

Research on “Mediated” Vicarious Traumatization in Major Epidemics

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ABSTRACT

In the beginning of 2020, a new type of coronavirus pneumonia broke out in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. What deserves our attention is that there is an increasing tendency of vicarious traumatization caused by Social Media During the Pneumonia. The emphasis of this study lies in the research of the media's role in promoting the formation of vicarious traumatization during the outbreak pneumonia, and the impact of vicarious traumatization on human psychology. Our goal has been to provide ways to alleviate “mediated” vicarious traumatization in the pneumonia. We conducted research based on psychological theories and Journalism and Communication investigation. Through analysis, we found that “mediated” vicarious traumatization may have a strong and persistent negative effect on the contact's psychology, which requires great attention and timely suppression. In addition, this article puts forward expectations for future quantitative research on vicarious traumatization and the development space of new media.

Keywords: “mediated” vicarious traumatization, public psychological problems during pneumonia, social media, trauma intervention

1. INTRODUCTION

Vicarious traumatization is referred to as VT, originally proposed by McCann and Pearlman [1]. The definition of VT is that a professional psychotherapist has similar symptoms due to long-term contact and interaction with the patient. McCann and Pearlman believed that VT is caused by the psychotherapist's empathy for the traumatization of the treated person while working with the treated person. With the development of science and technology, the emergence of social media makes the information age come. The transfer of information has exceeded the limits of time and space. Although the rapid development of the media has brought many conveniences, it has also made disaster and traumatic news visible to anyone who is a social media user. People continue to receive information about a catastrophic event via the media, which may produce the painful experience of witnessing the event. This is the reason for the “mediated” vicarious traumatization.

1.1. Related Work

Based on the history of vicarious trauma research, we divide existing work into two phases.

1.1.1. Establishment of the concept of vicarious trauma

According to McCann and Pearlman's study [1], VT originally referred to professional psychotherapists who experienced similar symptoms due to long-term contact

with patients and received the interactive influence of the consultation relationship. According to the research by Lerias, Doukessa et al. [2], having to intervene in the serious crises and tragedies of human beings may cause serious and persistent harm to individuals, such as anxiety that impairs health. These hazards can last for years. Personal traumatic experience, growth environment, social support, age, gender and other factors are indirect factors leading to VT. However, since trauma formation is indirect, the injured individuals often do not receive enough attention, and even the source of the pain cannot be detected by themselves.

1.1.2. Attempts to establish prevention mechanisms in multiple areas

Efforts to research and preventive mechanisms of vicarious trauma have been made in various fields.

1.1.2.1. Vicarious Traumatization study for Clinical Staff.

Since 2003, qualitative measurement methods and preventive mechanisms on vicarious traumatization have gradually developed, and increasingly attention has been paid to clinicians. A 2003 study by Baird et al. [3] attempted to identify factors related to vicarious traumatization. Among 101 traumatization counselors, the factors directly related to VT were client exposure workload and work compensation, and were not related to overall burnout and secondary stress traumatization. In addition, more educated, older, and less experienced counselors received less emotional traumatization. Based on Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber's topological correlation model,

Richard and Marvin proposed a protection scheme for related practitioners in 2009 [4]. The plan mainly starts from the subjective perspective of the relevant practitioners. The content has nine main measures including counter isolation, developing mindful self-awareness, consciously expanding perspective to embrace complexity, active optimism, holistic self-care, maintaining clear boundaries, exquisite empathy, professional satisfaction and creating meaning. At present, the main research is based on the investigation of the case population, so the solutions obtained are based on the individuals.

1.1.2.2. Vicarious Traumatization study for Non-clinical Staff.

Due to the development of science and technology, the availability of information has become higher, which has increased the possibility of non-employees being exposed to major disasters, and the scope of victims of vicarious traumatization has increased. However, the VT of non-employees has not yet attracted enough attention. In the existing study, eight authors [5] studied the impact of 911 on the VT influence among undergraduates at three public universities. According to research, people who are closer to the center of the explosion and people who have been exposed to television news for longer are more affected. In addition, participation in related events, such as blood donation, attending vigils, and gender also have an impact on the degree of harm.

1.2. Our Contribution

In various fields, researchers have made efforts to establish the VT prevention mechanism, and achieved practical and effective results. However, due to the rapid progress of science and technology, the development of the media has exploded at an extremely rapid rate. People have had countless interactions and connections with this world, and online social networks (OSN) have formed great popularity and influence [6]. The prevalence of OSN means that during major crises, such as disasters and illnesses, it may have a significant boost to the spread of VT. Because the scope of this impact is widespread, and there is not enough relevant information, and the harm is easy to be ignored. Taking the new coronavirus pneumonia that broke out in Hubei Province, China in January 2020 as the background, we analyzed the role of Sina Weibo, the largest mainstream social network platform in China, on the spread of VT. We hope to attract people's attention and try to propose a suppression plan.

1.3. Paper Structure

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the pathological analysis of VT of the public based on the characteristics of the user population during

the pneumonia epidemic. Section 3 presents the role of Sina Weibo's operating model on the spread of VT. Then, a preventive plan proposed based on "mediated" VT will be developed in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 make conclusion of this paper and presents direction for future research.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Pathological Analysis of Vicarious Traumatization during Epidemic

According to Yu Mei's analysis [7], rich knowledge and experience are the cognitive factors that make up mental capacity. Certain experience can enable individuals to make correct cognition in the face of emergencies, and thus taking reasonable measures. Professor Jun of the Capital Medical University Hospital indicated that an important principle for the formation of "vicarious traumatization" is that the degree of damage that people have witnessed exceeds the psychological and emotional tolerance limits of some of these people [8]. According to Professor Yu Guang's team's capture of Sina Weibo user information in 2016, the age distribution of Sina Weibo is shown as below [8].

Table 1 Distribution of users by age

Generation (year old)	[0-17]	[18-22]	[23-28]	[28+]
Proportion (%)	3.94	32.44	39.81	19.11

According to the table, 72.25% of Weibo users are aged between 18 and 28. In other words, Weibo's user base is relatively young, and some of them have weak psychological tolerance when facing epidemic information and are more likely to be harmed by vicarious traumatization.

2.2. The role Weibo's operating model plays on the spread of Vicarious Traumatization

Sina Weibo, as China's largest online social network, is an information-driven online social network [6]. When it comes to information, the main operating content of Sina Weibo, anyone can post information within 140 words anytime, anywhere. The follower model used by Sina Weibo allows users to form a network of discussion content across time and space. If you enter the content network, such as retrieving tags, users can receive a lot of relevant information. In addition, the hot section will push news and current affairs and recommend related information based on the user's browsing scope. According to our analysis, there are many characteristics of Weibo in this epidemic that have helped fuel the situation. The three main ones are: fragmentation, cheap cultivation cost (low threshold to

become a “big V”, easily spread rumors), and weak public opinion guidance. To begin with, fragmented text has an immediate advantage in event reporting, but it often leads to one-sidedness in the news. The one-sidedness leads to the news breaking away from the systematic consulting system, and the negative content is often magnified. Affects users' judgment of events, increases negative emotions of users, and promotes the generation of rumors. Fragmented information often causes the "core" of the event to be dissipated [9]. Rational analysis is dissipated, replaced by entertainment and recreational forwarding. In the context of the epidemic, emotions are amplified and reason is diluted [10]. From this point of view, users who have been fragmented for a long time can hardly face factual news rationally, but are more affected by public opinion and lose their judgment. To continue with, cheap cultivation cost enable every user to post their opinion. Weibo could not guarantee a high degree of authenticity of the information. On January 24, 2020, Weibo user "Witch Xiaoxi" posted a video Weibo, saying that the hospital she was in had patients who died in the hospital corridor and no one collected the bodies. This video was confirmed to have undergone secondary processing, and before this user deleted Weibo, this video received more than 154,000 playbacks. The low cultivation cost of Weibo makes rumors easily generated and exaggerated. In the research by Joyce and King-wa, on Sina Weibo, the general public is the largest category of message initiators, but its ability to lead public opinion is limited, and it is necessary to rely on the media to expand public attention to the event. On the one hand, the power of the people is revealed, and on the other, rumors may arise [11]. Serious news even spreads faster than real and rigorous news. This also makes many innocent users suffer from more pain and harm. To end with, the opinion guidance is weak. The most intuitive manifestation is the frequent occurrence of "bad tail" news. "Bad tail" refers to more questions, more investigations, less conclusions, rumors spreading wildly, and no powerful promotion of refutation messages. During the epidemic, the most common phenomenon was a steady stream of bad news. As a media, Weibo is not effective in following up on follow-up reports. Users often do not have access to information indicating that the problem has been resolved. On the one hand, negative thoughts that are deteriorating are generated, and on the other hand, the credibility of the media is doubted.

Under the current situation that modern people are highly dependent on social media, "mediated" VT has caused great distress to people's lives unknowingly. It is imperative to increase vigilance and take precautions. In the context of this pneumonia, we believe that the following measures should be taken to suppress the occurrence of vicarious traumatization. For media users, when they feel oppressive pain, despair, helplessness and other emotions, they should temporarily cut off the source of information and suspend receiving information about the epidemic. Do things in time to relax and make yourself happy. When you pay attention to the epidemic information again, you should first think calmly and obtain the “fact” in the media instead of emotional rendering. Second, you should keep your own

rational thinking and focus on developing the habit of evaluating events in various aspects and looking at the essence through phenomena. As media workers, you should pay attention to the supervision and guidance of public opinion, and promote the improvement of the media supervision system. The sense of social responsibility should always be maintained.

3. CONCLUSION

Through research, we found that Sina Weibo promoted the spread of vicarious traumatization among users. "Mediated" VT means that its cause is not only the victims themselves, but also the imperfection of media development. Not only Chinese media, imperfect stage is a stage that is inevitable in the rapid development of global media. Suppressing "mediated" VT is not only a concern for people's psychological problems, but also a demand for the improvement of the media to play a positive role. It is hoped that more people can pay attention to psychological problems, and researchers can formulate a clearer and more official VT test scale in the future. Media people should clarify their social responsibilities and actively improve the media to make it play a positive role.

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