Photojournalism and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Understanding How Photographs Can Contribute to Stereotypes

Ashley Reese

Advised by Dr. Keith Greenwood

ABSTRACT

This study was a quantitative content analysis that examined the visual characteristics of 971 photographs of persons with post-traumatic stress disorder published online by 14 major U.S. newspapers. The goal of this study was to determine whether certain characteristics were common among the photographs, and if these characteristics correlated with certain photographic moods and media frames that could be perpetuating stereotypes of PTSD and mental illness. Results found that photographers and photo editors were employing a few media frames, such as males and veterans are the most likely people to have PTSD. The study also suggests that the news media may be leaning slightly toward depicting persons with PTSD as depressed, but it also shows an increasing tendency to show human resilience. This study helps explain how the use of media frames could be causing photographers and photo editors to contribute to stereotypes of PTSD, and how these stereotypes could be detrimental to society. As a content analysis, the study contains details that could help inform journalists of exactly how they are employing these media frames. This research could also be used to help develop a scale on which visual characteristics correlate with certain photographic moods.