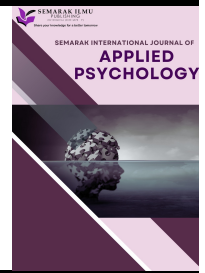




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Breaking the Mental Illness Stigma: A Content Analysis of Mental Health Awareness Campaigns on Social Media

Wan Nur Asyura Wan Adnan^{1,*}, Wan Farah Wani Wan Fakhruddin¹, Farhana Abu Bakar², Scott Elliott Cohen³

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Kuala Lumpur, 54100, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

² Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 Skudai, Johor, Malaysia

³ Cat Frog Web Consulting, Carlton Avenue East, Wembley, Middlesex, London, HA9 8PZ, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Mental health awareness campaigns, in particular, have increasingly relied on digital platform to share information, promote help-seeking behaviour, and reduce stigma of mental illness. In Malaysia, public health institutions use social media to communicate key messages related to mental well-being, existing support systems and early intervention. Despite the growing reliance on social media, the effectiveness of social media in reducing mental illness stigma and engaging audiences remains a critical area of investigation. The way mental health messages are framed and the rhetorical strategies employed can determine public perception and behavioural responses. This study explores mental health awareness campaigns on social media, namely the Public Health Malaysia Facebook. Using netnographic approach and qualitative content analysis of mental health-related campaign posts, the study explores the themes and rhetorical strategies used in the campaigns. The findings yielded interesting themes and rhetorical strategies used in mental health awareness campaigns on Facebook. The study offers a fresh insight into enhancing the current mental health awareness campaigns on social media which should be more audience-centred, interactive and inclusive.

1. Introduction

Mental health awareness campaigns have shifted to digital platforms to reach greater number of audiences, disseminate accurate information, encourage help seeking and reduce mental health-related stigma. Social media particularly Facebook, has become a widely utilised channel for health organisations to deliver public health messages and engage the community [1]. Facebook offers cost-effective, and broad-audience reach that it is able to connect groups of people including those people who are comfortable with online interactions over public settings [2]. In Malaysia, public health institutions and non-governmental organisations have utilised social media to communicate key

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: asyura.kl@utm.my

messages on mental well-being, advertise support systems, and promote early mental intervention in mental health issues. There is a growing public interest in Malaysia in seeking health information online as past studies [3-5] reported that people often find such information useful and reliable, and sometimes they even consult healthcare professionals directly via social media. The public interest shows the importance of public health organisations or health-related government agencies to leverage their social media channels to provide accurate and supportive mental health content.

Despite the use of social media for mental health promotion, there is still room to question about its effectiveness in engaging audiences and reducing mental health and mental illness-related stigma. In fact, mental illness stigma has been reported as one of the barriers in seeking help and receiving professional medical treatment. To better contextualise this issue, first, it is important to distinguish between mental health stigma and mental illness stigma.

Mental health stigma and mental illness stigma, while related, is two different concepts. Mental health stigma refers to negative perceptions and attitudes toward acknowledging mental well-being, discussing emotional struggles, or seeking professional help, which often rooted in cultural misconceptions or low literacy on mental health. In contrast, mental illness stigma is directed more specifically at individuals who are diagnosed with or perceived to have a mental disorder which is manifested through stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination that can lead to social exclusion or barriers to treatment or employment. While both forms of stigma discourage help-seeking, the former primarily affects openness to conversations about mental health, while the latter reinforces harmful labels and marginalization of those with clinically diagnosed conditions.

Given that mental health awareness campaigns' aim is to promote positive attitudes towards well-being and to counter negative stereotypes about mental illness, these initiatives are inherently connected to breaking mental illness stigma. Therefore, examining mental health awareness campaigns on social media provides valuable insights into strategies for reducing stigma towards mental illness.

Language and framing in mental health communication can significantly influence public perceptions and willingness to seek professional help [6]. For example, stigma exists even in clinical and academic contexts and using labeling language (e.g. calling someone 'crazy' or 'schizophrenic' rather than 'a person with schizophrenia' can reinforce harmful stereotypes [7]. On the other hand, careful use of person-centred, respectful language can help validate individuals and potentially reduce societal and self-stigma [7]. Therefore, the way mental health messages are framed and the rhetorical strategies used are critical as they can shape public perception in two ways as in either perpetuating inadvertently more stigma or breaking stigma.

Prior studies have highlighted both the advantages and challenges of using social media in disseminating mental health messages [8]. On the positive side, social media campaigns have been associated with increased help-seeking behaviour. Social media communities also leverage personal stories and make the 'invisible' aspects of mental illness visible through posts, photos, and videos, which can help change public perceptions on mental illness. For example, one Malaysian social media influencer shared in a few of his social media postings on what is happening in the brain and mind of people with schizophrenia when they are hallucinating. With this sharing on social media, social media has turned into online communities that often provide spaces of empathy and support, therefore normalising conversations about mental health.

On the other hand, social media can also perpetuate stigma if the posts contain condescending or inappropriate contents towards those with mental illness or mental health issues [9]. This includes social media posts by non-governmental or mental health-related organisations [10]. This reality makes it imperative to study how official mental health campaigns craft their messages and whether

they employ strategies either the postings reduce or perpetuate stigma in their mental health-related campaigns.

This study focuses on mental health awareness campaigns on the Public Health Malaysia Facebook page, analysing the content of posts and how they frame mental health messages. Public Health Malaysia Facebook page, analysing the content of posts and how they frame mental health messages. Public Health Malaysia's Facebook page is a prominent platform for public health information in Malaysia to over one million followers. This Facebook page is not operated or linked to the Ministry of Health Malaysia, but it is operated by Malaysian health professionals and allied health professionals. Using a qualitative netnographic approach and content analysis, this study aims to explore (i) prominent themes present in these mental health-related campaign posts and (ii) identify the rhetorical strategies (e.g. language style, emotional appeals) used. By examining how the messages are conveyed and how they are presented, this study is able to unpack their mental health campaigns in engaging the public and reducing stigma.

1.1 Social Media in Public Mental Health Campaigns

Social media has become an integral tool in public health promotion globally. The shift to public health promotion from conventional approach to social media is due to how social media is interactive in nature and massive in reach which allow health promotion to reach larger populations at low cost [11]. In mental health promotion, social media platforms have been used to raise awareness, disseminate psychoeducational content and influence health behaviours. A systematic review of social media mental health campaigns suggested that these platforms show promise in changing users' attitudes and behaviours. While social media mental health campaigns consistently generated engagement, there is still a scarcity in the studies that measure help-seeking and behaviour change [12]. In relation to the current study, behaviour change includes whether mental health campaigns can reduce stigma or the contrast. It is believed that key factors that influence public engagement on social media campaigns are video or live content, relatable messaging, credible sources, and presentation styles [12].

In Malaysia, the use of Facebook for health communication has been notable. Public Health Malaysia's Facebook page is one of the most influential health social media, with thousands of posts and 1.3 million followers. Health-related posts in Malaysia are often delivered both in Bahasa Melayu and English to maximise outreach. Studies have found that Malaysians often trust and appreciate health information shared on legitimate social media platforms [13,14]. Nonetheless, it has been reported that health misinformation is one of the threats of disseminating health information through social media, hence making the role of credible sources like Public Health Malaysia Facebook is important in ensuring accuracy, building public trust and guiding health-related discussions. Engagement with such content (based on social media users' likes, shares, and comments) is seen as an indicator to positive impact. This sets the understanding that public responds positively to informative health content, reinforcing the idea that improving mental health awareness and reducing mental health stigma via social media can be effective, which is the focus of the current study.

1.2 Mental Health and Mental Illness Stigma and Message Framing

Stigma that surrounds mental health-issue and mental illness remains a significant barrier to care. In general, many individuals with mental illness do not seek professional treatment, partly due to fear of being stigmatised [15]. In Malaysia, mental illness stigma is deeply influenced by cultural and

social factors, where misconceptions such as viewing mental illness as a spiritual weakness are still evident in some communities. Public awareness campaigns thus carry the responsibility of 'reframing' mental health and mental illness issues in a way that counters these stigmatising beliefs. Literature on framing health messages suggests that the way information is presented (the 'frame') can significantly change public response. For example, anti-stigma campaigns have tested counter-framing strategies by actively refuting negative stereotypes and replacing them with positive or normalise descriptors [16]. It is also evident that messages that explicitly stating that people with mental illness are not weak or crazy but can be strong and resilient individuals can significantly reduce stigmatising attitudes among certain audiences [16]. This indicates that even small changes in wording or emphasis can enhance a campaign's destigmatising impact.

However, framing is delicate. Some mental health campaigns' messages are able to reduce stigma for certain public but inadvertently backfired in another [17]. The lesson is that mental health messaging must be carefully tailored as different rhetorical strategies (e.g. factual appeals, emotional appeals, or narrative stories) can have varied effects on diverse audience groups.

Another aspect of mental health messages on social media is the use of language. Experts argue that using first language and avoiding labels that define individuals by their illness [18]. For example, instead of using 'depressed person', it is better to use 'person with depression'. Avoiding terms like 'schizo' or 'crazy' in favour of clinical yet compassionate language. Language shapes beliefs, hence using neutral, person-centered terms validates individuals' experiences and can reduce the internalized shame that often accompanies mental illness [19]. In essence, the rhetoric of mental health campaigns through social media should aim to humanise the subject by portraying those with mental health conditions as multifaceted people), emphasise treatability and hope and eliminate blame or shame. Prior campaigns worldwide have utilised mental health campaigns strategies such as storytelling, myth-busting facts and inclusive messaging. In this study, these strategies are explored within the Malaysian context to examine their effectiveness in addressing mental illness stigma through social media.

At this point of juncture, it is evident that limited research has focused on how mental health campaigns are delivered in the Malaysian context, particularly in relation to addressing mental health and mental illness stigma. Addressing this gap is significant as social media has become a powerful tool for shaping public perceptions, specifically in countering mental health and mental illness stigma. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the strategies employed in mental health awareness campaigns on social media, particularly, Public Health Malaysia Facebook posts and evaluate their effectiveness in addressing the stigma surrounding mental health and mental illness.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design: Netnography

This study employed qualitative research design, combining netnography (online ethnographic observation) and qualitative content analysis. Netnography involves systematic and immersive observation of online interactions and content to understand cultural and communicative patterns within digital communities [20]. A netnographic approach is suitable as Facebook functions as a community where public health organisations and citizens interact. Also, this approach enables researchers to fully immerse themselves in online environment, making researchers a participant-observer who can interpret interactions and community dynamics from within. In this context, researchers observed the Public Health Malaysia Facebook contents related to mental health and audience engagement (emoji reactions, shares and comments) the post garnered. Other than that,

researchers' field notes which are central to netnography were collected from the researchers involved in collecting the data.

2.2 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Public Health Malaysia Facebook posts related to mental health and mental illness were collected from June 2020 to May 2025, given mental health posts were frequent since the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. 193 posts related to mental health and mental illness awareness campaigns were analysed. The data were not chosen randomly but were selected based on their relevance to mental health and mental illness topics. Inclusion criteria were that a post must focus on mental health or mental illness in some ways (e.g. posts about depression, anxiety, stress management, suicide prevention, coping strategies and promotion of mental well-being). Samples of Public Health Malaysia's Facebook posts on mental health campaigns and public response on the same post are presented in Figure 1 and 2:



Fig. 1. Sample of Public Health Malaysia Facebook's mental health campaigns posts



Fig. 2. Sample of comments from public in response to the post in Figure 1

Complementing the netnographic approach, qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data following Bengston's [21] analytical framework. The content analysis was conducted to identify themes and rhetorical strategies of each theme. The content analysis began with preliminary coding scheme based on research objectives and literature, followed by open coding to allow for the exploration of additional themes. After the open coding, then the analysis was performed by grouping the themes into broader categories, and overarching themes were synthesised. The final

themes and rhetorical strategies were defined clearly. The data was analysed in its original language (informal Malay/mix of English) and was translated into formal English for the research reporting purpose. Finally, to ensure reflexivity, we maintained a reflexive journal to note how our own biases or expectations might influence interpretation as this is central and important in netnography.

3. Results and Discussion

After thoroughly analysing the data, the researchers identified several key themes in the content as well as rhetorical strategies used to convey messages in mental health campaigns via Public Health Malaysia Facebook. The findings are organised into two-subsections, first, the major themes of the mental health campaign posts and second, the rhetorical or framing strategies employed. In practice, these often intertwine (e.g. the theme on destigmatisation can be achieved through certain rhetorical strategies such as myth-busting or emotional story telling) but for clarity, they are discussed separately before we integrate them into the discussion.

3.1 Prominent Themes in Mental Health Campaigns Posts

3.1.1 Destigmatisation and normalising mental health

The theme on destigmatisation and normalising mental health was identified as the active effort to reduce stigma that associates with mental illness. Many posts explicitly aimed to normalise conversations about mental health. For example, some posts contained statements such as 'mental health problems are common' and 'can happen to anyone' regardless of age, gender or background. Some posts included reassuring messages such as 'It's okay not to be okay' which happened to be posted around the time a famous Korean drama on mental health titled 'It's Okay Not to Be Okay' was aired, with the possible aim to attract the Malaysian younger generation. There were also posts on 'Seeking help is not a weakness' that directly target common stigmatising beliefs. Public Health Malaysia mental health and mental illness infographic posts are believed to tackle misconceptions like depression is just laziness or people with mental illness are dangerous by providing factual corrections and empathetic explanations.

By addressing these myths, the campaign tried a strategy called counter-framing which replaces negative stereotypes with more accurate and sympathetic frames. The tones of the posts were identified as supportive and non-judgmental. Nonetheless, in the comments section, a minority of Facebook users were seen judgemental and being negative when responding to mental health and mental illness-related posts on Public Health Malaysia Facebook (e.g. Figure 2) but some judgmental and negative comments were immediately corrected by other members of the public. The campaigns might have not 'won' everyone, but these posts were aligned with the idea that careful word choice can positively shape beliefs.

3.1.2 Encouraging help-seeking and highlighting resources

Another key theme identified was promoting help-seeking behaviour. Many posts (e.g. Figure 1) sought to reassure people that it is both important and acceptable to seek professional help for mental health issues. For example, one post might list signs that someone should consider reaching out to professionals when they have depression symptoms such as persistent sadness, loss of interest in activities and others) and provide information on mental health support and helplines such as Befrienders and depression survivor support groups. By posting the existing support systems, the

campaigns attempted at bridging the gap between awareness and action as in informing the public what they should do if they or someone they know is struggling.

In this post, the framing was solution-oriented and empowering the public. Additionally, posts under this theme are considered as an effort to alleviate fears of seeking professional help and mental illness is like any other disease like fever, hence, it asserts that it is fine to get treated. Through relating mental health support to something as routine as seeing a doctor for fever, the campaign attempted to encourage help-seeking behaviour and reduce hesitation that comes from shame or stigma.

3.1.3 Mental health literacy and education

A substantial proportion of Public Health Malaysia Facebook were informational and aimed at improving mental health literacy among the public. These educational posts covered a range of topics such as definition and symptoms of common mental illness conditions (e.g. depression, bipolar, schizophrenia), or mental health well-being (e.g. tips for maintaining mental well-being, stress management). For example, a post that shows an infographic of 'Signs of Burnout' is usually meant for working adult. During the aftermath period of Covid-19 pandemic, some posts focused on psychological well-being in the context of the pandemic (e.g. dealing with grief, anxiety about health). The use of layman's terms was very evident in these posts and medical jargons, or clinical terminologies were kept to a minimum. Whenever technical terms were used, they were always accompanied by plain language.

This strategy likely reflects an understanding that majority of the public might not be versed in medical terminology, hence using simplified information can increase comprehension and shareability [22]. Visual aids were common in these educational posts, the page often used colourful graphics or cartoon illustrations to present mental health messages and information in engaging way.

3.2 Rhetorical Strategies in Mental Health Campaigns Posts

3.2.1 Use of layman's terms

The most consistently noted rhetorical strategy was the use of layman's terms or layperson-friendly language. Given the target audience is the general public, posts avoided medical jargon. For example, in one post on Manic Bipolar symptoms, phrases like 'excessive happiness' make the symptoms relatable rather than using an academic style or scientific explanation. Nonetheless, for essential terms like mania, neurotransmitter, serotonin or dopamine were still used with the aim of making it easy for the general public to understand accurate context of manic bipolar.

The sentence structures in most of the posts tended to be short and clear, often showing important points in boxes or numbered lists for tips. By using everyday language, the campaign aligns with health literacy principles and likely ensured the messages did not feel unnecessary lengthy or overly clinical. This approach corresponds to recommendations in health communication that scientifically accurate information should be translated into community-friendly terms to avoid alienating the audience [23].

3.2.2 Emotional appeals

Many posts used emotional resonance to connect with readers. For destigmatisation posts, the emotion was often empathy or compassion. For instance, posts would prompt readers to imagine the pain someone has or share a heartfelt anecdote of someone overcoming suicidal thoughts with

the help of friends. By using empathy, these posts aim to reduce stigma and encourage positive behaviours. Other emotional tones included hope and inspirations. For example, during certain campaigns (e.g. World Mental Health Day), the page shared uplifting slogans and messages of solidarity such as 'You are not alone in this journey' with supportive comments in these posts. Another prominent post was the use of emotional phrases to deliver indignation and moral outrage on a local media that showed insensitive portrayal of suicide via satire comic (e.g. 'How could they do this..' (*sampai hati*)). This post created a corrective, emotionally compelling message that suicide is not trivial but the culmination of profound suffering.

This rhetorical strategy is known as pathos appeals (touching the heart to motivate attitude change and action) which is common in health campaigns worldwide. Mental health campaigns on Public Health Malaysia Facebook are identified to avoid heavy-handed hear or shame because it will only perpetuate greater mental illness stigma among the Malaysian public. Overall, emotional appeals were used to create an atmosphere of understanding.

3.2.3 Credibility and authority

To increase the credibility of the messages, the campaigns frequently used expert authority or evidence. Several posts were either attributed to reputable authority and organisation. For example, a post might start with 'According to the Malaysian Psychiatric Association', hence framing the information as coming from knowledgeable sources. This rhetorical strategy is important in an era where social media is rife with health misinformation, as showing that the information that comes from trusted medical experts encourages the public to trust messages on Public Health Malaysia social media.

It is also observed that credibility and authority strategy was established through the use of statistics and research findings. For instance, the page administrators sometimes used phrases such as '1 in 5 adolescents in Malaysia have experienced....'. This strategy grabs the public attention with concrete figure and underlines the severity of the issue in the national context. By framing the messages in data, mental health campaigns try to appeal to the more analytically minded users of Facebook. The balance between empathetic tone and authoritative content likely helped make posts persuasive yet relatable.

4. Conclusions

This study offers an understanding into mental health campaigns by Public Health Malaysia Facebook, an advocate and non-governmental organisation related to public health. The adoption of netnography as the contemporary research design has enabled an exploration of how mental health campaign messages are framed, circulated and received in online spaces.

By situating the analysis within the naturally occurring digital interactions (social media), this study highlights the opportunities and challenges faced by public health communicators in engaging audiences on sensitive issues such as mental health. Although mental health campaigns by the Public Health Malaysia Facebook are not able to fully break the mental illness stigma among Malaysian public, the findings showed that public perceptions towards mental illness have gradually showed a positive improvement.

Overall, the findings suggest that the Public Health Malaysia Facebook page has been proactive and largely effective in its mental health campaigns approaches although with room to grow in terms of interactivity. The findings contribute to the understanding of digital health communication and

provide practical implications for designing more empathetic, evidence based, and impactful campaigns which represents the novelty of this study.

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