



# The Disclosure of Celebrity Major Depressive Disorder Diagnoses in Hong Kong: Its Effects on Public Awareness and Understanding Toward the Illness

Vivienne S. Y. Leung<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper aims to examine consumer perception toward celebrity diagnoses of major depressive disorder (MDD) in Hong Kong and to provide insights into the effect of various factors on the persuasive effectiveness of MDD communication. A total of thirty-five interviews were conducted in April 2015. Interviewees in general are aware of celebrity MDD diagnoses, but they do not deem MDD as a threat to themselves. Hence, they are not motivated to learn more about the symptoms. Responses to celebrity MDD diagnoses are mixed. Many interviewees are sympathetic toward ill celebrities diagnosed with MDD, but some of the interviewees are dubious about the true intention behind disclosing their diagnoses to the public. Compared to non-fans, fans reported a greater increase in the level of knowledge of MDD after reading related media stories about celebrity MDD diagnoses. Source credibility is perceived as an important factor in MDD communication. This research suggests that the government or NGOs may use credible celebrities whose image can be associated with MDD and cooperate with fan clubs to spread health-related information. The paper represents the first attempt to investigate the effects of celebrity disclosure of MDD diagnoses on the mental disorder-related perceptions of the general public in Hong Kong.

**Keywords** Celebrity · Depressive disorder · Attitudes · Health communication · Hong Kong

## Introduction

Celebrity plays an influential role in health communication, as celebrities are effective in raising public awareness of a particular disease, affecting consumer behaviour, and even changing public perceptions toward the disease (e.g., Pollock III 1994; Kelaher et al. 2008; Hilton and Hunt 2010). This paper recognizes the power of celebrities in health communication and aims to assess their potential impact in the area of major depressive disorder (MDD). MDD is a prevalent and serious mental disorder, which is significantly undertreated and stigmatized globally (World Health Organization 2008, 2012). According to previous studies, highly publicised illnesses may affect the public's awareness and behaviour (e.g., Kalichman and Hunter 1992, p. 1374; Kelaher et al. 2008, p. 1326). This paper will examine the

effects of the celebrity disclosure of MDD diagnoses on the mental disorder-related perception of the general public. It is expected that increased exposure to publicity about celebrity MDD diagnoses may lead to increase awareness and understanding of the disease.

## Literature Review

### Potential Impacts of Ill Celebrities in Health Communication

Celebrity is perceived as one of the effective tools in raising consumer awareness of a particular disease (Chapman et al. 2005, p. 247; Alonso 2006, p. 30; Hilton and Hunt 2010, pp. 1–2). Celebrity is an attention-gathering mechanism that can attract media attention and focus the spotlight on a particular issue. For example, after Kylie Minogue's breast cancer diagnosis went public, a 20-fold increase in news coverage of breast cancer occurred (Chapman et al. 2005, p. 247). The intensive media coverage may lead to an increase in concern about the disease and interest in

✉ Vivienne S. Y. Leung  
vivleung@hkbu.edu.hk

<sup>1</sup> Department of Communication Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong

acquiring more information about it (e.g., Kalichman and Hunter 1992, p. 1374; Kelaher et al. 2008, p. 1326). Similarly, basketball star Earvin Johnson disclosed his HIV seropositivity, and there were significant increases in interest in AIDS information and concern about AIDS among the respondents (Kalichman and Hunter 1992, p. 1375; Kalichman et al. 1993, p. 888).

Celebrities' effect on raising public awareness also applies in the field of mental illness. Due to the social stigma of mental illness, MDD has been underdiagnosed and undertreated, and a majority of sufferers choose to remain silent or even refuse to admit their internal distress (Capriotti 2006, p. 241; González et al. 2009, p. 37; Fujii et al. 2012, pp. 235–236). Media stories about celebrities revealing their own histories of depressive disorders challenge the norm of hiding the shame of mental illness and may encourage mentally distressed people to seek help (Alonso 2006; Capriotti 2006, pp. 241–242). Harper (2006) believes that audiences may express sympathy for mentally distressed celebrities, and this type of compassionate identification with the media stories may help to destigmatize mental illness. Their public disclosure of their own stories may also initiate a public discussion of mental suffering (Alonso 2006, pp. 30–31).<sup>1</sup> Leslie Cheung, a renowned Hong Kong celebrity, who had been suffering from depression, committed suicide in 2003. Cheung's death illuminated the seriousness of MDD to the public and motivated those of his fans who also suffered from depression to seek help (Chow 2005b). Moreover, the Mood Disorders Centre of the Chinese University recorded an increase in inquiries from potential patients after Cheung's death (Chow 2005b), thus proving celebrity's great influence on public awareness of mental illness.

In recent years, the topic of mental illness has become increasingly prominent in society, and media stories of mentally distressed celebrities also proliferate (Harper 2006). In Hong Kong, mentally distressed celebrities were increasingly willing to talk about their health conditions after the death of Leslie Cheung, including<sup>2</sup> Albert Leung (Lin Xi) (a local renowned lyricist),<sup>3</sup> Lam Kin-ming (a local female

actress),<sup>4</sup> Sammi Cheng (a famous local female singer),<sup>5</sup> Fiona Sit (a famous local female singer) and others. In addition to sharing their stories about fighting depression, some of them are actively involved in helping other sufferers and in educating the public. For example, Lam Kin-ming founded the Joyful (Mental Health) Foundation in 2004, which aims to spread correct information about mental illness and support mental patients in Hong Kong (Chow 2005a). Sammi Cheng recorded a theme song for the HK Familylink Mental Health Advocacy Association to help increase public awareness of mental illness and to raise funds for the organization.

Since research findings about the impact of ill celebrities and the related media stories of their diagnoses have been mixed in the past, this notion prompts the first and the second research questions.

RQ1: In general, is the general public aware of celebrities who are diagnosed with a serious illness? What specific kinds of information interested them the most?

RQ2: Would media stories that report information about a celebrity's diagnosis induce positive attitudinal changes toward the ill celebrity?

### Factors Affecting a Celebrity's Persuasive Effectiveness in MDD Communication

Though celebrities are in general effective endorsers in the field of mental illness, there are certain factors that may mediate their degree of effectiveness. An industry survey reported that credibility is an important factor in celebrity endorsement of pharmaceutical products (Moynihan 2004). According to the source credibility model, the expertise and trustworthiness of the source may affect message effectiveness (Hovland et al. 1953; Hung et al. 2011, pp. 609–610; Ohanian 1991; Lafferty et al. 2002, p. 3). Similarly, a celebrity who is perceived to be trustworthy and knowledgeable about the medical condition is more effective in spreading the message about the mental illness or the pharmaceutical products (Moynihan 2004, pp. 102–103).

In addition to credibility, source attractiveness is another theoretical framework for endorser effects in advertising. The components of source attractiveness include likability, familiarity and similarity. The more attractive a source, the more effective the message (Hovland et al. 1953; McGuire

<sup>1</sup> Leslie Cheung Kwok Wing was a Hong Kong singer-songwriter, actor and film director. He is considered as "one of the founding fathers of Cantopop" in Hong Kong entertainment business. He committed suicide on April 1, 2003, by leaping from a Hong Kong hotel while suffering from depression (Billboard 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Albert Leung, under the pen name Lin Xi, is a renowned, award-winning lyricist based in Hong Kong. He previously suffered from anxiety problems, and he was reluctant to undergo therapy to treat his problem (China Daily 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Lam Kin Ming is a actress in Hong Kong. She once suffered from depression and anxiety disorders. She established the Joyful (Mental Health) Foundation in 2004. The aim of the Foundation is to promote awareness of mental health in the community and to avoid misunderstanding and discrimination regarding the disease (Joyful Mental Health Foundation 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Sammi Cheng is a renowned Hong Kong Cantopop singer and actress. She is one of the most prominent female singers in Hong Kong. She battled serious depression for 3 years starting in 2005. She has spoken publicly about her battle with the disease and cites it as a life-changing experience (Lollipop 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Fiona Sit is a Chinese Cantopop singer and actress in Hong Kong. She exhibited signs of severe depression as early as 2008. She slashed her waist and became obsessed with suicide. She recovered after she found strength in God (Jayne 2012).

1985). A celebrity with personal experience of the medical conditions about which he or she speaks is usually a more effective messenger in health communication (Moynihan 2004, p. 324). A possible explanation for this relationship is that a perceived fit between the source and the cause enhances the attribution of social motivations (Lafferty et al. 2004, pp. 515–517; de los Salmones et al. 2013, p. 5). For example, if a celebrity is a mentally distressed patient, consumers will attribute more altruistic motives to his or her behaviour, which in turn enhances the celebrity's credibility and ultimately the message effectiveness (de los Salmones et al. 2013, p. 4).

In addition to the personal attributes of the celebrity, the celebrity–consumer relationship also plays a crucial role in determining message effectiveness. According to the Celebrity Worship Scale (McCutcheon et al. 2002), the celebrity–consumer relationship has three dimensions. In low levels of celebrity worship, consumers are mainly involved in individualistic behaviour, like reading news about their favourite celebrities for entertainment purposes. In higher levels of celebrity worship, the consumer's relationship with the celebrity is characterized by social activities. For example, such a consumer enjoys watching and talking about their favourite celebrities with friends or other fans. The highest worship levels involve identification with their favourite celebrities' successes and failures, and even over-identification, compulsive behaviours and obsession with details about the celebrities' lives on the part of consumers. These relational bonds between consumers and celebrity are important, as they are perceived to be a significant psychological foundation and behavioural antecedents for the endorser effect, which exerts substantial influence on value transfer and consumer behaviour (Hung et al. 2011, p. 620). This discussion prompts the following research questions.

RQ3: Do source attributes affect MDD communication to the public? Which source attribute, that is source credibility or source attractiveness, is more effective in communicating MDD-related information?

RQ4: Compared to non-fans, will people who share a closer celebrity–consumer relationship pay more attention to MDD?

### Public's Perceptions Toward Mentally Distressed Celebrities

The content of media stories about celebrities' mental distress may influence their image according to consumers' responses. Consumers' responses to media stories of celebrity mental distress are complex. Though mental illness is attached to a continuing social stigma, narratives of celebrity mental illness are not necessarily a hindrance to a celebrity's career (Harper 2006). For example, Brooke Shields and Sammi Cheng have each written a book about their

depressive disorders and gained favourable responses and evaluation (Clark 2008, p. 452). Harper (2006) observed that, in contemporary Western culture, the Greco-Roman association of madness with genius still persists in mainstream narratives. The romanticizing association regards mental illness as a source of artistic creativity and, therefore, mental illness becomes a synonym of artistic credibility. In recent years, more and more celebrities have come forward to disclose and discuss their mental distress in public. Harper (2006, p. 312) believed that this kind of self-exposure allows celebrities and their publicists to have a higher degree of control over their star image, through which they may promote the “mad genius” stereotype to reinforce the unique aura of the celebrity involved (Harper 2006, p. 314).

In addition to proving artistic authenticity, stories of celebrity mental illness allow audiences to glimpse a celebrity's reality. The “realistic” disclosure of a celebrity's mental distress arouses audiences' sympathy and can be used to vouchsafe the “ordinariness” of the celebrity (Harper 2006). In fact, the private lives of celebrities are increasingly addressed in an intimate way, signifying a “democratic” counter-impulse in celebrity culture that appeals to audiences (Clark 2008, pp. 456–457). As such, the celebrities are attainable, as they are “just like us.” Therefore, Harper (2006) believed that mentally distressed celebrities become well loved after disclosing their medical conditions, because audiences would compassionately identify with the celebrities. This kind of compassionate identification may at the same time help destigmatize mental illness. Moreover, the misery of the mentally distressed celebrities may even provide feelings of consolation and make audiences feel better about their own lives (Harper 2006, p. 323).

Set against this background, Harper (2006) also highlighted that this kind of consolatory identification may contain a certain degree of *schadenfreude*. Though celebrities are admired and desired by the public, their privileged social status and glamorous life, at the same time, emphasize the public's own insufficiency, which may arouse their desire to shame celebrities (Clark 2008, p. 456). This explains why both the achievements and failures of a celebrity are fascinating to the general public. Therefore, media stories of celebrity mental illness may arouse both sympathy and the desire to shame the celebrities involved. This notion prompts the fifth research question.

RQ5: What is the public's perception of mentally distressed celebrities in HK, who self-disclosed their illness on media?

### Reasons to Study Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)

MDD is a mental disorder characterized by a sad, empty, or irritable mood, accompanied by somatic and cognitive changes that may lead to a decline in an individual's capacity

to function and the impairment of the individual's quality of life (American Psychiatric Association 2013). MDD is a serious mental disorder and is estimated to become the first leading cause of burden of disease in 2030, which means that MDD will be the first leading cause of years of life lost due to premature mortality and years lost due to disability for people living with MDD or its consequences (World Health Organization 2008). Although more than 350 million people suffer from MDD in the world, fewer than half of them receive medical treatments; in some countries, the percentage of those who receive proper treatment may even be lower than 10% (World Health Organization 2012).

The problems of underdiagnosis and undertreatment also exist in Hong Kong. According to Lee et al. (2007, p. 133), 32.5% of respondents with MDD reported frequent thoughts of suicide. 85.7% of respondents with MDD recognized that they had an emotional problem, but only one quarter of them sought professional treatment. The significant discrepancy between the prevalence rate and the rate of doctor-reported depressive disorder indicates that a majority of mentally distressed people do not seek professional treatments (Lee et al. 2007, pp. 133–135; Chin et al. 2011). It is estimated that this high rate of underdiagnosis and undertreatment may be due to a lack of resources and social stigma associated with mental disorders (Lee et al. 2007; World Health Organization 2012) or unawareness (Fujii et al. 2012, p. 235). Therefore, to encourage more mentally distressed people to seek help and to understand the cause and consequences of the disease, it is essential to increase public awareness of MDD and to remove the social stigma attached to the disease.

A pilot test was conducted at a university in Hong Kong in March 2015 in order to investigate the general public's reaction to celebrity MDD diagnoses in Hong Kong. Factors affecting the persuasive effectiveness of MDD will also be studied in order to provide practical insights into the strategic health campaigns for the government and NGOs.

## Methodology

This study employed qualitative interviews. A qualitative methodology was justified for this study, because it provides an interactive way to gain understanding of the meaning that humans attach to events and a close understanding of the research context in which collected data could initiate new questions and further data collection (Ghauri and Grønhaug 2005).

A total of 35 interviewees were recruited to partake in a face-to-face, in-depth interview in April 2015. A general education class of about 35 students in a public university in Hong Kong was asked to invite a friend to partake in an interview. Of the 35 interviewees, 18 were females, while 17 were males. All interviewees were aged from 18

to 50. Six of them were 18–25 years old, 11 of them were 26–30 years old, 10 of them were 31–40 years old and eight were 41–50 years old. The interviewees were asked to give their viewpoints on three major areas: (i) awareness of celebrity diagnoses with MDD and related media stories that covered the disease; (ii) the celebrity's (source) persuasive effectiveness and celebrity–consumer relationship in MDD communication; and (iii) public perceptions of mentally distressed celebrities in Hong Kong. (Please see the interview questions as attached in the appendix below).

All interviews were recorded by audiotape and transcribed in Cantonese. The transcripts were analysed question by question by the author and a project assistant. The author and the project assistant coded the qualitative data under predetermined semantic themes, such as the types of media stories on celebrities illness, recall of media stories that covered the disease of ill celebrities, and the perceived effectiveness of source attributes, which affects MDD communication. Thematic analysis was then adopted in this study to examine commonalities and differences among the responses from the interviewees. The analysis was based on a small number of participants, yet the frequency count can indicate the participants' tendency of agreement or disagreement on a particular theme.

## Findings

### Awareness of Celebrity Diagnoses with MDD and Related Media Stories

Research question one explored the public's awareness of celebrity diagnoses of mental illness. Results showed that all interviewees were well informed about media stories of at least one celebrity MDD diagnosis in the past 10 years without aided. Among various reports on celebrity MDD diagnoses, the most well-known cases reported are Sammi Cheng's MDD story (a renowned female singer/actress) (12 out of 35) and the suicide incident of Leslie Cheung (a famous male singer/artist) (14 out of 35). Both of them are popular, famous singers/artists in Hong Kong. Some interviewees were shocked, especially when they learned that Leslie's death was caused by MDD. He committed suicide on April 1, 2003, and many people in Hong Kong believed that his death was a joke. He proved as elusive in death as he was in life.

It was so unforgettable when I learned that Leslie jumped from the hotel because of MDD (Female, I7). Leslie was very famous. This disease bothered him for quite a while. I would like to know more about the disease. His death is a total shock for everyone (Male, I27).

It was so scary to see Sammi be super skinny on magazines because of MDD. (Male, I30). Her case was the talk of the town back then (Female, I4).

Some interviewees want to know why some celebrities are diagnosed with MDD. Some are glad to learn that the ill celebrities are recovered. They enjoyed reading stories about their journeys to recovery, as those stories are perceived as encouraging and inspiring.

There are various reasons why a celebrity suffers from MDD. Is it because he or she cannot take negative criticism from the public and the media? Or is it because he or she cannot withdraw from the character he or she played in a movie? Also, how does a celebrity get over it if he or she is too stressed in work (Female, I8)?

Except Leslie Cheung, quite a number of female artists had successfully recovered from MDD such as Fiona Sit and Sammi Cheng. I want to know what makes them recovered and what are their motivations (Male, I30).

Sammi announced to the public that she suffered from MDD for four years. I am pleased to know that she recovered. Now she looks healthier and happier (Male, I1).

I'm interested to know who is the primary care doctor for those ill celebrities and the curing methods or treatments, so that if I have the same problem in the future, I will know where to seek help (Female, I12).

Research question two explored whether media stories that report information about a celebrity diagnosis would induce positive attitudinal changes toward the ill celebrity. The results showed that almost half of the interviewees experienced a positive attitudinal change toward the ill celebrity. Interviewees thought that the celebrity's story of winning the battle against MDD or overcoming obstacles during the treatment was encouraging and touching. They also appreciated the celebrity's courage and toughness during their battle for recovery.

I like her (Sammi Cheng) more. On one hand, I pity her. On the other hand, I am touched to see her helping others. She was diagnosed with MDD for 4 years, and she was so depressed that she quit her job in the entertainment business during the whole period while she was sick. I'm glad that she can help other people by sharing her own personal experiences now (Male, I30).

I think she (Sammi Cheng) is doing a great job! How did she get through all of these tough times whilst the mass media kept trying to criticize her? That was definitely not easy for her. She proved that she could recover, because she believed in the mottos "never give

up" and "good things will always come at the end." I appreciate her more now (Female, I31).

Although one-third of interviewees were shocked (15 out of 35) when they learned of a celebrity with MDD diagnosis, and they showed pity (12 out of 35) toward the ill celebrity, some people (eight out of 35) were dubious about the truthfulness and genuineness of the celebrity's intention. They expressed belief that celebrities may have used the disease to gain publicity.

How can you tell the real symptoms of MDD? Journalists or media always like to make up stories for media coverage. I doubt if media stories about a serious illness of a celebrity are true (Male, I1).

To a large extent, media stories in the entertainment industry are mainly for publicity only, for instance Dada [a Hong Kong female actress]. She does not appear to be stressed, so I guess it is more like a self-promotion gimmick only (Male, I13).

The media likes to exaggerate nowadays. You cannot trust any news, even with pictures available. They can still fake it (Female, I28).

It is her privacy! As long as the disease does not create too much trouble for her (Male, I1).

I doubt the truth. Maybe she [Dada] is lying... she is not mature for disappearing after her announcement of MDD. I think she is trying to gain pity from the public and making excuses (Female, I16).

Only a small number of interviewees reported a negative attitudinal change toward media stories about ill celebrities.

I am disappointed towards Leslie, in particular after learning that he committed suicide due to MDD. I like him a lot before though. MDD is not something we cannot manage. He should have tried to seek professional help and talk to his friends (Male, I21).

### **Celebrity's (Source) Persuasive Effectiveness and Celebrity–Consumer Relationship in MDD Communication**

Research question three explored celebrities' perceived credibility (including trustworthiness and expertise) and the attractiveness to MDD communication effectiveness. Interviewees were asked to indicate, on a scale from one to five, how much they believed the source attributes of celebrities (that is, attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise) are important for advocating MDD-related information. The results indicated that attractiveness (about 37%) is not as important as trustworthiness (about 66%)/expertise (about 57%) in MDD communication based on the measurement at

the mid point. The finding does not refute the fact that the attractiveness of the source is not important in MDD communication. The results demonstrated only that, if a celebrity is perceived as trustworthy or experienced, the celebrity is more reliable and appropriate to disseminate MDD-related information.

I pay attention to media stories about a celebrity [Sammi Cheng], because her image is positive. I believe in her, because she is credible. The story about she suffering from MDD problem grabs the public's attention (Female, I4).

Celebrities are professionals, but they are not experts in the medical area (Female, I4).

I trust him [Lin Xi, a famous local lyricist] because of his credibility and reputation. I think his advice on his MDD treatment is reliable (Male, I3).

Research question four examined the influence of the celebrity–fan relationship regarding MDD awareness. The results indicated that a favourable celebrity–fan relationship seems to be positively correlated to MDD awareness, while a casual celebrity–fan relationship appeared to have an insignificant influence on MDD awareness.

The case of Fiona Sit's MDD diagnosis (a HK female singer) does not change much about my knowledge towards this disease. I learn nothing about this disease from any media reports (Female, I5, neither a fan nor a non-fan of Fiona Sit).

I learned something very important from Leslie's case. I think that, if we found anyone close to us who is diagnosed with MDD, we need to show more caring toward them. We need to take them to see doctors immediately (Male, I19, a fan of Leslie Cheung).

Before Leslie died, I thought MDD would lead only to depression but nothing serious. After he died, I realized that MDD can actually cause someone to die. It's a serious disease, and everyone should pay more attention to it (Female, I12, a fan of Leslie Cheung).

### Public's Perceptions of Mentally Distressed Celebrities in Hong Kong

Research question five explored the public's perception of mentally distressed celebrities, who self-disclosed their illness on media. The results showed that the publics have mixed responses on media stories about celebrity mental distress. On one hand, narratives/media stories of a celebrity's journey to recovery are perceived as positive, encouraging and touching. People appreciate the celebrity's courage and determination to fight the battle. On the other hand, they are

disappointed when the celebrity commits suicide because of MDD.

Seven interviewees believed that MDD diagnoses that were self-reported by the ill celebrities are more credible and trustworthy compared to diagnoses that was revealed and reported by the media, because the celebrity who announces his or her medical condition first is perceived as courageous and genuine.

I respect the celebrity more if he or she discloses their diagnosis to the public himself or herself (Male, I26).

If he announces the diagnosis himself, it shows that he has the courage to undergo the treatment more seriously than stories that were revealed by the media. The act per se becomes more trustworthy and reliable. (Male, I27)

Some interviewees, however, think that a celebrity who announces his or her MDD diagnosis to the public is a fake act. To them, those celebrities are trying to gain publicity only. Therefore, media disclosure of their condition is perceived to be much more trustworthy.

Those celebrities who disclose their diagnoses to the public seem to have a hidden agenda. They aim to gain sympathy from the public only. The disease per se is their selling point (Female, I4).

Intriguingly, it appears that the best way to disclose the diagnoses is to have it reported by the media first and admitted by the ill celebrity honestly afterward.

I will show more pity to the ill celebrity if the media reported his or her diagnosis first, but of course given that the story is true. I think it is unfortunate for someone to be sick, and it is even worse if the media reported something negative about him or her. We should show more support to those who are strong enough to face the battle for recovery. (Male, I23)

### Discussion and Implications

In this qualitative study, the researcher asked 35 interviewees aged 18–50 in Hong Kong about their views regarding celebrity MDD diagnoses. There are three major observations. Implications are discussed as below.

First, consumers are aware of celebrity MDD diagnoses in Hong Kong, but they are unaware of the seriousness and danger of MDD. A majority of the respondents are not motivated or interested in getting more MDD information; for instance, consulting a medical professional. This finding contradicts the results in previous studies, which suggested that people who become aware of a disease will usually change their behaviour in a positive way, such as to seek for

more information or to consult a doctor (Kalichman et al. 1993). The possible explanation is that most media stories of celebrity MDD diagnoses in Hong Kong are mainly gossipy. In the research, interviewees commented that major media stories of celebrity MDD diagnoses are superficial. No solid information about the cause of the disease or possible treatment was given. In addition, people probably still think that they have the self-efficacy to control stress themselves without seeking help from professionals. In a traditional Chinese cultural context like Hong Kong, it is still considered taboo if one consults a psychiatrist for mental stress problems. Unlike other common diseases, such as cancer, or a viral transmission such as the flu and fever, the symptoms of depression are not easy to identify or diagnose. As previously mentioned, the problem of MDD underdiagnosis is prevalent in Hong Kong due to lack of resources, social stigma associated with mental disorders (Lee et al. 2007; World Health Organization 2012) and unawareness (Fujii et al. 2012, p. 235). There is an urgent need for the government or NGOs to develop health promotion campaigns to educate the public about the causes and threats of MDD.

Secondly, the public's attitudes toward the media coverage of celebrity MDD diagnoses are mixed. This study showed that celebrity MDD diagnoses might induce sympathy or support from people. Disclosure of celebrity illness aroused their sympathy, as they realized the "ordinariness" of the celebrities and compassionately identified them (Harper 2006). They feel sorry for the mentally distressed celebrity for being criticized by the media (Johansson 2006). However, some people are dubious about the truthfulness of such disclosures and their intentions. Interviewees expressed that disclosure by the celebrity of his or her mental condition is merely a "publicity stunt" to draw the media spotlight. This study also demonstrated that source credibility is a significant attribute or factor in MDD communication. Interviewees perceived trustworthiness to be a more important factor affecting effectiveness in MDD advocacy followed by expertise. Attractiveness is among the least important factors comparatively.

Compared to non-fans, fans or people who like the celebrity are more likely to relate themselves to the celebrities' MDD diagnoses. Some of them may even consult medical professionals' advice. This corresponds to some previous studies, which suggested that a stronger relational bond between consumers and a celebrity result in a stronger or more obvious emotional reaction to the media story (Hung et al. 2011).

Since source credibility and celebrity–consumer relationships are significant factors that influence MDD communication, perhaps health policy makers should carefully consider the use of celebrity representation in the future. The government or NGOs can cooperate with fan clubs to spread health-related information. Celebrities who had

previously suffered from serious depression are recommended. For instance, results indicated that Sammi Cheng is a reliable and an attractive source. She has a favourable, healthy image, and her efforts to help other MDD patients are well recognized. Health policymakers should consider inviting her to participate in future health promotion campaigns.

Lastly, from the perspective of image/reputation management of the celebrity diagnosed with MDD, it is advised that the celebrity should self-confess the diagnosis him or herself. The results indicated that self-disclosure of the diagnoses is perceived as more genuine and sincere and therefore can arouse more sympathy from the public. With regard to what information should be disclosed, this research found that, although narratives and stories of journeys to full recovery were inspiring, people are more interested in the treatment methods of MDD. As one interviewee mentioned, "I want to know about the treatment and the causes of MDD rather than the privacy of the ill celebrity". This research suggests that health policymakers or NGOs should cooperate with celebrities with MDD to highlight the curing methods or causes of MDD in campaign communication. The media, public policy makers and celebrities should work closely together to create an effective message with educational value. In so doing, the general public is more informed about the details of the disease per se. The self-disclosure of celebrities' MDD diagnoses presents an opportunity to improve public health.

The study has limitations. First, the study sample was limited; only thirty-five interviewees participated. Limited size restricts the generalizability of a study to represent the mass public's perception towards celebrity of MDD diagnoses in Hong Kong. Second, the celebrities reported are pop entertainers. No political celebrities or sports celebrities were reported. Third, this study investigated only the public's awareness towards media stories of MDD diagnoses and factors affecting their understanding of the celebrity and his/her mental disease. The content of the media stories that covered celebrities' illness was not examined. In this research, people tended to think that the self-disclosure of celebrity's MDD diagnosis was more genuine and credible than stories that were first disclosed and covered by the media. Future study should compare and contrast the differences between stories of MDD that were self-reported by the celebrities with those that were revealed by the media agent. It is expected that the source of the story would induce different attitudes towards the celebrity diagnosed with the disease.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was provided by all participants in this research as per ethical guidelines in Hong Kong at the time of the study. All participants were aware that the interview was conducted on voluntary basis and they agreed to partake.

## Appendix: Interview Questions

To facilitate the interview, here's the definition of major depressive disorder. Major depressive disorder (MDD) is a mental illness referring to the presence of sad, empty, or irritable mood, accompanied by somatic and cognitive changes that significantly affect the individual's capacity to function.

### Questions

1. Have you come across any media stories about any local celebrity who is diagnosed with major depressive disorder (MDD) in the past 10 years? Can you recall the names of the celebrities? He/she has to be a local celebrity. [Interviewers please drop down all the names here]
  - a. Assist if the interviewees have problems telling the name of the celebrity.
2. From your knowledge, did he/she self-report his/her illness by himself/herself or is it discovered/speculated by the news agent/media?
3. Which medium did you hear about their stories? Please name all, including social media. [Interviewers please drop down all media here]
4. What information/message in the media stories about the celebrity illness are you *most interested in*? Why?
5. What information/message in the media stories about the celebrity illness are you *least interested in*? Why?
6. From all media stories that you can recall, which one is the most memorable to you? (Please tell me the name of the celebrity)
  - a. Why?
7. What was your initial emotional response? [please write down everything the interviewee tells you here]
  - a. Probe if the interviewee have problem answering the question. E.g., do you trust the story? Are you impressed etc?
8. Why is this particular media story memorable to you?
9. Do you like the celebrity mentioned in the story? Are you a fan of the ill celebrity?
10. How do you describe your relationship with the celebrity?
  - a. (probe only when the interviewees cannot answer this question) e.g., I aspire to her/him; I look up to him/her; I follow her/his news everyday; I identify with his/her image etc.
11. Did you change your perception towards the celebrity after you learned about his/her story from the media?
  - a. Positive or negative? No change?
  - b. Why positive or negative? Or why no change?
12. Do you like or dislike him/her more after you learned that he/she was diagnosed with MDD? Why?
13. In terms of your perceived image toward the celebrity, does it make a difference if the illness was self-reported by the celebrity himself/herself compared to someone/a news agent who discovered and reported till later? Why?
14. What is your perception of MDD?
15. On a scale from 1 to 5, please indicate how much you are willing to consult a medical professional about the disease. Why? [1 = very unwilling, 5 = very willing]
16. On a scale from 1 to 5, do you think the news story is trustworthy? [1 = Not at all, 5 = A lot]
17. On a scale from 1 to 5, please indicate how much you learned about the disease *before* you read the news. [1 = Not at all, 5 = A lot]
18. On a scale from 1 to 5, please indicate how much you learned about the disease *after* you read the news. [1 = Not at all, 5 = A lot]
19. Please kindly recall. Did you learn something about MDD from the media story? If yes, what did you learn about the illness?
20. On a scale from 1 to 5, please indicate how much you think the following attributes of the celebrity is important for advocating a medical opinion/advice. [1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree]
  - a. Attractiveness
  - b. Trustworthiness
  - c. Expertise

### Based on the Media Story That You Think is the Most Memorable,

7. What was your initial emotional response? [please write down everything the interviewee tells you here]
  - a. Probe if the interviewee have problem answering the question. E.g., do you trust the story? Are you impressed etc?

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