

Ideological Representations of People with Mental Illness in Malaysian Online Newspapers: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The news media's role in shaping knowledge about mental illness has long been recognised as one of the primary conduits through which the public learns about people with mental health conditions. Despite a proliferation of research on media portrayals of mental illness, there seems to be a lack of studies critically examining how people with mental illness (PwMI) are constructed in mainstream and independent newspapers, especially in the Malaysian context. The present study aims to comparatively examine how PwMI are ideologically represented in mainstream and independent online newspapers. Predicated on van Dijk's (1980) theory of semantic macrostructures and van Dijk's (1998) ideological square model, twelve news reports from each newspaper were analysed. Findings revealed that the semantic macrostructures constructed from the news reports mainly centred on the topic of the dangerousness, vulnerability, and human rights of PwMI. The prominent "othering" of PwMI was particularly evident in both newspapers, as they were not only depicted as dangerous and violent but also as vulnerable, dependent, and powerless, in juxtaposition to those without mental illness. In addition to providing insights on how online newspapers contribute to the ideological construction of PwMI via topicalisation, the study's findings have potential implications for media literacy programmes aiming to empower news consumers with critical reading skills in deconstructing public discourses on mental illness.

Keywords: People with mental illness; representation; semantic macrostructures; critical discourse analysis; online newspapers

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INTRODUCTION

Ranging from anxiety to depression, around 1 billion people worldwide are living with one or more forms of mental illness (World Health Organization, 2022). People with mental illness (PwMI) often have to deal with both the challenging symptoms of mental illness and the widespread stigma linked to mental health diagnoses (Thornicroft et al., 2022). Although those with other medical conditions are also subjected to stigma, PwMI are among the most highly stigmatised groups in society (Arboleda-Flórez & Stuart, 2012; Boysen et al., 2020). Notably, recent studies have shown that PwMI from Asian countries, including Malaysia, are also equally stigmatised as those from Western countries (Mariana Tumin, 2022; Shaeraine Raaj et al., 2021). However, addressing mental illness stigma among Malaysians has been challenging due to two main reasons: (a) the influence of distinct cultural and religious beliefs of diverse ethnic groups (Shaeraine Raaj et al., 2021; Stella Jane Lakshman et al., 2023); and (b) negative media representations of PwMI that conflate them with violence, criminality, and vulnerability to suicide (Lai Fong Yang, 2023; Siti Munirah Mohd Ali et al., 2024; Zul Azlin Razali et al., 2018). Such stigmatising media depictions of PwMI are particularly concerning given the news media's pivotal role in the articulation of beliefs about mental illness (Erubami et al., 2023; Whitley & Wang, 2017), whereby powerful ideas about PwMI can be implicitly reinforced in shaping readers' social cognition. In fact, scholars have confirmed that the news media's constant inaccurate and misleading portrayals of mental illness have led the public to develop negative perceptions of PwMI (Corrigan et al., 2005; McGinty et al., 2013; Pendit & Koo, 2020).

Nonetheless, news may not necessarily reflect the world, but rather a construction of social reality (Fowler, 1991). Preferential news coverage by news institutions can be a significant influencing factor in their selection of issues to include, as well as how certain groups are portrayed in newspapers. Another related criticism of the news media's construction of reality is the frequent use of value-laden language in representing certain groups, including the marginalised, as well as other controversial events (Fatihi, 2023; Fowler, 1991; Goatly & Hiradhar, 2016; Riggs, 2020). Such language use in the news calls into question the truthfulness and objectivity of the information shared with the public. Despite the prevalence of value-laden language in the news, there appear to be a limited number of studies that have focused on the critical analysis of the discursive mechanisms involved in the portrayals of PwMI (Assaf, 2020; Balfour, 2020; Olstead, 2002; Price, 2019). Rather, most studies examining the news representations of mental illness have centrally focused on understanding what the media says about mental illness, with their findings pointing to a prevalence of stigmatising depictions of PwMI as perpetrators of crimes (Corrigan et al., 2005; Delahunt-Smolencic & Smith-Merry, 2020; Goulden et al., 2011; Wahl et al., 2002). Likewise, in the Malaysian context, relatively small studies on news representations of mental illness have been conducted to date (Lai Fong Yang, 2023; Nor Fariza et al., 2021; Siti Munirah Mohd Ali et al., 2024; Zul Azlin Razali et al., 2018). Except for one study that employed a discourse-analytic approach to examine the constructions of mental health, particularly the adjective collocates for *mental health* in newspapers (Nor Fariza et al., 2021), the remaining studies appeared to be mainly preoccupied with studying the overall prevalence of specific themes in the news coverage of mental illness. As such, this study hopes to bridge the gap in the literature by further investigating the topic using a critical discourse analytic approach to examine how PwMI are discursively constructed in juxtaposition to those without mental illness in selected mainstream and independent online newspapers. More specifically, given the significance of semantic macrostructures in foregrounding the most relevant information (and usually the best-

recalled information) in news articles (van Dijk, 1980), the study is interested in identifying the semantic macrostructures in the news coverage of PwMI. The prominent discursive functions of the semantic macrostructures in news discourses have also been studied by scholars examining the representations of other marginalised groups, including the *Malaysian Orang Asli* (Marlina Jamal & Malini Ganapathy, 2021), *the Muslim women* (Al-Hejin, 2015), *the squatters* (van Dijk, 1988b), as well as controversial events such as *the Syrian civil war* (Al-Gamde & Tenbrink, 2020), and *the Arab Spring* (Al-Radhi et al., 2016), among others.

Besides that, given that most news institutions are “socially, economically, and politically situated” (Fowler, 1991, p. 10), the news may be constructed from specific angles in line with their respective ideologies, underpinned by the distinct orientations and ownership patterns of the newspapers (Hema Preya Selvanathan & Lickel, 2020). Correspondingly, previous studies comparing the news reporting patterns of selected Malaysian mainstream and independent newspapers have shown that the former was more selective in the choice of discourses and voices included in the news, with powerful elites being represented more, while the latter appeared to be more critical in challenging the status quo (Dauda & Nik Norma Nik Hasan, 2018; Laily Murny Kamarulzaman, 2016; Lim Shiang Shiang et al., 2020). Considering the distinctions between the news reporting of the Malaysian mainstream and independent newspapers, as well as the repeated calls made by scholars for more comparative studies to be conducted (Alkaff & McLellan, 2017; Chan & Lee, 2017; Miller et al., 2020), this study intends to conduct a comparative-based CDA study on the portrayals of PwMI in *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*.

By conducting this study, the research hopes to uncover the ideologies that are inherently reinforced through the topicalisation of certain issues in relation to PwMI in the two newspapers. The research questions that inform this study are as follows:

- 1) What are the similarities and differences in the semantic macrostructures derived from the selected news reports on PwMI from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*?
- 2) How do the semantic macrostructures derived from the selected news reports from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* reveal the ideologies reinforced in the representations of PwMI?

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

Previous studies on news representations of mental illness have demonstrated that PwMI were consistently depicted in a stigmatising way. In a pioneering study by Wahl et al. (2002), it was found that despite increased positive news coverage on mental illness in U.S. newspapers in 1989 and 1999, the theme of dangerousness remained prevalent. Likewise, in another similar study, Corrigan et al. (2005) noted that a majority of the news reports on PwMI in U.S. newspapers in 2002 focused elements of violent crimes, mental illness as a legal defence, as well as criminal victimisation. Besides that, other positive themes related to treatment and recovery and those concerning advocacy actions, albeit to a lesser extent, were also evident in the newspapers. Meanwhile, in the context of the U.K., Goulden et al. (2011) found that although the news coverage of mental illness between 1992-2008 improved, as evidenced by the increased coverage of articles focusing on the themes of understanding mental illness and advocacy, PwMI were still frequently reported in relation to danger and violence. Scholars have also compared the news coverage of

mental illness in newspapers of distinct media ownership and orientations (e.g., mainstream versus independent newspapers). For instance, Miller et al. (2020) revealed that the selected mainstream newspaper in the Ugandan context employed a more stigmatising language in depicting PwMI relative to the independent newspaper in the country.

More pertinently, only a limited number of studies on news portrayals of mental illness have employed the CDA and critical-corpus linguistics approaches. Assaf's (2020) study on the linguistic choices in the U.S. press coverage on mental health revealed an overlexicalisation of mental illness relative to aggression, which further reinforced the stigmatisation of PwMI as being prone to committing crimes. In another similar study, Price (2019), who applied a combination of frameworks from corpus linguistics and CDA, investigated the discursive representations of mental illness in the U.K. press. Despite a positive change in the news coverage of PwMI in the country, especially in the domain of semantics (e.g., the prominent use of 'mental health' in referring to mental illness), the study revealed that the news reports citing the symptoms of mental illness were still misleading. Meanwhile, Olstead (2002), in his study on the conflation of mental illness with criminality in the Canadian press, suggested that the news media, besides focusing on the polarising representations between the "us" and "them," also reinforced different forms of otherness based on one's social class, especially in assigning different levels of agency to PwMI.

In Malaysia, studies on media representations of PwMI are still relatively scarce. Among the few studies on the portrayals of PwMI in Malaysian news media, the research by Zul Azlin Razali et al. (2018) and Siti Munirah Mohd Ali et al. (2024) showed that mental illness was frequently conflated with criminality and violence, concurring with the patterns of news representations in the global context. Meanwhile, studies focusing on the representations of mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic confirmed that less stigmatising news discussing the actions taken by the government and NGOs in assisting those suffering from mental health issues and promoting mental health awareness among the public were included in the newspapers (Lai Fong Yang, 2023; Nor Fariza et al., 2021). However, the examination of mental health representations and portrayals of PwMI in selected Malaysian newspapers has mainly employed content analysis and corpus-driven discourse analysis. In other words, the analysis of the local news coverage on mental illness using CDA methods is a topic rife with possibilities, especially considering Malaysia's unique socio-political context.

SEMANTIC MACROSTRUCTURES AND THE IDEOLOGICAL SQUARE MODEL

Considering that media discourses, especially news reports, are regarded as "particular types of language use or text and as specific kinds of sociocultural practice" (van Dijk, 1988b, p. 2), examining their structures at distinct levels of description is warranted. However, news analysis is not confined to micro-level analysis; rather it concerns more complex, global-level discourse properties, including semantic macrostructures. The semantic macrostructures are characterised by the construction of global structures that systematically organise micro information in discourse and other cognitive processes (van Dijk, 1980). In other words, van Dijk's (1980) theory of semantic macrostructures focuses on the hierarchical organisation of themes or topics in a text, representing the more global and most relevant meanings of the text, derived through the macrorules (i.e., deletion, generalisation, and construction).

The scholar also introduced a more comprehensive model of ideology, namely the ideological square model. In the model, the scholar emphasised that ideology is not only the cluster of ideas in our minds but also the socially shared beliefs among members of a group (van Dijk,

1998). More precisely, ideology, besides functioning as a belief system that is part of our cognition, plays a social function as it is socially shared among members of the same social group, often manifested through social discourses. The ideological square model, which comprises four strategic moves, provides a systematic method to examine the ideological polarisations in news discourse. The four moves of the ideological square model (van Dijk, 1998, p. 267) are as follows:

1. Express/emphasise information that is positive about Us
2. Express/emphasise information that is negative about Them
3. Suppress/de-emphasise information that is positive about Them
4. Suppress/de-emphasise information that is negative about Us

Several studies have applied van Dijk's theories to examine news representations across different contexts, establishing their effectiveness in identifying prominent topics and uncovering the embedded ideologies in news articles. For example, Marlina Jamal and Malini Ganapathy (2021) have exclusively employed van Dijk's (1980) theory of semantic macrostructures to analyse the thematic structures in news reports on the Orang Asli community in *The Star* newspaper. The study's findings documented that the group was constructed in a stereotypical way, highlighting the group's position as a marginalised community in the country accompanied by high rates of poverty, poor health, and restricted access to political power. In another study, Al-Radhi et al. (2016) examined the global meanings and ideologies expressed in the news reporting of the Egyptian internal crisis during the Arab Spring period by the *Al-Jazeera (AJE)* newspaper, using both van Dijk's theoretical frameworks discussed above. The findings showed that *AJE* focused on foregrounding the Muslim Brotherhood's (Islamists) fight to reclaim its legitimate ruling power from the oppressive new Egyptian coup authority. The researchers also uncovered that *AJE* reinforced its support for the Islamists by representing their actions of defending their rights positively while negatively depicting the new Egyptian coup as an illegitimate ruler of Egypt. Numerous other studies, both locally and outside of Malaysia, have also examined the ideological representations and/or macrostructures of news articles using the theories discussed above. Thus, owing to the usefulness of the theories in capturing the discourse topics in news texts and making evident the discursive strategies employed by journalists in the formation of a polarising world comprising the in-group "us" and the out-group "them," this study is thus interested in investigating the significance of the framework in uncovering the ideologies reinforced about PwMI in *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*.

METHOD

Given the mediating power of language, this study adopts a qualitative research design, particularly the CDA approach, in comparing how language is thematically used in ideologically representing PwMI in news reports from selected Malaysian mainstream and independent online newspapers. The CDA framework developed for this research includes two distinct levels: macro-level analysis (semantic macrostructures) and ideological analysis, informed by van Dijk's (1980) theory of semantic macrostructures and van Dijk's (1998) ideological square model, respectively. In tandem with the criterion sampling strategy employed in this study, a set of predetermined criteria was identified to guide the study's sample selection process.

Firstly, online newspapers were chosen in this research owing to their up-to-date news reporting, easy accessibility, and growing readers' demand for online news sources (Newman et al., 2023). Specifically, two Malaysian English-language online newspapers, *The Star Online* (mainstream newspaper) and *Malaysiakini* (independent newspaper) were mainly selected as they recorded the highest readership and brand trust scores among Malaysians in comparison to other local dailies (Newman et al., 2023). Secondly, only the genre of news reports from the two online newspapers was included in this study due to its news reporting style and distinct schema, which can be structurally analysed at various levels of description (Bell, 1991; van Dijk, 1988a). Thirdly, the online news portals of *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* were used as the primary databases to retrieve samples of news reports on mental illness for the study. Keywords including both general (e.g., *mental illness, mental disorder, mental disability, etc.*) and specific diagnostic terms (e.g., *depressive disorder, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, etc.*) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) were used to retrieve news reports in order of relevance from the online databases from January 2022 to June 2023. The research was conducted in July 2023, and thus the news reports published between January 2022 and June 2023 were collected. The sampling period does not correspond to any major events or issues concerning PwMI in Malaysia; rather, it was chosen to capture a wide variety of topics on the news coverage of mental illness in the Malaysian context while also providing current insights into the journalistic practices of the selected newspapers (Murni Wan Mohd Nor & Gale, 2021).

The main characteristic of data collection in qualitative research, according to Flick (1998), is that “sampling proceeds according to the relevance of cases instead of their representativeness” (p. 68). Two inclusion and three exclusion criteria were used to evaluate the relevance of the news reports obtained from the online databases of the respective newspapers. The inclusion criteria require the news reports to address those with mental illness and the issues concerning them. Meanwhile, news reports covering the same events or issues in both online newspapers were included in the corpus due to potential distinctions in the editorial stances and ideologies between different news organisations (Fowler, 1991). For the exclusion criteria, exact duplicates and false-positive news reports were eliminated from the corpus. Subsequently, news reports containing terms denoting non-clinically significant symptoms of mental illness (e.g., stress) were also excluded. More importantly, news reports sourced from global news agencies were not included in the corpus as the present study mainly focuses on the news coverage of PwMI in the Malaysian context that reflects the voice and stance of local journalists.

Based on criterion sampling, a sample of 19 and 14 news reports were initially obtained from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*, respectively. Given that studies employing qualitative research designs aim to achieve great depths in analysis and provide “thick descriptions” of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10), rather than focusing on drawing generalisations, they involve relatively small samples (Patton, 2002). To ensure the rigour of qualitative studies employing small samples, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) argued that data saturation can be considered in determining the adequacy of sample sizes in a study. Scholars have also recommended that a sample size of between ten and twelve is sufficient for achieving saturation and a fairly reliable analysis (Guest et al., 2006; Sandelowski, 1995). Thus, to ensure a manageable set of samples and to increase the credibility of the comparison between the two newspapers, every second article from the initially obtained datasets from both online newspapers was selected for inclusion. A total of 24 news reports, 12 articles (63.2% of the initial dataset) from *The Star Online*, and 12 articles (85.7% of the initial dataset) from *Malaysiakini* were included in the final corpus of the study. For ease of reference, a code was subsequently assigned to each news report, with those from *The Star Online*

labelled “S1” to “S12,” while those from *Malaysiakini* were labelled “MK1” to “MK12”. The news reports were then grouped into their respective categories based on the broad focus of the news articles, namely *dangerousness*, *strangeness/ineptness*, *criminal victimisation*, and *mental health advocacy*, among others (Corrigan et al., 2005; Goulden et al., 2011; Wahl et al., 2002). The broad categories of the news reports on PwMI were determined based on the coding frames and descriptions provided in similar previous studies (Table 1). However, the grouping of the news reports based on their respective categories is not conclusive, as it is only intended to present the range of subjects found in the coverage of PwMI in the two online newspapers.

TABLE 1. The categories of the selected news reports from The Star Online and Malaysiakini

Major Category	Sub-Category	News Report	Description
Dangerousness	Violent crime	S1, S2	News reports focusing on violent crimes (e.g., murder, assault, etc.) committed or allegedly perpetrated by PwMI are subsumed under the category of dangerous.
		MK1, MK2, MK4, MK5	
	Double murder-suicide	S5	
		MK6	
Strangeness/ineptness	Non-violent crime	S3, S4	News reports highlighting the strange behaviours of PwMI, their involvement in less severe forms of troublesome actions (e.g., vandalising public property), or cases of them going missing are placed under the strangeness/ineptness category.
		MK3	
	Rescued victim	S7	
Criminal victimisation	Crime victim	S6	News reports discussing crime incidents or mistreatments against PwMI within mental health care facilities are subsumed under the category of criminal victimisation.
Mental health advocacy	Stigma and awareness	S8, S9	News reports discussing efforts to create awareness about mental illness and reduce stigma and discrimination of PwMI are placed under the category of mental health advocacy.
		MK7	
Others	Legal issues	S10, S12	News reports discussing a range of legal issues, rights related to justice-involved individuals with mental illness, as well as custodial deaths are subsumed under the category of others.
		MK9, MK10, MK12	
	Right to health in custody	S11	
		MK11	
Custodial death	MK8		

Adapted from Corrigan et al. (2005), Goulden et al. (2011), and Wahl et al. (2002)

The steps involved in the construction of semantic macrostructures from the selected news reports are presented in Table 2. As stated earlier, the semantic macrostructures are constructed based on the first-level and higher-level macropropositions derived from the news reports via the (re)application of macrorules.

TABLE 2. Derivation of First-Level Macropropositions from S1

Headline of S1: Cops arrest mentally impaired man for trying to kidnap child in Pasir Gudang		
Para.	Application of Macrorules	First-Level Macroproposition (M)
1	a) Deletion of irrelevant details in sentences [1] and [2] – the spatial-temporal information of the crime incident can be removed. b) Construction of M1	M1: The police arrested a mentally impaired man for attempting to abduct a child after receiving a complaint from the public.
2	a) Deletion of irrelevant details in sentence [3] – the suspect’s and victim’s ages can be removed. b) Generalisation of information in sentences [4] and [5] – the police arrested the suspect. c) Construction of M2	M2: The police arrested the suspect with the help of bystanders at the scene.
3	a) Generalisation of information in sentence [6] – the victim was approached by the suspect when he was walking back home alone. b) Generalisation of information in sentence [7] – the suspect attempted to manipulate the victim to follow him. c) Construction of M3	M3: The police investigations revealed that the suspect approached and attempted to manipulate the victim who was walking back home alone.
4	a) Generalisation of sentence [8] – the suspect is a mental health patient and is wanted by the police for a drug-related offence. b) Deletion of sentence [9] – the exact legal section under which the suspect will be investigated can be removed. c) Construction of M4	M4: The police revealed that the suspect is mentally impaired and has a drug-related criminal history.
5	a) Generalisation of information in sentence [10] – the police advised parents to be more vigilant over their children. b) Construction of M5	M5: The police urged parents to be more vigilant over their children as they are more vulnerable and easier targets of abductors.

Based on the first-level macropropositions generated above, the semantic macrostructure of S1 can be constructed through the re-application of the macrorules (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Derivation of the Semantic Macrostructure from S1

Code	Application of Macrorules
M1	Generalisation of information in M1 and M2 – The police arrested a mentally impaired man for attempting to abduct a child.
M3	Deletion of information in M3 – The suspect’s attempt at manipulating the child can be taken to be a normal component of an attempted abduction.
M4	Generalisation of information in M4 – The suspect is mentally impaired.
M5	Deletion of M5 – The macroproposition may not be necessary for the interpretation of other propositions at a more global level.
Construction of the semantic macrostructure – The police arrested a mentally impaired man for attempting to abduct a child.	

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The overall macro-level analysis of the selected news reports from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* yielded a total of twenty-four semantic macrostructures, twelve from each newspaper. A comparison between the semantic macrostructures constructed from the online newspapers revealed notable similarities in the representations of PwMI. The semantic macrostructures focused on foregrounding the dangerousness, vulnerability, and human rights of PwMI. Tables 4-6 show the higher semantic macrostructures (HSM) constructed based on the semantic macrostructures derived from the selected news reports.

HSM 1: PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS ARE DANGEROUS AND A THREAT TO OTHERS

TABLE 4. Higher Semantic Macrostructure 1

HSM 1: People with mental illness are dangerous and a threat to others			
Newspaper	News Report	Semantic Macrostructure	Ideological Representations
<i>The Star Online</i>	S1	The police arrested a mentally impaired man for attempting to abduct a child.	<p>Self: Positive representation of the police as enforcers of law and order</p> <p>Other: Negative representation of the mentally impaired man as dangerous</p>
	S2	The suspect who brutally killed his mother before disposing of her body parts in the sewage tank suffers from mental illness.	<p>Self: Neutral representation of the victim as an innocent murder victim</p> <p>Other: Negative representation of the suspect with mental illness as violent and ruthless</p>
	S3	The police detained a suspect with mental illness for vandalising a temple's property and behaving disrespectfully after video evidence of the rampage surfaced online.	<p>Self: Positive representation of the police as enforcers of law and order</p> <p>Other: Negative representation of the suspect with mental illness as deviant and disrespectful</p>
	S4	A man with schizophrenia was punished by the court for causing damages to his neighbour's shoe rack.	<p>Self: Positive representation of the court as impartial in making decisions</p> <p>Other: Negative representation of the man with schizophrenia as impulsive and irresponsible</p>
	S5	The man who brutally killed his young children before committing suicide was suffering from mental illness.	<p>Self: Neutral representation of the victims as innocent</p> <p>Other: Negative representation of the man with mental illness as violent and impulsive</p>

HSM 1: People with mental illness are dangerous and a threat to others			
Newspaper	News Report	Semantic Macrostructure	Ideological Representations
<i>Malaysiakini</i>	MK1	A mentally disabled man was charged with murdering his stepmother.	Self: Neutral representation of the man's stepmother as an innocent murder victim Other: Negative representation of the mentally disabled man as dangerous
	MK2	The police arrested a mentally ill man for causing a violent commotion on his home roof.	Self: Positive representation of the police as enforcers of law and order Other: Negative representation of the mentally ill man as aggressive
	MK3	The suspect with mental illness was arrested by the police for trespassing and vandalising graves at the cemetery.	Self: Positive representation of the police as enforcers of law and order Other: Negative representation of the suspect with mental illness as impulsive and disrespectful
	MK4	A psychiatric patient had brutally stabbed another patient at a public hospital.	Self: Neutral representation of the victim as innocent Other: Negative representation of the psychiatric patient as violent
	MK5	The police officer who allegedly shot his wife to death suffers from depression.	Self: Neutral representation of the victim as an innocent murder victim Other: Negative representation of the police officer with depression as violent
	MK6	The man who threw his children off a flyover before committing suicide had depression.	Self: Neutral representation of the victims as innocent Other: Negative representation of the man with depression as violent and impulsive

HSM 1 underscores the link between mental illness and violence/criminality, manifested through the semantic macrostructures derived from news reports S1-S5 and MK1-MK6 from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*, respectively. Specifically, the danger posed by PwMI was accentuated in both online newspapers via references to the alleged crimes committed by them, consistent with findings of earlier studies confirming the disproportionate focus on the theme of dangerousness in the news media (Bilkay et al., 2023; Corrigan et al., 2005; Goulden et al., 2011; Olstead, 2002; Siti Munirah Mohd Ali et al., 2024; Wahl et al., 2002; Zul Azlin Razali et al., 2018). More importantly, the semantic macrostructures derived from the news reports highlighted the potential threats posed by PwMI through an emphasis on the major events or actions featuring them (e.g., *killed his mother, stabbed another patient, threw his children off a flyover*, etc.) and the

major actors in the news reports, such as *a man with schizophrenia, a psychiatric patient, a suspect with mental illness*, on the one hand, and *the police, the court*, on the other hand. The frequent portrayals of PwMI in juxtaposition with the in-group members, highlighting the latter's direct interventions (*e.g., arrest, court trials*) in dealing with cases involving the former, further promote the news media criminalisation of those with mental illness. In other words, such news reporting reflects positive self-representations and negative other-representations (van Dijk, 1998), exemplified through an emphasis on the positive actions of the in-group members and an emphasis on the negative actions of PwMI in *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*.

Besides that, another concerning issue in both newspapers is the overemphasis on the perpetrators' mental health diagnoses, for example, *the suspect who brutally killed his mother before disposing of her body parts in the sewage tank suffers from mental illness* (news report S2); *the man who threw his children off a flyover before committing suicide had depression* (news report MK6) as a fundamental explanatory factor influencing their involvement in deviant crimes. Constant references to their history of mental illness in the news reports reinforce the belief that most criminals suffer from mental health conditions, undermining other possible explanations for their deviant actions. This can be misleading, as being diagnosed with a mental health disorder is only one of the various risk factors linked to violence (Halle et al., 2020; Van Brunt & Pescara-Kovach, 2019), and evidence has also shown that the violence perpetrated by PwMI is relatively lower, except for those with severe psychiatric diagnoses (Van Brunt & Pescara-Kovach, 2019). Correspondingly, the in-group members, while represented as victims of crime allegedly perpetrated by PwMI, notably in cases of family homicides (news reports S2, S5, MK1, MK5, MK6), were accorded no role in the semantic macrostructures on the possible explanation for being targeted by PwMI. Although several other potential reasons that may have led PwMI to commit crimes, such as unemployment (*e.g., the man was unemployed and had spent most of his time taking care of his children [...]*) (news report S5), and stress (*e.g., the man had been under a lot of stress because he was unable to find a job [...]*) (news report M6), among others, were highlighted in the news reports, they were not placed in a prominent position to be promoted as topics (van Dijk, 1991). Instead, their mental health diagnoses were foregrounded to explain the reasons behind their actions against others. In essence, the oppositionality between the in-group members (the victims) and the out-group members (PwMI) was bolstered through the depictions of the former as innocent victims while the latter as deviant. In doing so, the journalists of both online newspapers seemed to have employed ideological moves that express negative information about PwMI while suppressing negative information about the in-group members (van Dijk, 1998).

HSM 2: PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS ARE VULNERABLE AND NEED TO BE PROTECTED

HSM 2 focuses on the vulnerability of PwMI and the need for them to be protected. Table 5 presents the second HSM and its corresponding semantic macrostructures derived from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*.

TABLE 5. Higher Semantic Macrostructure 2

HSM 2: People with mental illness are vulnerable and need to be cared for and protected			
Newspaper	News Report	Semantic Macrostructure	Ideological Representations
<i>The Star Online</i>	S6	A cook was charged with murdering a mental health patient at a mental healthcare centre.	Self: Negative representation of the cook as a criminal Other: Neutral representation of the mental health patient as a murder victim
	S7	The man who was rescued by the authorities after getting lost in the forest suffers from schizophrenia.	Self: Positive representation of the authorities as competent in providing immediate assistance Other: Negative representation of the man with schizophrenia as vulnerable
	S8	The Health Minister shared about the former PM's severe dementia to raise awareness about the condition.	Self: Positive representation of the Health Minister as transparent and concerned Other: Negative representation of the former PM with severe dementia as vulnerable
	S9	The Ruler is committed to creating a more compassionate and inclusive society for the well-being of those with mental illness.	Self: Positive representation of the Ruler as compassionate Other: Neutral representation of PwMI as deserving empathy and understanding from others
	S10	The NGO is against the execution of the mentally disabled Malaysian convict by the Singapore government as it violates the human rights of the disabled.	Self: Positive representation of the NGO as an advocate of the human rights of PwMI Other: Negative representation of the mentally disabled convict as vulnerable and needing the support of others
<i>Malaysiakini</i>	MK7	The Health Minister shared that the former PM was suffering from severe dementia.	Self: Positive representation of the Health Minister as transparent Other: Negative representation of the former PM as vulnerable
	MK9	The NGO opposes the execution of the mentally disabled Malaysian convict as it violates the human rights of the disabled.	Self: Positive representation of the NGO as an advocate of the human rights of PwMI Other: Negative representation of the mentally disabled convict as vulnerable

HSM 2: People with mental illness are vulnerable and need to be cared for and protected			
Newspaper	News Report	Semantic Macrostructure	Ideological Representations
	MK10	The NGO was dissatisfied with Singapore's ignorance over its international obligations as the country disregarded the human rights of the mentally disabled Malaysian convict.	Self: Positive representation of the NGO as an advocate of the human rights of PwMI Other: Negative representation of the mentally disabled convict as vulnerable
	MK11	The singer's lawyer is seeking to get the Prisons Department's permission to allow the singer with bipolar disorder to access psychiatrists.	Self: Positive representation of the singer's lawyer as dedicated Other: Negative representation of the singer with bipolar disorder as vulnerable
	MK12	The protest at the Singapore High Commission opposes the execution of the mentally disabled Malaysian convict as it violates his human rights.	Self: Positive representation of the protestors as concerned Other: Negative representation of the mentally disabled convict as vulnerable and needing support from others

HSM 2 was constructed based on the semantic macrostructures derived from news reports S6-S10 and MK7, MK9-MK12 from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*, respectively. The vulnerability of PwMI was effectively consolidated in the semantic macrostructures through references to selected major events involving this group. For example, the semantic macrostructures, *the NGO is against the execution of the mentally disabled Malaysian convict by the Singapore government as it violates the human rights of the disabled* (news report S10); *the protest at the Singapore High Commission opposes the execution of the mentally disabled Malaysian convict as it violates his human rights* (news report MK12), underscored not only the challenges and injustices experienced by PwMI but also discursively constructed their powerlessness and/or dependencies on others. Such depictions of PwMI in juxtaposition to those without mental illness serve to subtly reinforce the former's vulnerability (Goggin, 2009; Simcock & Lee, 2023), consistent with van Dijk's (1998) ideological moves of emphasising negative information about out-group members and positive information about in-group members.

More specifically, in depicting PwMI as a vulnerable group, the in-group members comprising the powerful elites (*e.g., the Ruler, the Health Minister*), the public and legal authorities (*e.g., the police, lawyers*), and the NGO were mainly characterised positively as prominent actors. Positive information about the in-group members was foregrounded through the propositional predicates in the semantic macrostructures, highlighting their actions in the interest of PwMI, for example, *the Ruler is committed to creating a more compassionate and inclusive society for the well-being of those with mental illness* (news report S9); and *the NGO opposes the execution of the mentally disabled Malaysian convict [...]* (news report MK9); among others. In essence, the semantic macrostructures under HSM 2 primarily constructed the image of the in-group members as having advocacy roles in protecting those with mental health conditions, parallel with findings from previous studies pointing to the significance of the themes related to mental health advocacy in the news coverage of mental illness (Corrigan et al., 2005; Goulden et al., 2011; Wahl et al., 2002).

Although the topicalisation of the in-group members’ positive roles in relation to the ‘vulnerable’ PwMI adds prominence to the former’s protective duties, such moralistic discourses can be a cause for concern as they can result in misconceptions about the latter’s worth, especially when they are repeatedly represented as vulnerable, helpless, and dependent on others (Goggin, 2009; Simcock & Lee, 2023). Scholars also posited that the vulnerability doctrine encapsulated in the media about marginalised groups functions to inherently promote the paternalistic practices of the powerful against the vulnerable, which can potentially widen the gap of social inequalities in society (Mosurska et al., 2023; Tronto, 2010).

HSM 3: THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS ARE LEGALLY RECOGNISED IN MALAYSIA

HSM 3 shows the topicalisation of the PwMI in the context of human rights based on the semantic macrostructures constructed from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* (Table 6).

TABLE 6. Higher Semantic Macrostructure 3

HSM 3: The human rights of people with mental illness are legally recognised in Malaysia			
Newspaper	News Report	Semantic Macrostructure	Ideological Representations
<i>The Star Online</i>	S11	The court has permitted the singer with severe bipolar disorder to be referred for mental evaluations to determine his fitness to stand trial.	Self: Positive representation of the court as impartial and considerate Other: Negative representation of the singer with severe bipolar disorder as vulnerable and requiring medical attention
	S12	The court acquitted the murder charges against the depressed woman by reason of insanity and committed her to a psychiatric hospital.	Self: Positive representation of the court as impartial Other: Negative representation of the depressed woman as vulnerable
<i>Malaysiakini</i>	MK8	A special police unit is set to investigate the custodial death of the suspect with mental illness.	Self: Positive representation of the police as committed and transparent Other: Neutral representation of the suspect with mental illness as someone who died while in police custody.

HSM3 was constructed based on the semantic macrostructures derived from news reports S11, S12, and MK8. The recognition of the human rights of PwMI in Malaysia was made evident in both *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* through the impartiality and the commitments shown by the in-group members who were predominantly positioned as the major actors (e.g., *the court* and *the police*) in the semantic macrostructures. The fundamental rights of PwMI were shown to be acknowledged by the Malaysian judicial system through its impartial legal decisions in the criminal proceedings involving those with mental illness, as evident from the action predicates found in the semantic macrostructures constructed from the news report S11 (e.g., *the court has permitted the singer with severe bipolar disorder to be referred for mental evaluations [...]*) and

the news report S12 (e.g., *the court acquitted the charges against the depressed woman [...]*) (news report S12). Likewise, the police's commitment and transparency in handling cases involving PwMI was accentuated in MK 8 (e.g., *a special police unit is set to investigate the custodial death of the suspect with mental illness*). Such favourable representations of the in-group members concur with Klug's (2000 as cited in Kelly, 2016) 'third wave' of human rights that stressed the growing involvement of public authorities in observing the rights of people with mental illness. However, from an ideological perspective, the semantic macrostructures revealed that the news reports appeared to have placed a disproportionate focus on the positive actions of the in-group members in opposition to PwMI who were primarily reported in the context of crime (van Dijk, 1998).

In contrast, PwMI were shown as offenders of crime with a failed agency amid their mental health diagnoses (e.g., *the court acquitted the charges against the depressed woman for killing her infant son by reason of insanity [...]*) (news report S12). In such contexts, mental illness was predominantly used as a form of defence, confirming the findings of studies highlighting the extensive coverage of mental illness as a legal defence in criminal trials (Corrigan et al., 2005; Goethals et al., 2022; McCrae et al., 2019). Meanwhile, the semantic macrostructure MK 8 underscored the image of PwMI as a victim of an unfortunate circumstance (e.g., *a special police unit is set to investigate the custodial death of the suspect with mental illness*). In sum, despite the topicalisation of the human rights of PwMI in the semantic macrostructures constructed from both online newspapers, PwMI were nonetheless projected passively in juxtaposition to the impartial and committed in-group members.

CONCLUSION

A CDA-based comparative analysis of the representations of PwMI between *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* revealed that this group continues to be linked with stereotypical topics, highlighting their dangerousness and vulnerability in both newspapers. In other words, the portrayals of PwMI in these newspapers appeared to be bi-directional, with those with mental health diagnoses being depicted both as active perpetrators of criminal offences while also being portrayed as vulnerable in other news reports. Specifically, the semantic macrostructures foregrounding PwMI as criminals and deviants through an emphasis on their major actions, whereby they were portrayed using highly negative terms in juxtaposition to the positive actions and roles of the in-group members, confirmed the presence of a polarising schema promoting the opposition between "us" and "them." More pertinently, given that the semantic macrostructures are typically the best-recalled information in news discourse (van Dijk, 1991), a constant emphasis on such polarising representations of PwMI in news is rather concerning as they may lead to the continuous perpetuation of a stereotypical or discriminatory ideology against those with mental health diagnoses, consistent with van Dijk's (1998, p. 69) concept of "positive-self representation and negative-other representation." Despite the foregrounding of a less stigmatising portrayal of PwMI through the topicalisation of their vulnerability in *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*, ideologically, this research has confirmed that it may not be a straightforward projection, given the evident 'othering' of PwMI as vulnerable, dependent, and powerless, in binary opposition to the in-group members. As such, the news discourses on PwMI from both the mainstream and independent news media bear testimony to the fact that there is always more than one side to a story.

In hindsight, the integration of both macro-level and ideological analyses in this study was instrumental in uncovering the ideological workings of the news media, particularly by the Malaysian mainstream and independent online news media, in their representations of PwMI. Given the mixed consensus in the literature on news representations of mental illness in the Malaysian context, it necessitates a careful interpretation of the present research findings that support the outcome of two previous studies (Siti Munirah Mohd Ali et al., 2024; Zul Azlin Razali et al., 2018), while partly conflicting with other similar studies (Lai Fong Yang, 2023; Nor Fariza et al., 2021). Besides, the marked absence of comparative studies examining Malaysian new media's constructions of PwMI, notably from a critical discourse analysis perspective, makes this study significant in addressing the gap in the existing literature. This study also calls for more comparative CDA studies on other local newspapers with different ownership and orientations to be conducted to gain a more nuanced understanding of how PwMI are represented across such newspapers.

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