Breaking the silence: Extending public relations theory to address the underutilization of mental health services among Chinese immigrants in the United States

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Abstract

Mental health services underutilization has been a prevalent issue in Chinese immigrant community in the United States. Using a nation wide survey of 445 Chinese immigrants in November 2017, this study investigates the effects of cognitive barriers (i.e., acculturation levels) and affective obstacles (i.e., mental illness stigma) on Chinese immigrants’ perceptual, attitudinal, and behavioral responses toward mental health services, by combing situational theory of problem solving and the theory of planned behavior. This study also examines the effects of mainstream and ethnic media use on acculturation and perceived stigma. Findings provide empirical support for the combined model, showing that all the cognitive and affective factors can predict Chinese immigrants’ communicative action and behaviors regarding mental health services utilization. In addition, this study found that acculturation (cognitive barriers) is an effective predictor of individuals’ ability to recognize the problem, connection to the problem, subjective norms regarding the problem, and their perceived behavioral control over the problem. On the other hand, mental illness stigma (affective barriers) can predict individuals’ constraint recognition, attitudes, and perceived behavioral control over the issue. Practical implications are discussed for health public relations practitioners and communicators to better identify publics, propose strategic messages, and implement communication campaigns to improve Chinese immigrants’ mental health services utilization rates.