Systematizing Destigmatization in the Context of Media and Communication:

A Systematic Literature Review

Extended Abstract zum Tagungsthema

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We are aware of the problem of stigmatization, which can be reinforced by media portrayals. Various studies explored how media should be designed to destigmatize in a specific context. However, there is currently no consistent definition for destigmatization that brings together these approaches. Therefore, the aim of this research is to systematically derive a definition of destigmatization (RQ1). Furthermore, it is of interest which factors in the context of media and communication can influence destigmatization (RQ2). Through this systematic study, we highlight the responsibility and potential positive impact of media and communication for destigmatization.

We conducted a systematic literature review and combined two types of reviews—scoping review and theoretical review. The search was conducted using three databases (WoS Core Collection, CMMC, and Google Scholar). We intentionally chose a simple and therefore inclusive search string: destigma*. By searching the databases, $n=1452$ publications were identified. After removing duplicates, we performed *abstract-based-screening* with $n=1269$ publications. Based on titles and abstracts, we decided on the relevance of the publications referring to four inclusion/exclusion criteria: They had to be detailed scientific publications (1) in English (2) with destigmatization as a thematic focus (3) and a relationship to media or communication (4). We identified $n=257$ relevant publications, of which $n=200$ were accessible and peer-reviewed full-texts in English. We then drew a random sample of $n=100$ publications for our *full-text-reading*. After reading, re-evaluating the mentioned inclusion/exclusion criteria, and coding the full-texts, $n=79$ publications remained for our final analysis.

In our sample, we only found very few detailed definitions of *de*stigmatization, as most of the analyzed publications only define stigmatization (predominantly based on

Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001) and conclude that destigmatization is work on stigmatization. Nevertheless, to answer RQ1, we derived the following definition of destigmatization based on our systematic literature review:

> Destigmatization is the communication-based process of working on change for stigmatized individuals and groups to decrease labeling and the separation between *Us* and *Them* and to reevaluate the societal construction of who is "worthy". This process exists on the societal level and needs individual and structural efforts, since power relations benefit from and therefore reproduce stigmatization or destigmatization. Individual backgrounds of the stigmatized groups and different forms of stigma have to be considered. Most importantly, the perspective of the stigmatized group should always be asked for and included in the process of destigmatization.

We then systematized the factors that—based on our sample—influence destigmatization in the context of media and communication (RQ2). We identified four factor groups:

> **1) Contact** with the stigmatized group, especially through video, social media, and photography; effective through processes like, e.g., empathy and perspective-taking
>
> **2) Education** of the general public with accurate information about the stigmatized group; e.g., the presence of experts in media content
>
> **3) Language/terminology** regarding the stigmatized group; e.g., reflection on outdated terms for stigmatized conditions
>
> **4) Information presentation approach** of information about the stigmatized group; e.g., framing of information in media portrayals

Here, we see some consistencies with models of destigmatization strategies by Corrigan and Penn (1999) and Haghighat (2001), which we transferred and specified according to the media and communication context.

Our systematically derived definition of destigmatization can be applied in an interdisciplinary manner within the context of media and communication. We aimed to uncover common ground between various research efforts on destigmatization. Nevertheless, we want to stress that both our definition and the identified factors serve as a starting point for extensions and should be adjusted depending on the stigmatized group of interest and the specific situation overall. Not all factors will work for all situations. But it is worth looking at this "toolbox" (meaning the identified factors) and discussing which factors could be feasible. Therefore, our results serve as a basis for future research and as a guide for practitioners who aim to develop destigmatizing media content and communication strategies.

We define destigmatization as a communication-based process. Also, as media and stigmatization are strongly connected, media and communication science has a responsibility to contribute to destigmatization. With our systematic literature review, we follow a progressive perspective with a focus on *de*stigmatization rather than stigmatization. We call for a focus of future research on strategies for destigmatization and equality, for research on solutions that allow a *good life* for everyone—and contribute with our derived definition and the systematization of factors influencing destigmatization. As "we destigmatise for love of humanity" (Haghighat, 2001), we continuously have to work on destigmatization.

Literature

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