

Mental Illness Portrayal in Media: A Content Analysis of Malaysian Newspapers

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Abstract

Stigmatization of mental illness is closely related with media representation. Newspaper is regarded as the main source of information for Malaysian public. However, the portrayal of mental illnesses in this form of media was never assessed. This study was conducted with the aims of evaluating how Bahasa Melayu newspapers reported mental illness issues and to quantify the frequency of negative depiction versus positive depiction of mental illness patient. Four daily Bahasa Melayu newspapers were examined page by page by the researchers during a five-week period, from July to August 2015. These newspapers were chosen based on their average daily circulation. The selected articles were coded according to coding frame developed by the authors. The data were then analyzed qualitatively using content analysis. A total of 46 articles were selected for analysis. The majority of tone used in the headlines of these articles was neutral and the majority of the tone used in the text was negative. The most common keyword in these articles was 'sakit mental'. The findings were similar to what have been reported in other studies. In order to prevent further negative stigma on mental illness, several recommendations were discussed.

Keywords: Stigma, mental illness, psychiatry, media, newspaper

1. INTRODUCTION

Psychiatry is branch of medicine that deals with mental disorders, illnesses that affect an individual's cognition, emotional regulation and behaviors which in turn manifest in a dysfunction of psychological, biological, or developmental processes (APA 2013). Mass media includes broadcast media; television and radio, printed media; newspaper and magazines, and online media; websites, blog, social media. More than any other medical disciplines, psychiatry often became the subject of factual or fictional depiction in media and arts (Byrne 2003). Symptoms such as auditory hallucinations and fascinating delusions potentially drive the creative processes and imaginations of artists. The significant influence of media on public perception and behaviors is a well-established fact (Mcnamara 2003). The relationship between psychiatry and media is controversial at best. Like many other important issues such as education and national security, psychiatry depends on media to advocate the public. For general knowledge about psychiatry, media is still public's main feeder (Anderson 2003). However, most research conducted showed that media representation of psychiatric illness or mental health workers was in contrast making the social advocacy even more difficult endeavor. Fictional characters in television show that were mentally-ill, were often portrayed as someone who are irresponsible and dangerous (Wilson 1999), easily lose control (Wilson 2000) and were likely to be seen as failures (Signorielli 1989). In the factual reporting of events, majority of the news involving psychiatric patient would mostly depict the individuals as either the perpetrators of the crime or someone who had difficulty to assimilate in the society (Wahl 2003, Smith 2015). These situations occurred despite the facts that generally mentally ill patients are not violent, are able to be treated with proper treatment and intervention and have capacity to become fully-functional citizen (Ainsah 2013). With the advent of cyber technology, printed media is still considered to be the primary source of information for Malaysian public (Ahmad et al 2011). Based on National Health and Morbidity Survey in 2006, newspaper was the second most common source of health information in Malaysia (MOH 2006). Objectives of this study were to gain more insight into how Malaysian newspapers publish issues of mental illness and to find out any different themes other than what

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have been reported in previous studies. To the best of authors' knowledge, no systematic study has been done on the representation of psychiatric illness in Malaysian mass media.

2. METHODOLOGY

A selection of four Malaysian daily Malay newspapers was examined page by page by the researchers during five-week period, from July to August 2015. These newspapers were regarded as the most popular Malay language medium based on the daily circulation (MPG 2015). Two broadsheets; *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia*, one compact; *Kosmo!* and one tabloid, *Harian Metro* made to the list. Broadsheet newspaper is regarded as a newspaper with a larger size and is formatted to meet the expectation of more upscale readers. The stories and news are presented in much more serious and sober manner. Tabloid, a smaller size newspaper, is traditionally meant for working class population in the city with its content that is more sensationalized and captivating (Rogers 2015). There is another type of newspaper; compact, which can be regarded as hybridization of the two. Some modern broadsheets changed their form into smaller size but retain the nature and style of presentation (Newspaper Sizes, n.d). Tabloid and compact are interchangeably used in the modern day printed media industry, for example *Kosmo!* is considered compact in its own official website but a leading media advertisement planning company regards them as tabloid (MPG 2015). In this study, we consider *Kosmo!* as compact type. The rationale of choosing only Malay medium newspaper was that the language is considered the official language of the nation. Each newspaper was scanned for articles that predominantly related to psychiatry. No discrimination was made on whether the articles were written for educational purpose or an actual event reporting. Several inclusion criteria guide the selection process; story of a character who was considered, suspected or accused to be mentally ill, any writing specifically written about psychiatric condition, presence of any Malay translation of English terminology for three main serious mental illness namely 'skizofrenia' (schizophrenia), 'kecelaruan bipolar' (bipolar mood disorder), and 'kemurungan' or 'kemurungan melampau' (major depressive disorder), and any article that had keywords such as 'gila', 'sakit mental', 'psikiatri', and 'dengar suara' or 'suara halus' (NIMH 2013). Keywords used were identified through a focus group discussion of experts in the psychiatric field. The operationalized definition of each keyword used for this research is illustrated in the Table 1.

Table 1: The operationalized definition of the keywords

Keyword	Explanation
<i>Gila</i>	Insane, crazy or mentally ill person. *Although <i>gila</i> is also used in Bahasa Melayu as a reinforcing adverb or adjective and as part of some idiomatic expression, these definitions are not included in the keyword
<i>Sakit mental, kesihatan mental</i>	Mentally ill person, crazy or insane, mental health
<i>Psikiatri</i>	Psychiatry
<i>Dengar suara, suara halus</i>	Hearing invisible voices, auditory hallucination

The selected articles were then coded based on the coding schemes informed by Halder et al 2014 with minor modifications. The coding scheme was on the tone of the heading and the body of the article which was coded separately according to three different themes; **negative**, **positive** and **neutral**. Other important variables documented were the authorship of the article and whether or not expert opinion was sought. The authorship of the article is divided into three broad groups; **General Journalist**, **Professional in the Field** and **Not Mentioned**. The expert in the **Expert Opinion** is considered anyone who actively works in the field of clinical psychiatry including psychiatrist, psychologist, nurse and any person working in mental health service on a professional basis (Halder 2014). The operationalized definition of each code in the coding scheme is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The operationalized definition of the tone of heading and article

Tone	Explanation
Negative tone	The psychiatric-related character or issue mentioned in the headline or article was associated with criminal activities, social disruption or irresponsible act that causes injury to self or others. This tone is also assigned if the article dramatizes and sensationalizes the psychiatric issue without proper medical facts.
Positive tone	The psychiatric-related character or issue mentioned in the headline or article was associated with good citizenship, well-functioning in the society and potential improvement with established medical and psychiatric treatment
Neutral tone	The psychiatric-related character or issue described in the headline or article was not associated with neither of the above mentioned tone.

The codes were analyzed and quantified (Lynch & Peer 2002, Saldana 2013). Comparison was made among the newspapers in regards of the tone of the headlines and the articles, the authorship and the existence of experts' opinion.

3. RESULT

46 articles were selected from four newspapers in the 5-week duration. Table 3 and 4 summarizes the findings according to the newspapers. 50% of the articles came from broadsheets; *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia*. The other two types of newspapers, compact; *Kosmo!* and tabloid; *Harian Metro*, made up the rest with 13 (22%) and 10 (28%) articles respectively. 36 or 78% of the articles had negative tone in their article in contrast with the headline, which majority of them had neutral tone (74%). Individually, negative tone predominated in the articles from each newspaper. 78% of all broadsheets had negative tone in their articles while the tabloid and compact newspapers each 60% and 90%. Association with crime or dangerousness was the most common reason to be assigned as negative tone. Table 5 provides some examples of headings and the assigned tone.

Table 3: Analysis of the four Bahasa Melayu newspapers for psychiatric-related articles

Variables		Berita Harian N= 15	Utusan Malaysia (N=8)	Harian Metro (N=13)	Kosmo! (N=10)
Headline	Negative tone	1	3	3	3
	Positive tone	1		1	
	Neutral tone	13	5	9	7
Article	Negative tone	12	6	9	9
	Positive tone	1	2	3	
	Neutral tone	2		1	1
Author	Journalist	5	2	7	5
	Professional				
	Not Mentioned	10	6	6	5
Expert	Yes	3		1	2
	No	12	8	12	8

Table 4: Analysis of the four Bahasa Melayu newspapers according to keyword

Keyword	Berita Harian N= 15	Utusan (N=8)	Malaysia	Harian Metro (N=13)	Kosmo! (N=10)
<i>Gila</i>	1	3		2	1
<i>Sakit mental</i>	10	4		6	6
<i>Psikiatri</i>	3	2		2	
<i>Dengar suara,</i>	2	1		1	1
<i>Skizofrenia</i>					1
<i>Kecelaruan bipolar</i>					1
<i>Kemurungan</i>	4	1		4	2

None of the articles were written by any professionals working in clinical field of mental health. Majority of the articles (87%) did not cite any opinion from professionals in the field. The most commonly used keyword was 'sakit mental' or 'penyakit mental' (mental illness) represented by 45% of total 58 keywords found. 11 articles have used more than one keyword in an article. Accompanying 'sakit mental' or 'gila', we found other words used such as 'hospital bahagia' (n=1), 'tidak siuman' (n=1) and 'psiko' (n=1). Specific diagnostic term only accounted for 28% of all keywords with 'kemurungan' or 'kemurungan melampau' represented the largest group.

Table 5: Examples of headings and the assigned tone

Tone	Explanation
Negative tone	<i>'Lelaki sakit mental dituduh penggal ibu'</i> (A mentally ill man accused of decapitating mother) <i>Laporan mental kes model lucah 10 Ogos'</i> (Mental report of pornographic model 10 August) <i>'Isteri kemurungan hilang dari rumah'</i> (Depressed wife disappear from home)
Positive tone	<i>'Sakit mental boleh dirawat'</i> (Mental illness can be treated) <i>'Kesedaran kesihatan mental perlu jadi agenda nasional'</i> (Mental health awareness must be national agenda)
Neutral tone	<i>'Masalah psikiatri tidak kenal usia'</i> (Psychiatric problems regardless of age)

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Stigmatization of mental illness

Stigma of mental illness with the accompanying discrimination is a major obstacle in management and treatment of mental illness. As Goffman puts it, stigma is "a trait which is deeply discrediting" which will reduce a person "from a whole and usual person to a tainted discounted one" (Goffman 2009). Stigma or marks, a direct translation of its Greek origin, of psychiatry includes the idea that the person who has mental illness are violent, incompetent, and at fault for their illness (Corrigan 2004). These negative views are what have been repeatedly discovered in the study of media representations of psychiatry (Wahl 2003, Smith 2015).

4.2 Effects of printed media

This is the first study of media portrayal of mental illness in Malaysian newspapers. The study on other form of media in depicting psychiatry was also not known to be available. Stigmatization of mental illness in this nation is prevalent. Many people still considered depression can subside naturally and even hospital workers had negative attitudes toward mentally ill patient evidenced by high score on avoidance but low on caring (Khan 2009, Minas 2011). Negative views were overrepresented in the news media when mental illness is reported. Patient or character with psychiatric disorder was significantly more frequently associated with dangerousness, criminal activities, unpredictability and dysfunction (Wahl 2003). Our study was also in agreement of what Wahl and colleagues encountered. The obvious lacking of the perspective of people with mental illness and the stories of recovery is likely to contribute to public pessimistic view of cure (Wahl 2002). When the prevailing stigmatizing

attitudes were consistently supplied with more negative views from a powerful source, it will create a vicious cycle where public education and social advocacy are doomed for imminent failure. When majority of the members of society hold the same view, the stance of policy maker would also be affected. The unfortunate end result is the lack of interest and fund in improving mental health services (Wahl 2003, Smith 2015). In relation to the tone of the articles reported, we found no difference between broadsheets and tabloid newspapers. Data from previous studies were mixed in this regard. A study in Belgium showed that broadsheets reported more negative tone of stories related to psychiatry as compared to tabloids (Pieters 2003). When comparing Irish and England broadsheets and tabloids, Halder and team discovered that significantly more dramatic and sensationalized tone were associated with psychiatric-related articles in tabloids with broadsheets published more articles with positive tone (Halder 2014). Seeking opinion from experts in the mental health services for stories published was almost non-existence in our study. This remained to be investigated. The race for novelty and the fierce competition among each other could be posited as one of the reason expert viewpoints were not solicited in which it could delay the publication of stories. On the other hand, the reluctance or the bureaucracy surrounding the mental health professionals in appearing in mass media is other possible factor.

4.3 Limitations and recommendation

The short duration of the study might limit the findings. Although the result replicates the previous studies, longer period gives the possibility to find other themes that might be unique to Malaysia settings such as the tendency to associate mental illness with black magic. Study with lengthier duration also minimizes the risk of missing major national issue related to psychiatry reported nationwide. Such situation would make valuable comparison in between newspapers and improve our insight. In our study, we did not find any metaphorical use of an established psychiatric diagnosis in mainstream newspaper which could be discovered if the period is extended. Metaphorical use of 'schizophrenia' to describe irresponsible and erratic behavior without any evidence of mental illness is well documented (Duckworth 2003, Athanasopoulou 2014).

The study was based on newspapers with only one medium of language; Bahasa Melayu. Malaysia comprises of three major ethnicities that come with their own unique cultures. Even though Bahasa Melayu is the official language, other major language especially English are widely spoken. Some English broadsheets and tabloids have decent daily circulation and readerships (MPG 2015). Research on these newspapers as well as those with Tamil and Mandarin as their medium would enrich our knowledge and further inform us on what is the best way to advocate and educate public in Malaysia about psychiatry.

Future study should include more keywords as what we have found in this study words such as 'tidak siuman', 'psiko' and 'hospital bahagia' were associated with 'sakit mental' and 'gila' in the same article. Other potential keywords are 'tidak waras', 'sewel', 'sakit otak' and 'sakit jiwa' which are all different ways of Bahasa Melayu to express crazy or madness. There are concerns that the keywords might have different connotations and understandings among mental health professionals and member of public including the reporters. This potential setback was limited in the expert forum to generate the appropriate keywords by involving a psychiatrist who is experienced in the mass media psychiatric advocacy.

Comparison between Malaysian media reporting of general medical illness and psychiatric illness is also another avenue to gain perspective of the issue. Studies elsewhere showed that general medical illness was less stigmatized in the printed media as compared to psychiatric illness (Halder 2014, Pieters 2003).

4.4 Conclusion

The tradition of journalism to report event as it is is well-respected. However, when it comes to mentally ill patient, the innocent reporting of a man with mental illness turns murderous to his own kin reinforce the ever-present stigmatizing attitudes. Media could probably present the public more articles on the potential recovery of mental illness and the true stories about successful psychiatric patient. In turn, professionals in the psychiatric fraternity should make pro-active engagement with media personalities. Regular program such as seminars and forums would be helpful to disseminate proper knowledge about psychiatry. Interesting fictional drama or films could still be produced while the content brings more positive view of mental illness. Psychiatrist and clinical psychologist should come forward more frequently to appear in the broadcast media or to write professional writings about mental health for the public. A dedicated committee could be set up in the future as an immediate point of reference and opinion for the media should new story related to mental illness arise.

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