions (Entman et al., 2009; Entman, 1993; Van Gorp, 2007). This method ensures that all media texts are systematically analysed (Bryman, 2016). A total of 497 news texts on mental health were analysed, and all texts were published by NRK.no or VG.no in 2018–2021. VG is the leading commercial and tabloid newspaper, while NRK is the oldest traditional broadcaster. The two news sources combined provide a picture of tabloid and public service news coverage on mental health online.

In 2021, most of Norway's population will read news online (85 per cent), rather than in traditional print (21 per cent). Therefore, I chose to analyse the digital editions of VG and NRK. Weekly, they reached 59 per cent (VG.no) and 42 per cent (NRK.no) of the population in Norway and are the two most-read news sources (Bjørnan & Moe, 2021).

All texts were retrieved from the A-Tekst Retriever, the National Media Archive of Norway, using specific search words. A-Tekst's archive comprises all Norwegian newspapers published online, including texts published behind paywalls.¹

Using A-Tekst, the researcher cannot know if the media texts analysed were read or made salient in the online newspaper, only whether they were published. This could be seen as a disadvantage in framing analysis, because framing can also entail text placement in newspapers. This study covers all relevant texts on mental health published on VG.no

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and NRK.no, regardless of the text's placement on the news page. This process demonstrates how mental health is framed within the news texts.

Four news weeks per year were established, as recommended for studying health news (Luke et al., 2011). I chose four random Mondays, weekends, Wednesdays, and so on, and analysed the texts about mental health published on the selected days. This general sampling strategy was used to avoid the significant impact of single events on the overall findings (Bryman, 2016).

Table 1: Number of texts published about mental health issues, VG.no and NRK.no, 2018–2021, in frequencies.

		Year				Total	Kappa value
		2018	2019	2020	2021		
Newspaper	VG	72	54	42	105	273	
	NRK	81	46	50	47	224	
Total		153	100	92	152	497	1

The criteria for selecting texts were that they should be about human mental health issues, not animals or “depressing weather”. This was ensured by closely reading all the texts that were found in A-Tekst using the search string. At first glance, there were 570 relevant texts; the final number of texts analysed was 497. I analysed all relevant texts published by VG.no and NRK.no about mental health issues regardless of genre, because mental health issues are not necessarily written about only in traditional news genres. The identified genres and the distribution of texts within them are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Genre distribution of texts about mental health issues, VG.no and NRK.no, 2018–2021, in percentages

Genre	Year				Total	Kappa value
	2018	2019	2020	2021		
News	62	58	53	66	61	
Commentary	14	15	12	15	14	
Leader	2	0	0	1	1	
Feature/Reportages	10	9	12	5	9	
Notis	9	13	14	5	10	
Review (literature, theatre, movies, etc.)	4	5	9	9	6	
Total	101	100	100	101	101	0,697

$N = 497$

All texts were manually coded by the author in IBM's SPSS Statistics using a codebook designed to answer whether mental health news texts were normalised. 10 per cent of the 497 texts was randomly chosen, coded by a student assistant, and a reliability test using Cohen's kappa was conducted. The reliability test showed an agreement between the two independent coders. All variables used had a kappa value between 0.6 and 1, which was considered nearly perfect, good, or fair (Bryman, 2016). All tables presented here show the individual kappa values.

Furthermore, in this study, I did not define the term mental health or the words used in the search string. Instead, I related the term to newspaper items in which these words were used. This study investigated how news sites refer to mental health issues, not mental health issues in a medical sense.

The search string involved the general term "mental health" (in Norwegian: *psykisk helse* or *mental helse*) to include texts that did not necessarily use diagnostic words but covered general stories about mental health issues. The search string also included the most common diagnoses in the adult population in Norway, including depression, anxiety, addiction, alcohol addiction, drug addiction, and addiction to prescribed medicine² (Reneflot et al., 2018). Finally, the search string included words related to less common diagnoses in the Norwegian population, such as PTSD, psychosis, and personality disorders. Other words that could cover the same content were also used, like "misbruk", another word for addiction and trauma. Indeed, this study did not cover all mental health issues or the phrasing of such issues.

The codebook was designed to answer the overarching research question, and four sub-questions were used to support and illuminate the answer to the overarching question. The four sub-questions correspond to Entman's (1993) components of an issue frames: issue definition, causal interpretation of the issue, (moral) evaluation of the issue/person, and responsibility for the issue.

Beginning with the last component, one variable (or question) in the codebook specifically asks who is responsible for the mental health issue: the individual, the public (meaning the society/politicians/health system), or both. To determine the causal interpretation of the issue, I asked what causal factors were related to mental health in the news text. Casual factors refer to what is presented as either contributing to mental health issues or the consequences of living with mental health issues. For example, sleep deprivation could contribute to mental health issues, which could lead to life crises and trouble at work. Because all are equally credible as part of the complexity of mental health issues, every factor is designed as an individual variable, also called a dummy variable, where the coder can respond if all factors are present in the news text. In this way, the results of this article can illuminate the multifaceted way mental health issues are presented in the news. In addition, one can also determine the frequency of which each factor is mentioned and if these factors are related to society, the individual, an everyday circumstance such as work, or more severe factors such as sexual assault.

When evaluating an issue/person, the codebook should provide results that tell us about its representation. Thus, a specific part of the codebook was designed to measure how persons with mental health issues are presented if the news texts highlighted a human with mental health issues. These variables were coded as zero if the news texts did not represent a person. As with the causal factors, the variables used to capture the representation and evaluation of people with mental health issues were dummy variables, because the representation of people is often quite nuanced in news texts. The variables capture whether the person is presented as a fighter, celebrity, or struggler; as an example to follow; or as criminal or normal. What I mean by normal is that the person is either compared to a normal person, explicitly described as normal, or presented as living a typical productive life (McGinty et al., 2016). Examples of this could be phrases like “Lisa has bipolar disorder but has a loving family like any other person”, “Michelle looks like a normal person”, or “David has a job, enjoys nature, and plays soccer with his friends on his days off” – just as one usually associates with normality (Briggs & Hallin, 2016). To answer the question of which mental health frame was the most dominant, I considered all the previous sub-questions and evaluated whether the narrative presented belonged to one of the five frames. The frames are issue-specific frames for media texts about (mental) health issues (Briggs & Hallin, 2016; Hågvar & Alnæs, 2020). These frames are understood as the underlying story or “the story behind the story” in news texts.³

Social awareness frame: In this frame, mental health is linked to society. The journalist or source seeks to expose, explain, or improve health problems by examining demographic, sociological, economic, and political contexts. Governments or other authorities are generally seen as responsible for mental health; authorities are questioned and/or mental health news of societal interest may be portrayed. Case stories are familiar in this frame, and individuals are often seen as victims of repressive structures or as “activist heroes fighting back” (Briggs & Hallin, 2016; Hågvar & Alnæs, 2020).

Patient/consumer/lifestyle frame: In this frame, the patient/citizen is often seen as able to be (and often is) responsible for their health. Therefore, the text is usually organised around how individuals first notice their mental health problems and learn to live with or resolve them. While medical experts can provide knowledge or advice, the individual is the agent of action, and the journalist often takes on the adviser role. This frame is associated with service journalism and neoliberalism, focusing on the individual rather than external factors such as society and democratic processes (Briggs & Hallin, 2016; Hågvar & Alnæs, 2020).

Celebrity frame: In this frame, the celebrity (in its widely understood meaning) is the central focus. Celebrities might have fallen ill and become exposed to mental health issues, or their previous experiences of a mental health disorder were mentioned. The story would have no news value without the celebrity focus (Hågvar & Alnæs, 2020).

Experience frame: Identification is central to this frame. Positive mental health stories give hope or comfort or create empathy and an understanding of mental health issues.

Often, the news also focuses on celebrities. The difference between the two was that there was a deeper understanding of the situations and experiences of mental illness in this frame. Lay persons, close friends, or family can also be the story's centre. Personal narrative and closeness to the disease make this different from the celebrity frame (Hågvar, 2021).

Crime frame: Earlier studies have shown that crime is a common theme in mental health news (Morlandstø, 2010; Wahl, 2003). The crime frame describes mental health using a narrative that mainly revolves around crime, in which either the victim or the perpetrator struggles with mental health. The crime frame is often associated with violence and presents a person with mental health issues as deviant (although some exceptions exist). The crime frame can also be related to mental health failure, either at the individual level (the offender lost control) or at the societal level (police or the health sector failed to help a person with mental health issues).⁴

Results

Mental health is a societal issue

Frames in news media highlight certain aspects of reality and guide audiences' understanding of the story told in the text. Furthermore, some qualities in texts about mental health are said to be normalising, while others are understood as stigmatising. Asking how mental health is framed in VG.no and NRK.no reveals the aspects of mental health that the audience encounters.

One of the five news articles on mental health published in 2019 belonged to the crime frame, meaning that mental health was not predominantly related to crime. The crime level is at the same level as in 1999/2000 and 2009 in Norway (Morlandstø, 2010), meaning there has been no change in the number of texts combining mental health and crime in Norway for several years.

The crime frame decreased in 2020 and 2021 to about 10 per cent. There is no clear answer as to why the crime frame has dropped. As I discuss later, this could be due to the pandemic in 2020/2021 or the Norwegian election in 2021. Such events often shift a country's general news orientation.

Social awareness was the most common mental health issue in VG. no and NRK. no (40 per cent of the total, Table 3). This frame indicates that mental-health issues are societal and/or political problems. In social awareness texts, journalists, and/or sources seek to expose, explain, or improve mental health by examining political discussions in the health sector and holding authorities responsible. Presenting mental health issues as societal issues may be a sign of normalisation because they are being acknowledged as legitimate public health issues, which society is open to discussing publicly.

On 13 May 2020, NRK.no published a short news bulletin: "A study at the University of Oslo showed that anxiety and depression tripled in adults. Kirkens SOS (a nongovern-

mental organisation) received twice as many calls about suicide than before the coronavirus crisis” (NRK, 2020). The quote is an example of news stories behind the increase in the social awareness frame after the pandemic came into effect in 2020 (from 31 per cent in 2018 to 40 per cent in 2021). The increase in social awareness could be because the pandemic caused the government to implement strict policies to ensure people’s health and safety. As a result, the government took more responsibility for public health, thereby making it simultaneously responsible for policy outcomes. The pandemic also led the government and parliament to take responsibility for the population’s mental health, as restrictions led to isolation and decreased mental well-being. Therefore, many texts from 2020 were concerned with the population’s mental health reactions to COVID-19 policies.

Table 3: Mental health frames in VG.no and NRK.no, 2018–2021, in percentages

Frame	Year				Total	Kappa value
	2018	2019	2020	2021		
Patient/Consumer/Lifestyle	14	11	14	15	14	
Social awareness	31	34	45	49	40	
Celebrity	22	29	20	24	23	
Experience	12	3	11	5	8	
Crime	22	23	11	7	15	
Total	101	100	101	100	100	0,741

N = 497

In 2021, more political matters are likely to be included in the news texts and social awareness frame because Norway’s general election was held in September. The opposition parties promised to improve the mental health sector and provide more resources, as the sector proved incapable of handling the increase in the number of patients during the pandemic. In this way, mental health became a major political theme in elections.

The patient/consumer/lifestyle, celebrity, and experience frames were present and remained stable each year. Combined, the frames represented 43 per cent of the mental health texts. A mix of frames provided varied news about mental health. These frames present individuals as active patients who take responsibility for their mental health. News texts provide the audience with tips and tricks to optimise their mental health (patient/consumer/lifestyle frame). The news texts also told the audience about celebrities’ mental health issues (celebrity narrative frame) and laypersons’ personal mental health experiences (experience frame). Consequently, the audience is presented with different perspectives. Mental health is presented as not uncommon and as an issue integrally shaped by society.

Individual responsibility

This study found that responsibility was placed on the individual in half of the texts in 2018 and 2019 and 40 per cent in 2020 and 2021. After 2020, one out of four texts attributed responsibility to the public. Finally, in the election year 2021, the public was seen as responsible for mental health issues by 44 per cent of the texts. The increased number of texts seeing the public as responsible for mental health issues could be due to the pandemic and the election. Nevertheless, mental health issues were mainly presented as individual problems (45 per cent).

Table 4: Allocation of responsibility for mental health issues in news texts, VG.no and NRK.no, 2018–2021, in percentages

Solution	Year				Total	Kappa value
	2018	2019	2020	2021		
NA	2	0	0	0	1	
Individual	49	52	40	40	45	
Public	26	29	33	44	33	
Both	24	19	27	17	21	
Total	101	100	100	101	100	0,684

$N = 497$

The allocation of responsibility can affect how the audience perceives mental health issues, their origins, and remedies. Moreover, in some cases, placement could influence the resources that people believe are available when countering mental health issues, such as their inner “strength” or the welfare system.⁵

The question is whether emphasis on individual responsibility overshadows the fact that mental health could also be connected to societal and structural issues, as critics have warned (Major, 2018; Roslyng, 2020; Zhang et al., 2016). To answer this question, one must look at the factors that determine mental health.

Causal factors for mental health

Table 4 shows that the individual is seen as responsible for mental health issues – however, Table 5 allocates the nuances of responsibility. Presenting the causal factors of mental health in the text tells the audience what the constituents and consequences of mental health are. Extending this, causal factors lead the audience to connect mental health to individual factors, like personal life crises or sleep problems, societal factors like political issues, structural issues in the health sector, or discriminatory laws.

Forty per cent of all texts mentioned the structural and systematic causes of mental health issues. Twenty-seven per cent of the texts related political matters to mental

health, and 22 per cent mentioned work. This indicates that although individuals are mostly considered responsible for their mental health, mental health issues are connected to societal issues. In contrast, factors related to personal life, “nutrition and exercise”, and “isolation and loneliness” are some of the least mentioned factors in 2018–2021.

*Table 5: Causal factors of mental health issues in news texts, VG.no and NRK.no, 2018–2021, in percentages**

Factors	Year				Total	Kappa value
	2018	2019	2020	2021		
Structural/System	38	32	36	51	40	0,643
Political issue	20	16	26	41	27	0,697
Work	16	20	26	25	22	0,832
Life crisis	17	28	13	24	21	0,776
Crime	22	21	19	18	20	0,668
COVID	0	0	33	20	12	0,618
Isolation/Loneliness	9	5	14	9	9	0,789
Victim of sexual assault	10	7	7	4	7	1
Nutrition/Exercise	5	3	4	7	5	1
Sleep problems	3	3	4	4	4	1

N = 497

* Numbers collected from dummy variables

There was also a noticeable difference in the causal factors related to mental health issues in news texts after the pandemic came to Norway in 2020. “COVID” was not mentioned as a causal factor prior to 2020 but was mentioned in 33 per cent of the cases in 2020, decreasing to 20 per cent in 2021. Mental health is related to politics (policies, resources, etc.) twice as often in 2021 and 2018. Other factors related to mental health issues seemed relatively stable each year, COVID or not.

Positive representations

Earlier studies criticised news media for not using people living with mental health issues as sources or mentioning them in news texts (Clarke & Gawley, 2009; Philo et al., 1994; Wahl, 2003; Zhang et al., 2016). Recent studies have shown that they are receiving increasing attention and are now foremost in news texts (Paulsen, 2018; Roslyng, 2020). Obtaining perspectives on mental health is vital to creating empathy and understanding such issues. However, when individuals with mental health issues are presented in the news media, one should not assume that presence indicates a positive representation. Therefore, we measured two aspects in this study. First, how many news articles on mental

health issues present human examples?⁶ And second, how are these cases presented in the news?

Approximately half of all texts published between 2018 and 2021 highlighted human cases when writing about mental health, which means that an individual was either the main story or a vital part of the news text. However, this number decreased and ordinary people were less abundant in texts after the pandemic began in 2020.

Laypersons were the most frequently used cases in the four years combined, meaning that the two newspapers often used “ordinary” people to exemplify mental health issues (27 per cent). Celebrities were present in 21 per cent of the cases in the texts analysed. This means that mental health was presented as something that happens both to ordinary people and to people well known to the public.

Table 6: Mental health texts including cases and how cases are presented in news texts, VG.no and NRK.no, 2018–2019, in percentages

	Year				Total	Kappa value
	2018	2019	2020	2021		
Text includes a case	54	59	46	44	50	0,679
Case presented as*						
Layperson	32	35	22	18	27	0,623
Normal	23	25	28	27	26	0,605
Celebrity	18	23	22	21	21	0,691
Fighter	25	15	20	19	20	0,635
Struggler	20	30	17	16	20	0,732
Example to follow	19	13	20	19	18	0,631
Criminal	16	13	11	8	12	1
Mistreated by the system	13	11	4	7	9	0,657
Deviant	11	8	10	7	9	0,646

N = 497

*Numbers are from dummy variables

Human cases can be presented in texts in overlapping ways, as the variables are not exclusive. The story’s main character is often presented dynamically, particularly in the future. For example, one case could describe someone as a fighter *and* a struggler, like Michelle, who was first introduced as someone who struggled with drug addiction and lost her husband to an overdose. She is *also* presented as a fighter, as she had decided to seek treatment for her addiction and return to school (Øfsti, 2019). Likewise, a celebrity could be presented as deviant, for example, Kanye West, who tweeted that he had peed on his Grammy award (Støre, 2020). A more common combination is that criminals are also

described as deviant, as this title shows: “The 31-year-old charged with murder believes he ‘was controlled’ during the knife attacks” (Quist & Husby Sandnes, 2020).

What normal or familiar means in this study implies that individuals are explicitly presented as living routine lives, such as having a family and a job, or they may be presented as “one of us”. For example, in 2020, NRK created a feature series of prison inmates immediately before Christmas. One of the criminals said that he missed his family (Thommessen, 2020), as most people would do when separated from their loved ones during holidays. The same goes for Michelle, whom the journalist describes as “not the stereotype of a heroin addict. She has a straight back and a steady gaze, speaks clearly, and is neatly dressed” (Øfsti, 2019). To be presented as an example to follow, a person who struggles with mental health issues is explicitly open to the media to help destigmatise their issues or make a positive contribution to society. Knut Olav is categorised as follows: He was a war veteran who had struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for several years. Now, he works for an NGO helping other veterans on the sailboat, “The Swan”, dealing with the same issue (Kjølleberg & Schaubert, 2021).

When VG.no and NRK.no wrote about people living with mental health issues, they were more likely to be presented and/or described as examples (18 per cent) years or younger (27 per cent), as opposed to criminals (12 per cent) or deviant (9 per cent). Twenty per cent are presented as strugglers who are not directly positive, but can create empathy and understanding. Finally, 9 per cent are presented as people who, in one way or another, have been mistreated by the system, meaning they have not received the help they need from the healthcare system.

Discussion and conclusion

This study examined whether mental health issues were normalised in the two most-read Norwegian news providers from 2018 to 2021. Four sub-questions were addressed to illuminate how mental health issues are normalised: how the issue is framed, who is said to be responsible, what the causal factors of mental health issues are, and if and how people with mental health issues are presented.

First, this study showed that mental health issues were mostly framed as societal issues (social awareness frame, 40 per cent). This suggests that mental health is not secondary to physical health but is a part of *public health*. Mental health is also framed as an individual issue through patient/consumer/lifestyle, experience, and celebrity frames. All these frames share the awareness that they forefront individuals with mental health problems in a way that creates empathy and a deeper understanding of such issues (experience frame), showing that even celebrities have mental health issues (celebrity frame), or that individuals are capable of living with mental health issues and taking responsibility (patient/consumer/lifestyle frame). These three frames represent 43 per cent of all texts analysed from 2018–2021.

This means that when the audiences of NRK.no and VG.no read about mental health issues, they encountered different and varied news texts presenting both societal and individual perspectives on mental health issues. This also means that the audience can “gain insight into alternative ways to conceptualise the issue at hand” (Ohlsson, 2018, p. 312). On the one hand, the perceived framing effects become complicated, but on the other, they also allow audiences to accept different stories about mental health by accepting frames or combining them in different ways (Entman et al., 2009).

In this article, the varied ways mental health is framed should be seen as favourable in three ways. First, mental health coverage has been criticised for neglecting societal and political aspects of the issue (Roslyng, 2020; Zhang et al., 2016). This study showed that the same neglect does not occur in VG.no or NRK.no. Second, news articles on mental health *also* contain personal stories. The human element normalises mental health by providing insights to the audience, which can demystify diagnoses such as depression or schizophrenia (McGinty et al., 2016; Morlandstø, 2006; Wahl, 2003). Third, the combination of personal and societal framing indicates that mental health issues are not *one-sided*.

However, nearly one in five texts on mental health published in 2018–2019 belongs to the crime frame. Thus, in those two years, the number of news texts connecting mental health to crime was at the same level in selected print news outlets as in 1999/2000 and 2007 (Morlandstø, 2010). This indicates that VG.no and NRK.no can create stigma towards people with mental health issues, as such coverage has been proven to cause public fear and misconceptions about mental health illness (Wahl, 2003).

During the first pandemic years (2020–2021), only one of ten news texts belonged to the crime frame. The decrease in the crime frame could signify that mental health coverage in news sources is becoming less stigmatising, or that the pandemic and the election in 2021 changed the general news orientation to mental health. Therefore, one should not assume that the low crime frame rate will continue. Future studies should be conducted to measure how many texts about mental health in the Norwegian media feature crime after the pandemic, as the number of texts connecting mental health to crime has proven to be a clear indicator of stigmatising content.

The second finding in this study is that the individual was responsible for mental health for all years (45 per cent). There are variations between the pre-pandemic years (2020) and the election year (2021), where it seems that the public is more responsible for providing mental healthcare during the pandemic.

There is a discussion regarding the placement of responsibility in the media and whether it causes additional pressure on mental health issues. Suppose that an individual is seen as solely responsible. In this case, they are, in effect, the only ones to blame for their problems, and are presented as dysfunctional with a blemished character (Goffman, 1986; Zhang et al., 2016). Therefore, the placement of responsibility must be seen in relation to what is mentioned as a causal factor of mental health, because this reveals

what factors contribute to mental health issues and what consequences this has for the individual.

The third finding reveals that the most frequently mentioned causal factors of mental health are broadly related to society: political solutions regarding resources, structural issues in healthcare, and pressure at work. The least mentioned factors point back to individuals, such as nutrition and exercise. Even though individuals have a personal responsibility for their health, societal factors are woven into the complex picture of what contributes to mental health consequences.

The causal factors mentioned by the news sources “tell” the audience that the individual is not solely to blame, because it is mostly external factors causing mental health issues. Furthermore, causal factors highlight for the audience, laypersons, and policymakers which policy actions should be addressed to counter the causes and consequences of mental health issues (McGinty et al., 2016). This means that news sources in this case point towards the need for political and structural improvements. This mirrors the findings of this study that mental health is presented by VG.no and NRK.no from both human and societal perspectives, thereby suggesting it is an issue concerning both.

Fourth, the material shows that half of the published texts present human cases to exemplify mental health issues and/or forefront personal stories. Representation of people with mental health issues in the media can signify the humanisation of mental health (Ljuslinder et al., 2009). Their stories could challenge the notion of having a blemished character, as such stories create an understanding of identification, which contributes to destigmatising mental health issues. Personal stories can be inclusive (Henson et al., 2009); however, this depends on *how* people with mental health issues are represented and/or described.

When people with mental health issues are represented by VG.no and NRK.no, they are primarily favourable. One in four was explicitly compared with the conception of normal, as one of “us”, as persons with mental health issues are described as living ordinary lives. One in five was described as an example of following a fighter. In comparison, only one in ten was described as criminal or deviant. Thus, this study demonstrates that people with mental health issues were seldom represented in a stigmatising way in the news text; to the contrary, the representation was more normalised than earlier studies found in Norway (Morlandstø, 2010).

Although studies on mental health coverage in news media are very clear about what contributes to stigma, definitions of normalisation are lacking. This study suggests that earlier, stigmatised topics are becoming more normalised when presented in the news media as *political*, *societal*, and *personal*. This is because these perspectives present the topic from both bottom-up and top-down perspectives, which allows for different arguments, subjective feelings, personal experience, and logical arguments. Personal stories can generate compassion and emotional resonance, whereas political and social news

reports ensure that mental health is discussed openly. Further, they open the door for discussing resources, ethical dilemmas, and principles related to mental health.

Based on all four findings and this study's definition of normalisation, we argue that the coverage of mental health issues in VG.no and NRK.no in 2018–2021 contributes to normalising the issue: People's experiences with mental health issues are told as intertwined with societal perspectives, showing that mental health is not only a personal experience but also a socio-political matter. Although individuals are primarily responsible for their actions, the most frequently mentioned causal factors of mental health are politics and structure in the surrounding society. Political and societal obligations are discussed so as to organise resources for citizens. In the period analysed, people with mental health issues are represented positively and as "one of us". Finally, the crime frame was increasingly less dominant.

Comparing this study's findings with earlier studies on mental health coverage in Norway more than 13 years ago shows that coverage is becoming more normalised. As coverage has improved, there are reasons to believe that the population's attitudes and beliefs towards mental health is changing. Whether the normalisation of mental health issues in the news media has normalised mental health issues in society is beyond the scope of this study.

This study uses only data from the national news media. Thus, these findings do not comprehensively treat local, regional, niche, or social media portrayals of mental health. More studies should be conducted, especially on social media, because that coverage may be more influential for younger people. The findings of this study cannot be generalised to other countries, as news coverage on mental health reciprocally influences culture, politics, tradition, and history. More importantly, scholarly interest in mental health coverage has long been limited to media content rather than audience perceptions. Future research should address this gap by studying whether different audiences perceive mental health issues as normal when presented in the news media.

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Notes

- 1 The search results of A-tekst are not affected by the online newspaper algorithms, meaning (among other things) that any previous search or browser history does not skew the search results. Every media text that matched the search criteria was made available to the researcher.
- 2 The search string used in A-tekst was constructed by the author and was as follows: "Mental OR helse OR psykisk OR depr* OR angst* OR Spiseforstyrrel* OR Bipolar OR Mani* Or ADHD OR ADD OR Schizofre* OR Psyko* OR misbruk OR avhengig* OR alko* OR narko* OR PTSD OR Traum* OR personlighetsforstyrrel* OR Selvskad* Or selvmord* OR Suici* OR lidelse OR adferdforstyrrel* OR rus* OR OCD". The search words are a combination of Norwegian and English, as A-tekst recognises both.
- 3 The narrative frames used in this study are based on the health models of Briggs and Hallin (2016) and Hågvar and Alnæs (2020), and Hågvar's (2021) development of those models. The five frames are the social awareness frame, the patient/consumer/lifestyle frame (Briggs & Hallin, 2016), the celebrity frame (Hågvar & Alnæs, 2020), the experience frame (Hågvar, 2021), and the crime frame, which was added to reflect the fact that mental health stories in the media have a history of being about violence and crime.
- 4 The absence of another model, the biomedical authority model, deserves some additional explanation. Briggs and Hallin (2016) used the biomedical authority model in their original framework, which is a model for health news in which sources cited are biomedical authorities and ordinary persons are passive receivers. This model implies a hierarchy between biomedical professionals and others, and information is presented as factual. It is worth noting that the information the authority informs about is biomedicine (Briggs & Hallin, 2016, p. 26). While this kind of framing of mental health issues was found in Author's (1996) study of depression (2018), it was hard to find a clear example of this kind of frame in 2018–2021: Biomedical reasons were rarely given to explain mental health issues in the news texts analysed in this study, at least not to the extent it could be said to be an overall framing of the text. Therefore, the biomedical authority model was removed from this study as a frame.
- 5 Although the frames used in this study *also* indicate allocation of responsibility, this study also registers placement of responsibility in a separate variable. This is done because placing responsibility in the news texts does not always correspond with the frames, as one text could consist of more than one frame, and all news texts, regardless of whether they follow the same pattern, are unique. Furthermore, placement of responsibility is measured by viewing the text as a whole.
- 6 The way that cases are measured in this study is quite open: To be a human case, a text does not have to involve a direct interview with an individual, but rather a person with mental health issues should be presented with enough detail that it is possible to code the description. Cases could also be the main subject in the text if they were presented as living with mental health issues. Family, friends, or other spokespersons were excluded from being counted as a case. This case category makes it possible to include persons with mental health issues who cannot be interviewed for some reason; for example, criminals in custody, children who, in some cases, should be shielded from the press, and other persons who are not deemed fit for interviews (Morlandstø, 2006).