

Portrayal of Mental Illness in Malaysian Newspapers: A Thematic Analysis of Online News Reports

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Abstract

Media portrayal of mental illness may influence public stigma and service utilisation. Media, particularly the news media, has become omnipresent for mental illness information to the public. Most of the public's opinions and attitudes towards people with mental illness consume through the news media than direct experience. This study aims to explore prominent themes of news articles on mental illnesses in Malaysian online newspapers, which were collected from January 2017 to December 2021 using qualitative thematic analysis. Several keywords related to mental illness were used to seek news articles in the newspaper portals, and 86 news articles met the inclusion criteria. Results showed three significant themes identified - *people with mental illness have undesirable traits*, *people with mental illness are a menace*, and *the risk factors of people with mental illness*. Overall, the findings indicate that themes produced were stigmatising and derogatory towards individuals with mental illness by highlighting the negative characterisation of people with mental illness, naming them as a threat, and endangering others. These findings are essential for providing practical knowledge for media practitioners to report mental illness-related news. Therefore, this study suggested the need for improving the quality of mental illness media reporting in Malaysia.

Keywords: News Media, Mental Illness, Thematic Analysis, Online Newspapers, Health Communication

Introduction

It is estimated that around one billion people worldwide are affected by mental illnesses, making it one of the leading causes of disability (Kovacevic, 2021; World Health Organization (WHO), 2020). The National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) reveals that one in every three Malaysians may experience mental health problems at some point in their lives (Institute for Public Health., 2017). Depression is the most common mental disorder, affecting 2.3 million people throughout their lives, as indicated by this figure. Mental illness can affect individuals from diverse cultural and identity backgrounds, ages, genders, socioeconomic statuses, ethnicities, religions, and sexual orientations (Hassan et al., 2018). Despite the potential for recovery, many individuals with mental illness decline effective treatments because of the social stigma associated with the condition (World Health Organization, 2012; Harun, 2020). Even though mental illness can be treated effectively, many individuals who suffer from it refuse to seek treatment due to the shame and discrimination associated with the condition (World Health Organization, 2012; Harun, 2020). Mental illness is often considered a form of madness or a sign of an unsound mind, which leads to misconceptions and misunderstandings of the condition (Mukhtar & Oei, 2011; Harun, 2020). As a result, a lot of Malaysians lack knowledge about mental health, highlighting the need for more awareness and information dissemination efforts. The media could play a vital role in this regard by consistently sharing positive and informative messages that can help reduce the stigma associated with mental illness (Stout et al., 2004). However, media representations of mental illness are perpetuating stigma towards mental disease (Stout et al., 2004), significantly impacting the general perception of individuals with a mental illness (McKeown & Clancy, 1995). For example, negative portrayals of people with mental illness as violent and dangerous may add to the stigma associated with it, making individuals who need assistance less likely to seek treatment.

The portrayal of mental illness in the media is a topic of increasing importance. Studies show that media reporting can have a direct effect on the perception of mental illness. Scholars have delved into this subject matter with great interest and have produced a range of insightful studies. Ma's (2017) narrative review of 41 empirical research studies conducted between 2003 and 2015 offers a more optimistic perspective. Despite the negative portrayal of mental illness in the media, Ma found that entertainment-educational programs and web-based media have the power to reduce stigma and enhance mental health literacy. In Canada, Whitley and Wang (2017) found that news media reporting has improved significantly in terms of positive tone. Despite increased reporting on crime and violence, more attention has been given to those who struggle with mental illness. In a study conducted by Carmichael et al. in 2019, the tone and content of mainstream television coverage of mental illness were compared to educational videos created by citizen journalists who had lived experience with mental illness. The study found that videos created by citizen journalists were more effective in educating the public and reducing stigma than TV segments focused on crime, violence, or legal concerns. Ross et al (2019) conducted a systematic study to investigate the impact of media reporting on stigma and prejudice towards individuals with severe mental illness. The study revealed that media representations of individuals with severe mental illness are often portrayed in a negative light, which reinforces the public's perception of them as being violent and dangerous. As a result, this contributes to an increase in negative attitudes and stigmatizing beliefs about individuals with severe mental illness. Antebi et al (2020) found that a significant majority of Canadian news publications followed responsible reporting of suicide criteria. However, criteria involving ostensibly beneficial information are frequently

overlooked. Ross et al (2022) conducted a study to evaluate the effects of media intervention on journalism students' mental illness reporting in cases of violence and criminality. This study aimed to promote media literacy and discourage stigmatizing news reporting on individuals with mental illness. The study results were positive, as there were significant improvements in the students' attitudes towards severe mental illness, their understanding of best reporting practices, and their confidence in reporting consistently with the best practice standards.

In 2004, Malaysia published a guideline for reporting suicide, which was later revised in 2011. This guideline is also applicable to any other mental health-related issues, including the reporting of mental illness. Unfortunately, the efficiency of Malaysia's media-related suicide prevention monitoring and implementation activities is still questionable since studies have proven that the media still negatively report on suicide and mental health-related issues in Malaysia (Johari et al., 2017; Razali et al., 2018; Fong et al., 2018; Victor et al., 2019; Fong, 2021). The guidelines for suicidal reporting in Malaysia do not apply to addressing other mental health-related issues and reporting since suicidal tendencies are not necessarily caused by dwindling mental health. There is no direct relationship between suicide and mental illness (Sanati, 2009; Bradvik, 2018). Because of this, the degree of adherence to current guidelines for situations with mental health-related illness is poor and underapplied in this study.

Studies have shown that the portrayal of mental illnesses in Malaysian newspapers is primarily negative and misleading (Hanafiah & Van Bortel, 2015; Johari et al., 2017; Razali et al., 2018; Pendit & Choo, 2020). Researchers have found that individuals with mental disorders are often depicted as criminals rather than victims (Chen & Lawrie, 2017). These depictions can have a damaging effect on the public's perception of mental health and stigmatize those who are struggling with mental health issues. A study conducted by Johari et al (2017) yielded comparable results, indicating that the presentation of suicide narratives in Malaysia has been detrimental rather than beneficial. Johari et al (2017) suggested that the narratives are presented pessimistically, employing sensationalized headings. Razali et al (2018) quantified the positive and negative portrayals of mental illness patients in an additional study in which they assessed how Malay-language periodicals represented mental illness issues. Razali et al (2018) discovered that while the tone conveyed in the articles' texts was predominantly negative, the tone of the headings was predominantly neutral. However, this study was conducted in a short time (five weeks) and focused on only one medium of language, resulting in relatively scarce findings. Recent research conducted by Nor et al. in 2021 analyzed the representation of mental health in two English newspaper articles. The study found that both newspapers portrayed mental health concerns in a positive light by highlighting programs and activities that support individuals with mental illnesses. However, it should be noted that the study's findings are limited since it was conducted based on only two English-language newspaper outlets—News Stairs Times and The Star Online—and only for a single year-long period 2020. However, this research provides valuable insights into how the media can play a crucial role in promoting mental health awareness and supporting individuals with mental illnesses. The purpose of this research is to fill the gap in the need for more studies on how mental illness is portrayed in Malaysian newspapers. The focus of this study is to identify themes in the portrayal of mental illness in the media. As a result, this research can contribute to the limited literature on mental health-related issues and the media in Malaysia. Moreover, it can also provide valuable insights for media practitioners to report on mental illness news more effectively.

Methodology

This research analyses news articles related to mental illness from six online newspapers in Malaysia. It uses inductive thematic analysis, a qualitative research method that helps identify, analyse, and report patterns or themes in data collection. The coding process aims to identify the dominant themes or discourse topics that consistently appear in the data to address mental illness issues. This investigation follows the 6-stage processes Braun and Clarke (2006) described

Stage	Explanation
Stage 1: Familiarising oneself with the dataset	Read and re-read and note down initial ideas. The initial ideas are most likely to be initial categories (or codes) of information that are being classified.
Stage 2: Coding the data	Generating initial codes to organise the data, with full and equal attention given to each data set - Labelling and organising data items into meaningful group
Stage 3: Generating themes	Involve the process of sorting out the codes into initial themes and also identifying the meaning of and relationship between initial codes - writing themes and their defining properties
Stage 4: Reviewing themes	Identifying coherent patterns at the level of the coded data. This stage involves reviewing the entire data set as a whole - ensuring there is enough data to support a theme, collapsing overlapping themes and re-working and refining codes and themes
Stage 5: Defining and naming themes	Identifying the story of each identified theme and fitting the broader story of the data set to respond to the research questions - cycling between the data and the identified themes in order to organise the story
Stage 6: Producing themes	Presenting a concise and interesting account of the story told by the data, both within and across themes - writing a compelling argument that addresses the research question. This stage requires writing beyond the simple description of the themes

Thematic analysis is used in this study to identify significant themes, patterns, reporting patterns, or themes in online news reporting on mental illness. Shedding light on the themes of representation of mental illness in Malaysian news reports will raise awareness and encourage more responsible reporting on this critical topic.

Samples

This study aims to analyse a wide range of newspapers, both in Malay and English, spanning four years from January 2017 to December 2021. The newspaper articles were extracted from six major online newspaper websites and archives. The selection of online newspapers based on readership held a prominent position in Malaysia's media industry. The

newspapers used are the Berita Harian (BH), Harian Metro or myMetro (HM), Sinar Harian (SH), The Malay Mail (MM), The Star (TS), and The New Straits Times (NST). Articles were screened to remove duplicates ($n = 26$). Later, all articles that did not discuss the keywords not referred to as broadly as "mental illness" were excluded. Approximately 86 news articles meeting study inclusion criteria were collected and analysed.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

In the selection of news articles for the thematic analysis, their inclusion was according to the following criteria:

- The news articles are centred around a character who is either thought to be, suspected of, or accused of having a mental illness. It is worth noting that the news is not directly related to health, nor is it an editorial, an opinion column, a health section authored by invited medical writers, or an interview.
- Besides, the news headlines should contain keywords related to 'mental illness.' The keywords consist of general terms and specific diagnostic terms related to mental illness - "mentally ill", "run amok", "commit suicide", "depression", "hallucination", "insanity", and "mental problem/disorder".
- In this study, only mental illness-related news report is considered. For instance, 'running amok' and 'committing suicide'—not mental illnesses—are eliminated from the study.

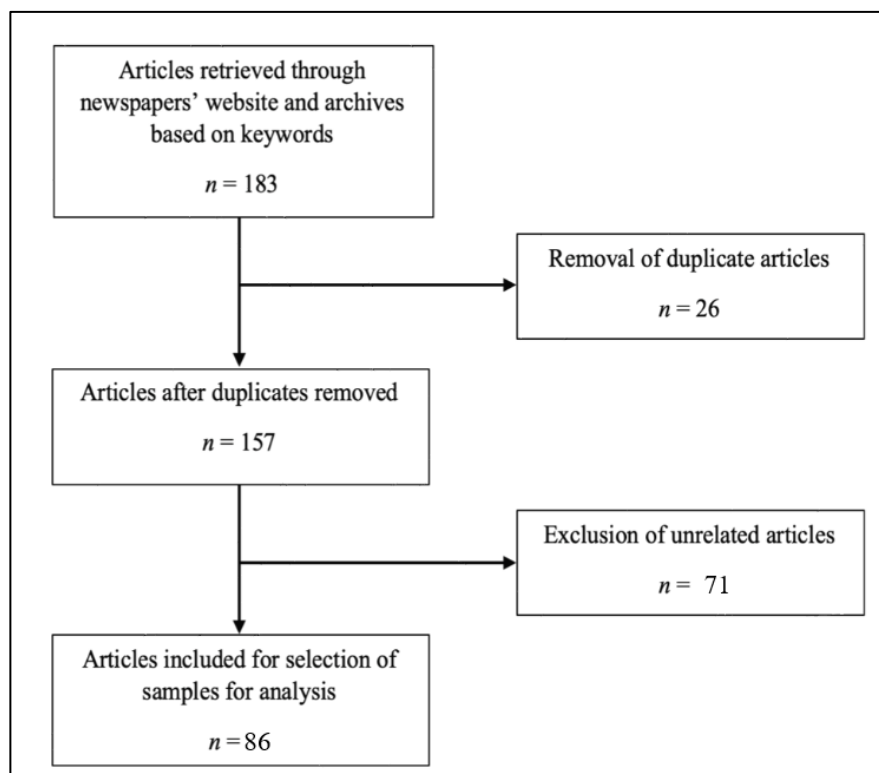


Figure 1: Search strategy and screening

Findings

Theme 1: *People with mental illness have undesirable traits*

This theme focuses on how people with mental illness are portrayed in news articles. Unfortunately, such articles often display disproportionate and negative characteristics of individuals with mental illness. This reporting not only reinforces harmful stereotypes but also undermines efforts to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness. Portrayals of people with mental illness in this theme often include negative stereotypes such as erratic behaviour, psychological disturbances, and having unfavourable circumstances such as broken relationships, and unemployment.

In this theme, people with mental illness' action or conduct are described as deviate from the norm. For instance, a man allegedly has a mental illness due to his peculiar actions, *being undressed in public and looking wacky*, as an ordinary person would not act that way. The comment on what "normal people" would do or not do suggests that it is considered abnormal for a man to perform that kind of action (being naked) in public.

Police are assuming that the naked man found strolling at Jalan Bundusan here is mentally ill.

District police chief Deputy Superintendant Mohd Haris Ibrahim said to date they had not received any report regarding the man.

"There is no report. Otherwise, we would have taken action.

" There is no information to be shared," he said, adding it would be easier if there was a report.

Haris said people assumed that the man, whose photo went viral, was likely to be insane as normal people would not do what he did. (NST 2 – 2019)

On the flip side, this theme also refers to a collection of symptoms that affect the mind, where there has been some loss of contact with reality. For example, news articles used various signifiers to identify mental illness presentation through psychosis symptoms such as hallucination (seeing and hearing things that others do not see or hear) and delusions (false beliefs about what is taking place or who one is) with no diagnostic information given about the illness. Instead, it was often mentioned as something that 'happened' to people.

A man experiencing hallucinations brought on by depression slashed his father with a knife at their home in Sungai Chenaam here, on Sunday night.

The 48-year-old victim received 10 stitches for injuries to the back of his neck in the 9.20pm incident. The attack occurred in the kitchen of the family home, where the 22-year-old suspect approached his father after "hearing voices in his head."

"The voices he heard caused him to get angry. (NST 11 – 2019)

Additionally, social problems that are associated with mental illness are often wrongly attributed to individuals with such conditions. These problems include unemployment and broken relationships, which are sometimes described as being more common among people who are divorced or unmarried. Due to their behaviour and mental health conditions, news articles have highlighted these adverse circumstances. Below are some examples of this issue:

A man, believed to be mentally ill, shot himself to death at Taman Seri Maklom, Seri Pinang, Butterworth here early this morning. The man, who is a divorcee, was found lying in pool of blood in a toilet by his father who alerted the cops about 5.30am. Seberang Prai Utara district police chief Assistant Commissioner Noorzainy Mohd Noor said the 30-year-old lived with his parents at the double storey terrace house where he was found dead (NST 25 –, 2020)

Menurutnya, suspek yang juga penganggur berjaya ditahan beberapa jam kemudian dan polis merampas parang sepanjang 40 sentimeter yang digunakan dalam kejadian itu.

(...the unemployed suspect was arrested a few hours later, and the police seized the 40-centimetre-long machete used in the incident.)

“Siasatan awal mendapati suspek bertindak sedemikian selepas mengalami halusinasi dan dia pernah mendapatkan rawatan sakit mental (HM 17 –, 2019)

Theme 2: *People with mental illness are a menace*

This theme explores the actions of individuals who have mental illnesses and have committed crimes that are considered illegal by law. The focus is on the link made between violent crimes and the offender's mental health state. This theme depicts that people with mental illness are often portrayed as a potential source of harm and disruption to others. This portrayal suggests that individuals with mental illness may pose a threat to the safety of others. This portrayal can be broken down into two sub-themes: "criminality" and "nuisances."

This theme refers to hostile actions, thoughts, or emotions towards others. The dramatic events, mainly violent crimes, were reported and commented on in many texts where references are made to the perpetrators' state of mental health.

A 42-year-old man, believed to be mentally ill, was charged at the Magistrate's Court here today with murdering a senior citizen at Jalan Genting Klang last month.

However, no plea from Choon Wei How was recorded after the charge was read to him before magistrate Wong Chia Sia. (NST 4 – November 12, 2018)

The news reports also frequently include information on the perpetrators' past criminal records, including any previous violent tendencies or substance-related offenses. The implication in these texts is that mental illness may serve as an explanation for their violent behaviour.

Ketua Polis Daerah Petaling Jaya, Asisten Komisioner Mohd Zani Che Din, berkata kejadian dipercayai berlaku ketika mangsa yang sedang tidur di kedai makan di kawasan berkenaan, didatangi suspek yang bersenjatakan parang. “Mangsa dan suspek dipercayai terlebih dulu bergaduh menyebabkan suspek yang mempunyai masalah mental menetaknya,” katanya ketika dihubungi di sini, hari ini.

(The assistant commissioner, Mohd Zani Che Din, said the incident is believed to have occurred when the victim, who was sleeping at a restaurant in the area,

was approached by a suspect armed with a machete. "The victim and the suspect are believed to have first quarreled, causing the suspect with mental problems to stab him," he said.)

"Punca pergaduhan belum diketahui dan mangsa memberitahu tidak pernah bermusuhan dengan suspek," katanya. Beliau berkata, siasatan awal mendapati, suspek dipercayai menghidap sakit mental dan mempunyai tiga rekod lampau berkaitan kesalahan kes dadah dan pukul.

("The cause of the fight is not yet known, and the victim said he had never been hostile to the suspect," he said. He said the initial investigation found that the suspect was believed to be mentally ill and had three previous records of drug offenses and beatings.) (BH 19 – January 03, 2020)

Conversely, this theme refers to a condition that annoys, causes trouble, or is obnoxious. In this context, the news articles describe people with mental illness as causing annoying, unpleasant, or inconvenient conditions for others.

Melaka Health Department officials had a hard time managing a patient-under-investigation (PUI) for Covid-19 after he scared neighbours by loitering in his neighbourhood while wearing a pink quarantine wristband. Melaka Health and Anti-Drug Committee chairman Rahmad Mariman said the 24-year-old was reported to have been strolling around his neighbourhood during his compulsory home quarantine order and was later diagnosed to be a person with mental health problems.

"Health officials found it tough to quarantine the man at his home due to his mental condition.

"However, the man tested negative at both Covid-19 screenings and his wristband was removed on Wednesday (July 29)," he said. (TS 1- July 29, 2020)

Theme 3: *The risk factors of people with mental illness*

This theme permeated news articles related to people with mental illness risk factors, such as their prior bad experiences and history of health conditions. The risk factor increases risk or susceptibility (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), for instance, things that make a person more likely to get a condition. This theme pertains to specific factors that may increase the risk of developing a mental illness. Here, the news reports on the explanations given by others for the (generally endangerment and criminality) behaviour of those with mental illness. A history of mental illness and trauma correlates with aggression toward others and suicidal behaviour in this situation.

The theme suggests that a person's history of psychiatric illness or previous psychiatric treatments is linked to the commission of a crime. For example, a family member of someone with a mental illness might try to explain the events that led to their violent actions.

The 45-year-old woman, who was rescued by her husband after jumping off the Penang Bridge this afternoon, is suffering from depression.

"Interview with the victim's husband revealed that she has been suffering from depression for the past few years.

"We are still probing the matter further. The case is being investigated under Section 309 of the Penal Code for attempted suicide," Seberang Prai Tengah district police chief Assistant Commissioner Shafee Abd Samad said tonight. (NST 23 – 2020)

News reports also often cite events of physical, emotional, spiritual, or psychological suffering as circumstances leading up to violent incidents. The theme explores the impact of catastrophic events that can cause physical, emotional, spiritual, or psychological suffering. Individuals who experience such traumatic incidents may feel physically intimidated or terrified. These traumas can result in a loss of hope, limited expectations about life, and a feeling that everyday living is not possible.

Malaysian TAMILAR KURAL president David Marshel, who spoke on behalf of the family, said they believe the boy had suffered from some form of depression after being allegedly "targeted" by certain teachers at school. He said the boy, who was in the second last class in school, had appealed to be transferred to a better class since the start of the new school session but to no avail. "Certain teachers would often subject the boy to shame by reprimanding him on his attire, his hair and such. "Last month, Logamitraa was made to take off his trousers after teachers claimed it was tight-fitting and made him wear shorts for the rest of the day. Even his favourite key chain, which had been with him for a long time, was taken away from him as teachers claimed it was a sharp object. (NST 23–2020)

The boy who died by suicide in above extract experienced a psychological risk factor when he was a bully victim in school. Being "targeted," bullied, and humiliated by teachers made him more vulnerable than he was. He was described by family members as 'someone with no problem before' as shown in the extract below

Everything started when he asked to change class. One thing led to another and the boy could no longer take it anymore. "We demand answers from the school. He never had any problems before and now he is gone," he said when met at Logamitraa's final rites at his house in Taman Taman Sejahtera here this morning. Logamitraa is survived by his parents and 15-year-old sister. Family members were too distraught to speak to newsmen present. Logamitraa's cousin asked for understanding that the family be given time to grieve. Logamitraa's mother found her son hanging from a blanket tied to the ceiling fan in his room at 6pm on Tuesday. He was rushed to the Bukit Mertajam Hospital but was pronounced dead upon arrival. (NST 23– 2020)

Discussion and Conclusion

The exploration of digital media articles through thematic analysis on mental illness portrayals in this study reveals inaccurate reporting and portrayal of people with mental illness, such as linking it to violence, being dangerous, or blaming those with it, which has become a significant factor in propagating stigma and stereotypes about mental illness to the public. It is crucial to comprehend that associating mental illness with violence or danger only

contributes to spreading harmful stereotypes and stigma. Misleading depictions have adverse impacts not only on individuals living with mental illness but also on society at large. It is high time for the Malaysian media to promote a more precise and empathetic comprehension of mental illness, one that is not founded on false assumptions.

It is also important to note that the way mental illness is portrayed in news reports can have a significant impact on public perception. According to this recent study, Malaysian news reports tend to focus on three main themes when discussing mental illness: *people with mental illness have undesirable traits*, *people with mental illness are a menace*, and *the risk factors of people with mental illness*. Understanding the consequences of these themes can help media practitioners work towards more accurate and compassionate depictions of mental health issues in the media.

The results of the study also demonstrated that individuals with mental illness who are afflicted with the condition are significantly portrayed as dangerous, malicious, vulnerable, and socially incompetent due to the media's persistent focus on insinuating a link between mental illness and violent crime and suicidal behaviour. Violence and homicides perpetrated by individuals with mental health issues are frequently sensationalised in the media (Srivastava et al., 2018). This condition is achieved by linking their past experiences of mental illness and trauma to behaviours such as aggression towards others and suicidal ideation (Farrelly, 2015). Moreover, those who have a mental illness, who are also unemployed, or lack stable employment are frequently stigmatised. Sadly, those with mental illness are confronted with a higher probability of experiencing unemployment in comparison to their non-ill counterparts (Baron & Salzer, 2002). These sensational and inaccurate portrayals contribute to the perpetuation of stigmatising attitudes. Therefore, it is imperative that how the mass media portrays mental illnesses be altered if society is to alter public perceptions of them (We, 2012). Those in the media should better understand concerns about the writing and reporting of mental health-related disorders. The researchers hold the belief that if the media can exert a negative influence, it is reasonable to expect that it also alleviates the stigma associated with mental illness for its audience. As a first step towards reducing the stigma perpetuated by misinformation, Nairn and Coverdale (2005) proposed that specific clinical symptoms of each mental illness diagnosis be reported, and the direct consequences of mental illness be discussed. As a result of implementing this strategy, the healthcare of individuals with mental illness can be improved while also promoting a shift in societal attitudes. This can foster greater empathy and eliminate detrimental biases that have hindered progress towards a more just and equitable society. It is imperative to update and revise the content code and guidelines for media implementation in Malaysia with a more strategic approach (Johari et al., 2017; Ng et al., 2021). The study's results have exposed areas where Malaysians' responsible reporting of mental health-related illness is lacking, hence this study fulfils the gaps that have been highlighted and thoroughly discussed.

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