

**REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH
MENTAL ILLNESS IN SELECTED NEWS
REPORTS OF *THE STAR ONLINE* AND
MALAYSIAKINI: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE
ANALYSIS**

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UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

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by

NIVEETHENE A/P MURUGAIAH

**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APA	American Psychiatric Association
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
ICD	International Classification of Diseases
GBD	Global Burden of Disease
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
PWD	Persons with Disabilities
PWIG	Prince of Wales Island Gazette
PPPA	Printing Presses and Publications Act
SDG 10	Sustainable Development Goal 10
SFL	Systemic Functional Linguistics
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
WHO	World Health Organization

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**REPRESENTASI INDIVIDU BERPENYAKIT MENTAL DALAM KERATAN
AKHBAR TERPILIH *THE STAR ONLINE* DAN *MALAYSIAKINI*: ANALISIS
WACANA KRITIS**

ABSTRAK

Walaupun media berita memainkan peranan penting dalam membentuk naratif dominan tentang kesihatan mental, literatur sedia ada menunjukkan bahawa representasi dalam berita mengenai individu yang mengalami penyakit mental secara umumnya bersifat stigma. Kajian mengenai penggambaran kumpulan ini dalam media lebih tertumpu kepada akhbar arus perdana, manakala perhatian yang diberikan terhadap akhbar bebas adalah terhad. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk membandingkan cara penggambaran individu yang mengalami penyakit mental antara dua akhbar dalam talian yang dibaca secara meluas di Malaysia: akhbar arus perdana *The Star Online* dan akhbar bebas *Malaysiakini*. Melalui pendekatan analisis wacana kritis (CDA), kajian ini menganalisis 12 keratan akhbar terpilih daripada setiap akhbar pada tahap tekstual dan ideologi. Analisis ini berlandaskan pada teori struktur makro semantik van Dijk (1980), linguistik sistemik fungsional Halliday dan Matthiessen (2014), dan teori ideologi van Dijk (1998). Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa penggambaran mengenai individu yang mengalami penyakit mental dalam kedua-dua akhbar tersebut adalah secara amnya setara dalam ketiga-tiga aspek analisis tekstual, menekankan kebahayaan dan kelemahan mereka. Selain itu, mereka juga lazimnya digambarkan sebagai kumpulan 'tanpa bersuara' dalam kedua-dua akhbar tersebut. Manakala, individu yang tidak mengalami penyakit mental terutamanya pihak berkuasa, diberi ruang untuk 'memberi' suara bagi mewakili individu yang mengalami penyakit mental. Walaupun terdapat perbezaan dari segi orientasi editorial dan struktur

pemilikan, kedua-dua akhbar tersebut menunjukkan corak penggambaran yang serupa, yang dibentuk melalui strategi gabungan representasi “sendiri” yang positif dan “lain” yang negatif. Pendekatan ini menonjolkan aspek negatif individu yang mengalami penyakit mental, di samping menekankan tindakan positif individu yang tidak mengalami penyakit mental. Secara khususnya, akhbar bebas *Malaysiakini*, meskipun dikenali sebagai wadah yang sering mencabar status quo dan naratif dominan, turut menggunakan pemingkaian ideologi mengenai individu yang mengalami penyakit mental yang serupa dengan akhbar arus perdana. Hal ini menunjukkan wujudnya satu bentuk penyelarasan baharu dalam corak penggambaran kumpulan ini dalam kedua-dua akhbar tersebut. Persamaan ini mencadangkan bahawa pembentukan ideologi dominan mengenai kumpulan ini wujud merentasi pelbagai media berita, tanpa mengira tahap kebebasan atau orientasi editorial. Secara keseluruhannya, hasil kajian ini diharapkan dapat menggalakkan pengamal media berita untuk menggunakan bahasa yang lebih sensitif semasa melaporkan tentang individu yang mengalami penyakit mental dan menekankan representasi yang lebih seimbang yang tidak meneruskan stereotaip negatif tentang kesihatan mental. Langkah ini sejajar dengan Matlamat Pembangunan Mampan ke-10 yang bertujuan mengurangkan ketidaksamaan sosial. Tambahan pula, kajian ini menekankan kepentingan pembacaan kritikal dalam kalangan pembaca untuk mengenal pasti dan mencabar ideologi yang tersirat dalam wacana berita mengenai kumpulan ini.

**REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH MENTAL ILLNESS IN
SELECTED NEWS REPORTS OF *THE STAR ONLINE* AND
MALAYSIAKINI: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

ABSTRACT

Despite the crucial role of news media in shaping dominant narratives about mental health, existing literature shows that news representations of individuals with mental illness have generally been stigmatising. Notably, research on media portrayals of this group has mainly focused on mainstream newspapers, with little attention given to independent newspapers. Therefore, this study aims to compare how individuals with mental illness are represented in two widely read online newspapers in Malaysia: the mainstream newspaper *The Star Online* and the independent newspaper *Malaysiakini*. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), the study examines 12 selected news reports from each newspaper at both textual and ideological levels. The analysis is informed by van Dijk's (1980) theory of semantic macrostructures, Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) systemic functional linguistics, and van Dijk's (1998) theory of ideology. The study's findings reveal that representations of individuals with mental illness in both newspapers were broadly comparable across all three aspects of textual analysis, highlighting their perceived dangerousness and vulnerability. Furthermore, they were typically positioned as a 'voiceless' group in both newspapers. In contrast, individuals without mental illness, notably those in positions of power, were accorded the space to 'give' voices on behalf of those with mental illness. Notwithstanding differences in editorial orientation and ownership structures, both newspapers exhibited similar representational patterns, shaped by a combined strategy of positive self-presentation and negative-other presentation. This approach foregrounded the

negative traits of individuals with mental illness while emphasising the positive actions of individuals without mental illness. Notably, the independent newspaper *Malaysiakini*, despite its reputation for critically challenging the status quo and dominant narratives, employed ideological framings of individuals with mental illness that closely mirrored those of the mainstream newspaper, revealing a novel alignment in how both portrayed this group. This convergence suggests that dominant ideological constructions of this group persist across different news media types, irrespective of their perceived independence or editorial orientation. Overall, it is hoped that the study's findings will encourage news media practitioners to adopt more sensitive language when reporting on individuals with mental illness and to promote balanced representations that do not reinforce negative mental health stereotypes. Such efforts align with Sustainable Development Goal 10, which seeks to reduce social inequalities. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of critical reading among news consumers to recognise and challenge latent ideologies in news discourse about this group.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter hopes to situate the study's main aim, which is to comparatively examine how individuals with mental illness are represented in the Malaysian mainstream online newspaper *The Star Online* and the independent online newspaper *Malaysiakini*. In particular, this study focuses on how individuals with mental illness are ideologically constructed in polarising opposition to those without mental illness through the strategic use of language in both online newspapers. To contextualise the study, important key variables are discussed in the background of the study. Subsequently, the statement of the problem, research objectives and questions, and the significance of the study are presented in this chapter. The chapter then concludes with an outline of the study's scope and limitations as well as the operational definitions of the terms relevant to this research.

1.2 Background of the Study

Mental illness, similar to physical illness, can affect anyone, irrespective of their age or background. A notable example is the tragic suicide of the award-winning comedian Robin Williams in 2014 due to depression, which left many in disbelief, raising questions about how someone who brought laughter to millions could resort to taking his own life. Not only him, but many other prominent figures, such as the renowned author J.K. Rowling, the American comedian and television host Ellen DeGeneres, and Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex, among others, have also publicly acknowledged their struggles with mental health issues. These examples stand as a

testament to the silent battles with mental illness that many face, often hidden beneath an outwardly ‘normal’ appearance.

To put this into further context, approximately one billion people worldwide are living with mental illness, with one committing suicide every 40 seconds (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022a). Although some segments of society continue to regard mental illness as a taboo subject (Roslee & Goh, 2021; Simmie & Nunes, 2012), the onset of the pandemic and its subsequent toll on mental health—evidenced by a 25% surge in the global prevalence of mental disorders in the first year of the pandemic alone) (WHO, 2022b)—has served as a wake-up call to the seriousness of mental health issues worldwide. The impact of the global health crisis was also equally felt by Malaysians, as seen by a spike in mental illness and suicide cases in the country during the initial and successive COVID-19 waves (Perveen et al., 2020; Ning & Mogan, 2021; Wong et al., 2021).

More pertinently, individuals with mental illness face not only the inherent challenges of living with a mental health condition but are often confronted with the pervasive mental health stigma characterising them as dangerous, violent, unpredictable, and burdensome to others (Ben-Zeev, 2010; Corrigan & Bink, 2016; Thornicroft et al., 2022). Recognising this, scholars have coined terms such as "mentalism" (Chamberlin, 1978, as cited in Ostrow and Adams, 2012) and "sanism" (Perlin, 2013) to foreground the prejudices and discrimination experienced by individuals with mental illness, putting it on par with other forms of bigotry (e.g., sexism, racism, etc.). The profound impact of stigmatisation and discrimination of individuals with mental illness was also further confirmed in the 2022 Lancet Commission on Ending Stigma and Discrimination in Mental Health (Thornicroft et

al., 2022), which stressed that such practices “contravene basic human rights and have severe, toxic effects on people with mental health conditions that exacerbate marginalisation and social exclusion” (p. 1438). As such, there is a pressing need to address mental health stigma in ensuring a more inclusive society, regardless of one’s mental health status.

Notably, in the Malaysian context, mental illness remains stigmatised for two primary reasons: (a) the persistence of negative media portrayals that sensationalise mental illness (Mohd Ali et al., 2024a; Mohd Ali et al., 2024b; Pendit & Koo, 2020; Razali et al., 2018) and (b) the deep entrenchment of cultural and religious beliefs that often frame mental illness through a moral or spiritual lens (Hanafiah & Van Bortel, 2015; Lakshman et al., 2023; Lin, 2018; Phang et al., 2011; Raaj et al., 2021). Despite the call by the United Nations (2022), through its 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) to eliminate stigma, including against individuals with mental health conditions through accurate and responsible media representations, such efforts remain largely futile. In Malaysia, news coverage of mental illness continues to reinforce stigma, often framing individuals with mental health conditions through narratives of criminality and violence (Hanafiah & Van Bortel, 2015; Mohd Ali et al., 2024a; Mohd Ali et al., 2024b; Pendit & Koo, 2020; Razali et al., 2018). Such repeated portrayals of the group function not only as mere descriptors but rather as powerful ideological tools in reinforcing dominant stereotypes that they are dangerous and inherently different from ‘us,’ thus legitimising their exclusion of the group from society.

This is particularly concerning given that news media representations are not always an objective reflection of reality, as news reports are typically subjected to rigorous selection and transformation processes before being discursively constructed through language (Fairclough, 1995; Fowler, 1991; van Dijk, 1993a). One related criticism of representations in the press is that while language is an important news transmitter to the public, it often emphasises or conceals certain information in the construction of reality, and thus it can never be neutral (Fowler, 1991; Goatly & Hiradhar, 2016). Further, it is argued that the practice of linguistically highlighting certain meanings relative to others in newspapers is ideologically motivated, as linguistic structures are “commonly used for ideological or manipulative purposes to smuggle in, as common sense, assumptions which are debatable, controversial or simply inapplicable” (Goatly, 2000, p. 123). For example, when news reports frequently employ emotive verbs such as “murdered” or “killed” in reporting the actions of individuals with mental illness, these linguistic choices can inadvertently reinforce the link between mental illness and violence while foregrounding the idea that these individuals are more dangerous than those without mental illness.

Besides that, as news media institutions are “socially, economically and politically situated, all news is always reported from some particular angle” (Fowler, 1991, p. 10). That is, the news reporting of different newspapers (e.g., mainstream and independent newspapers) can potentially vary in terms of what they consider newsworthy and how they present it to readers. Specifically, this variation is mainly influenced by their ideologies, shaped by the nature of their media ownership with possible links to the government, political elites, or influential conglomerates (Anwar & Jalli, 2020; Azlan et al., 2012; Sani, 2005; Selvanathan & Lickel, 2020; Tamam et al., 2012), as well as the restraints of stringent news regulatory laws (Nawang et al.,

2020; Omar & Ahrari, 2020; Wok & Mohamed, 2017). As such, news representations of individuals with mental illness cannot be completely seen as neutral but must be understood as the outcome of broader power structures that shape what is visible, how it is framed, and whose voices are prioritised.

Admittedly, given that, only a select few individuals have direct experience with those experiencing mental illness, the media, including online newspapers, helps contextualise much of what we know about this group (Ross et al., 2019; Wahl, 2003; Whitley & Wang, 2017; Whitley, 2021; Zhang et al., 2016). As Lupton (1999) emphasised, “mass media portrayals contribute to the creation or reproduction of knowledge about illness and disease... so too, they work to portray ill people in certain lights (for example, as ‘innocent victims’ or ‘deserving of their fate’)” (p. 260). In other words, the media in reporting about individuals with mental illness do more than just conveying facts; they function as powerful sites of ideological meaning-making by framing the group in ways that assign meaning, responsibility, and moral values. Correspondingly, existing literature on the representations of those with mental illness in the Malaysian context showed a preponderance of stigmatising news about this group, foregrounding the elements of criminality, violence, and danger, while privileging the voices of government officials and law enforcement (Mohd Ali et al., 2024a; Mohd Ali et al., 2024b; Razali et al., 2018). Hence, this can be understood as a subtle way by which the Malaysian news media typically maintains the pre-existing status quo of those with mental illness.

Considering the complex interplay between news representations and the realities of individuals with mental illness, this study critically examines the linguistic structures (macro-, micro-, and transitivity structures) in news reports from the

Malaysian mainstream online newspaper *The Star Online* and the independent online newspaper *Malaysiakini*. Grounded in a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, this comparative analysis seeks not only to investigate how the polarising opposition between the ‘self’ (individuals without mental illness) and the ‘other’ (individuals with mental illness) is ideologically constructed through language in the selected online newspapers, but also to explore how broader socio-political contexts, including editorial orientation and media ownership, shape the narratives on mental illness. By examining these dynamics, this study aims to move beyond merely mapping stigmatising portrayals of mental illness, toward uncovering the mechanism through which such representations are reproduced, normalised, and legitimised via language in Malaysian online news discourse. This is particularly important given that online newspapers remain one of the primary sources of information for many Malaysians (Newman et al., 2023, 2024), and as such, the narratives they construct have significant potential in shaping societal attitudes, especially toward individuals with mental illness.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

News media plays a crucial role in shaping the public’s perception and interpretation of social reality (Busa, 2014; Klin & Lemish, 2008; Yan, 2020). Despite its significant role as a fundamental site for the production of dominant understandings about mental illness and those affected by the condition (Whitley & Wang, 2017; Whitley, 2021; Zhang et al., 2016), evidence suggests that mental health representations in the news media have been predominantly stigmatising over the years, as individuals with mental illness have been consistently linked with criminality, violence and vulnerability (Bilkay et al., 2023; Corrigan et al., 2005; Coverdale et al.,

2002; Goulden et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2020; Mohd Ali et al., 2024a, 2024b; Razali et al., 2018; Wahl et al., 2002). Nonetheless, such stereotypical portrayals of the group may not accurately reflect reality, as not everyone with mental health issues behaves in the same manner. More concerningly, the preponderance of negative representations of individuals with mental illness in the news may not only perpetuate mental health stigma but also promote the perception that they are different from the rest of society, reinforcing the polarising divide between “us” (individuals without mental illness) and “them” (individuals with mental illness).

In tandem with the arguments above, Fowler (1991) claimed that “anything that is said or written about the world is articulated from a particular ideological position: language is not a clear window but a refracting, structuring medium” (p. 10). That is, in news reporting, journalists make strategic use of language to represent events and social actors in such a way that would make readers readily accept the embedded ideologies in news discourses. As a result, rather than being informed, readers are led into believing the news media’s warped version of reality. van Dijk (2008a) highlighted that language manipulation in news discourse is a form of discursive social practice that seeks to influence readers’ beliefs and frames of thought. As such, Fowler (1991) emphasised the need to critically analyse the language structures in news texts to deconstruct the “all-too-comfortable ‘common-sense’ enjoined by the newspapers” (p. 232).

The ideological aspects of language in news discourse can manifest in several ways. van Dijk (1980, 1988a, 1988b, 1991) argued that the construction of semantic macrostructures (topics) in news reports, which highlight the most relevant information in the texts (and are usually the best-recalled information), can be biased

and subjective as they are highly dependent on journalists' world knowledge, opinions, and ideologies. The same scholar added that the microstructures (e.g., lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical structures) in news reports are equally pertinent in mapping the underlying ideologies in the texts (van Dijk, 1980; 1998a, 1991). Meanwhile, drawing on Halliday's insights, Fowler (1991, p. 71) contended that "transitivity is the foundation of representation" and that newspapers are an important site where numerous instances of the ideological significance of transitivity can be identified. In other words, transitivity analysis is an essential CDA tool in the critical examinations of news reports, consistent with Halliday's (1985) conviction that "a discourse analysis not based on grammar is not an analysis at all, but simply a running commentary on a text" (p. xvi). Overall, the application of CDA in the present study can be instrumental in examining the discursive constructions of individuals with mental illness in news media, particularly in the (re)production of stereotypical identities of the group.

While there is a growing body of research on news media representations of mental illness globally (*see Sections 2.7.1 and 2.7.2*), to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there appears to be a notable gap in studies addressing this topic in the Malaysian context, necessitating the need for more targeted research in the area of study. Most studies on mental health issues in Malaysia primarily centred on selected research areas such as epidemiology (Raaj et al., 2021; Salleh, 2018), psychology (Abdullah et al., 2020; Subramaniam et al., 2021), and sociology (Ab Razak, 2017; Ibrahim et al., 2019; Kit et al., 2020; Xuan et al., 2020). Meanwhile, only a limited number of studies have examined the representations of individuals with mental illness in the local news media (Mohd Ali et al., 2024a; Mohd Ali et al., 2024b; Nor et al., 2021; Razali et al., 2018; Yang, 2023). Specifically, these studies predominantly employed a content analysis approach, focusing on topic frequencies or thematic

patterns as the main focus of the research, with the exception of two studies that adopted discourse analysis (Nor et al., 2021) and CDA (Mohd Ali et al., 2024b), respectively. In other words, the majority of studies on the topic were more concerned with uncovering what the news conveys about mental illness relative to examining how individuals with mental illness were linguistically and ideologically represented in news discourse from a CDA perspective, despite the prevalence of value-laden language in the news (Fowler, 1991; van Dijk, 2008a).

Another significant gap in the existing literature is the lack of research exploring the news coverage of individuals with mental illness in independent news media, with the exception of Yang's (2023) study, which examined the portrayals of mental health issues in selected mainstream and independent newspapers. However, the study did not attempt to compare the similarities and differences in mental health representations between mainstream and independent newspapers. Thus, it can be said that the representations of individuals with mental illness in independent newspapers have remained largely unexplored despite the presence of comparative studies examining the news coverage of Malaysian mainstream and independent newspapers focusing on marginalised groups such as the Orang Asli (Wong & Jamal, 2023), refugees and asylum seekers (Bolte & Yuen, 2014; Mohd Don & Lee, 2014), as well as other controversial issues such as Islamisation (Nor & Gale, 2021), power relations during elections (Rashidi, 2015), and the Bersih 4.0 rally (Kamarulzaman, 2016). More crucially, the gap in the literature is especially concerning given Malaysia's unique socio-political context that allows the exertion of control by powerful elites over news production in the country (*see Section 2.6.2*), which may influence how news is reported and framed by news organisations. Considering the lack of focused research on how individuals with mental illness are represented in independent news media,

this study is necessary to deepen our understanding of how distinct editorial orientations and media ownership structures influence mental health portrayals in alternative media narratives.

Therefore, owing to the gaps discussed above, this study aims to address them by employing the CDA approach, which includes an analysis of the macro-, micro-, and transitivity structures of selected news reports, in examining the construction of individuals with mental illness in the Malaysian mainstream newspaper *The Star Online* and the independent newspaper *Malaysiakini*. Furthermore, as ideologies are the basis of the shared social representations of groups, which are typically manifested through the “positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation” polarisation structures (van Dijk, 1998a, p. 69), an ideological analysis of selected news reports from the two online newspapers can shed light on potential manipulation or power differentials inherent in the framing of the social identities of individuals with mental illness relative to those without mental illness through the strategic use of language.

More pertinently, this research, in addition to approaching the study from a CDA lens, also employs a comparative approach to identify any similarities or differences in the thematic and linguistic structures in selected news reports from the Malaysian mainstream and independent online newspapers in the representations of individuals with mental illness. This is in line with the calls made by several scholars (Chan & Lee, 2017; Miller et al., 2020; Orphanidou & Kadianaki, 2020) on the need for more comparative studies, including CDA-based comparative approaches (Alkaff & McLellan, 2017), to be conducted on newspapers with different orientations to help us understand how sociopolitical contexts influence the news construction of social reality. Moreover, as more people are shifting to online news due to its real-time

reporting and easy accessibility through various online news platforms (i.e. news portals, social media sharing, and news applications on smartphones) (Bialik & Matsa, 2017; Newman et al., 2023, 2024; Westlund, 2015), it is imperative to examine how individuals with mental illness are represented in online news media, particularly in both mainstream and independent online newspapers. This is in line with Ma's (2017) call for more research into how mental illness and those affected by the condition are reported in different types of new media, including online news.

1.4 Research Objectives

The main purpose of this study is to comparatively examine how individuals with mental illness are discursively represented through language in selected news reports from the Malaysian mainstream online newspaper *The Star Online* and the independent online newspaper *Malaysiakini*. Thus, this study aims to achieve the following research objectives:

1. To compare the macrostructures derived from the selected news reports on individuals with mental illness from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*
2. To compare the microstructures used in the selected news reports on individuals with mental illness from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*
3. To compare the transitivity structures used in the selected news reports on individuals with mental illness from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*
4. To reveal the ideologies that are reinforced through the macro-, micro-, and transitivity structures in the selected news reports on individuals with mental illness from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*

1.5 Research Questions

Based on the research objectives highlighted above, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences in the macrostructures derived from the selected news reports on individuals with mental illness from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*?
2. What are the similarities and differences in the microstructures used in the selected news reports on individuals with mental illness from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*?
3. What are the similarities and differences in the transitivity structures used in the selected news reports on individuals with mental illness from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*?
4. How do the macro-, micro-, and transitivity structures in the selected news reports from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* reveal the ideologies reinforced in the representations of individuals with mental illness?

1.6 Significance of the Study

Given the integral role of news media in shaping readers' interpretations of social reality (Aragonès et al., 2014; Fowler, 1991; Rauch, 2021; Yan, 2020), or more precisely, in mediating “knowledge, beliefs, values, opinions, social relations and identities” (Busa, 2014, p. 139), being critically aware of the discourses constructed via this medium is important. A critical examination of news discourse is warranted as the neutrality and originality of news texts are often compromised by factors such as language, news values, the complex relationship between the media ownership of news

institutions and their respective ideological orientations (Anuar, 1994; Bednarek & Caple, 2019; Bourgeois et al., 2018; Fairclough, 1995; Fowler, 1991; Gamson et al., 1992).

More importantly, as the language of journalism is typically infused with values and beliefs (Busa, 2014; Fowler, 1991; Fowler et al., 1979), CDA can help reveal the underlying ideologies in stereotypical or prejudicial news reporting (van Dijk, 1991, 1998a), particularly in the news constructions of individuals with mental illness as a group prone to committing crimes and violence (Bilkay et al., 2023; Mohd Ali et al., 2024a, 2024b; Razali et al., 2018; Wahl et al., 2002). Of particular interest in this study is to examine the subtle roles of distinct language structures (e.g., macro-, micro-, and transitivity structures) in the mainstream newspaper *The Star Online* and the independent newspaper *Malaysiakini* in the discursive constructions of the “positive-self and negative-other representations” (van Dijk, 1998) identity narratives of individuals with mental illness relative to people without mental illness in legitimising and maintaining social inequalities. By bringing this to light, this study hopes to encourage readers to be more critical and conscious of the potential biases in news media, particularly in the representations of individuals with mental illness, which may inadvertently promote an “us” versus “them” mindset in society (Fowler, 1991; Lido et al., 2021; van Dijk, 1998).

In addition, given that Malaysia is an under-researched site for issues concerning media representations of individuals with mental illness (Mohd Ali et al., 2024a; Mohd Ali et al., 2024b; Nor et al., 2021; Razali et al., 2018; Yang, 2023), this study aims to contribute to this body of knowledge, particularly by employing a comparative approach through the CDA lens. Hence, by comparatively examining

news reports from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*, this study hopes to identify any potential similarities and differences in their use of language to discursively construct the identities of individuals with mental illness while also reflecting their values and ideologies. At the same time, this study also hopes to reveal emerging themes in the representations of individuals with mental illness in Malaysian news media, thereby contributing valuable insights to the existing body of research on the topic. Furthermore, through a CDA-based comparative study, this study also seeks to expose parochialism (if any) in the portrayals of individuals with mental illness in the selected online newspapers. It is argued that comparative studies are instrumental in exposing parochialism, particularly in mainstream media (Chan & Lee, 2017; Ramli, 2019), as the absence of such studies may lead to the presumption that whatever is presented in news media is omnipresent, prompting readers to accept it as reality.

Finally, it is hoped that the study's findings will contribute to the advocacy of responsible journalism by encouraging more accurate representations of individuals with mental illness, while also supporting efforts to combat mental health stigma. This aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 10 (SDG 10), which aims to reduce social disparities in society. Ultimately, a positive shift in mental health representations in the news media depends on media practitioners, who hold the power to shape public attitudes through their editorial practices, particularly in fostering greater acceptance of individuals with mental illness in society.

1.7 Scope and Limitation(s) of the Study

This research particularly examined selected news reports from the mainstream online newspaper *The Star Online* and the independent online newspaper *Malaysiakini*. van Dijk (1991) argued that news reports (also known as 'hard news')

have “their characteristic news schema, [while] other news genres may have their own typical schematic organisation” (p. 124). As such, news reports could be analysed at various levels of structural description (van Dijk, 1988a). The genre of news reports was also selected in this study as it generally provides an objective account of the facts, thereby allowing for a more valid cross-comparison study (Alkaff & McLellan, 2017; Busa, 2014). Other news genres such as editorials, letters to the editor, and opinions, among others, were excluded from the study as they do not necessarily reflect the ideologies of their respective news organisations (van Dijk, 1988a). In addition, the study only included news reports published within the Malaysian context, while those sourced from global news agencies were excluded, in line with the aim of the research. More pertinently, the findings obtained from this study were entirely based on the selected news reports published within a specific time frame; therefore, the conclusions drawn could not be generalised to other articles published by the same news organisations or others beyond that period.

Furthermore, this research focused solely on the textual features of news reports, excluding non-textual elements (i.e. links, advertisements, among others) to ensure a homogeneous corpus (Barthes, 1967, as cited in Bauer and Aarts, 2000). Given the sensitivity of the research topic and the lack of substantial visual content in the selected reports, images were not examined in this study. Accordingly, the analysis centred on the thematic and linguistic structures of the selected news reports.

Despite the presence of vernacular newspapers reflecting Malaysia’s ethnic diversity, this research focused primarily on English-language newspapers, as they were consumed by a large readership, signalling the representativeness of their content in comparison to newspapers defined by ethnicity (Newman et al., 2023, 2024; Niner

et al., 2013). Moreover, as cross-linguistic structural variations and their influence on news representations were beyond the scope of this study, only English-language newspapers were included.

1.8 Definitions of Key Terms

The operational definitions and explanations of the key terms used in this study are as follows:

Macrostructures: The term “macrostructure” (also known as semantic structure) represents the “semantic global structures in discourse” such as the topics, themes, or overall gist of discourse (van Dijk, 1980, p. 27). Specifically, macrostructures are inferred from a set of macropropositions derived from the local meanings (propositions) of sentences in a text, using macrorules (e.g., deletion, generalisation, and construction) (van Dijk, 1980). In this study, the semantic macrostructures about individuals with mental illness in selected news reports are examined.

Microstructures: The microstructures of news reports represent “all those structures that are processed, or described, at the local or short-range level” (van Dijk, 1980, p. 29). In other words, microstructures are explicitly expressed in the discourse. In this research, microstructures such as the lexical, syntactical, and rhetorical structures in selected news reports on individuals with mental illness are analysed.

Transitivity structures: In the grammar of the clause, transitivity structures construe “the world of experience into a manageable set of process types” (Halliday, 1994, p. 106). In this study, four types of processes in the transitivity system—

material, mental, relational, and verbal—are examined in selected news reports on individuals with mental illness.

Ideology: Ideologies are the system of shared beliefs communicated through “symbols, rituals, discourse or other social and cultural practices” (van Dijk, 1998a, p. 26). van Dijk (1998) noted that the concept of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation is an essential component of ideologies. In relation to that, this study employs van Dijk’s (1998) theory of ideology to examine how the positive representation of the “self” and negative representation of the “other” are conceptualised through the strategic use of language in news reports on individuals with mental illness. As for the context of this study, the “self” refers to people without mental illness, while the “other” refers to individuals with mental illness.

Discourse: The term “discourse” is interpreted through the perspective of Fairclough (1992), who views “language use as a form of social practice” (p. 63), implying a reciprocal relationship between discourse and the situation, institution, and social structure in which it occurs. In relation to that, language functions to both represent and contribute to the (re)production of social reality. In this study, Fairclough’s (1992) notion of discourse is adopted since it establishes the link to our understanding of institutional discourse (the selected news reports from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*) as responsible for the discursive constructions of reality, in particular, the social identities of individuals with mental illness.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): CDA is a multidisciplinary approach to discourse studies. According to van Dijk (2018), CDA is an approach that focuses on how “social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (p.466). That is, CDA is

employed to examine text and speech to reveal how social inequality is exercised in society. This research particularly advocates van Dijk's definition of CDA to identify how dominant forces, in this case, the selected mainstream and independent news media, ideologically construct individuals with mental illness relative to those without mental illness.

Representation: In the context of discourse analysis, representation entails the use of language in written text or speech to assign meanings to specific groups and their social practices (Fairclough, 1989, 1995; van Dijk, 2002). Thus, in this study, the thematic and linguistic structures used in the discursive representations of individuals with mental illness in the selected news reports are examined to uncover the ideological slant of the respective online newspapers.

News reports: A “news report” is a type of text or discourse with its own schematic structure that is published in a newspaper to communicate the latest information about events to readers (van Dijk, 1988a). In this study, news reports include “hard news” about individuals with mental illness retrieved from the online databases of the mainstream newspaper *The Star Online* and the independent newspaper *Malaysiakini*.

Mainstream newspapers: Mainstream newspapers are highly centralised, as they are typically owned by the government or government-linked corporations (Chomsky, 2000) and are thus subjected to stringent government monitoring through regulatory laws and regulations (Nor & Gale, 2021). The mainstream online newspaper selected for this study is *The Star Online*.

Independent newspapers: Independent (alternative) newspapers are more accessible and less constrained by the influence of the government or political interests (Gicheru, 2014) and thus offer more dissenting viewpoints than mainstream newspapers (Nor & Gale, 2021). The independent online newspaper chosen for this study is *Malaysiakini*.

Mental illness: Mental illness is defined as a clinically significant disturbance in an individual's thinking, emotions, and/or behaviour that suggests a problem with one's mental functioning (American Psychiatric Association, [APA], 2015). The applicability of the terms "mental illness" and "mental disorder" is debatable and diagnostically dependent (as the latter is primarily used in official diagnostic manuals) (Corcoran, 2017; Kröber, 2016). However, given that it is not the focus of this research, these terms and other related terms are used interchangeably in this study to refer to a wide range of mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia, among others.

1.9 Organisation of the Study

This dissertation comprises five chapters. **Chapter One** outlines the background of the study, the statement of the problem, research objectives and questions, and other key elements that serve to contextualise the present study.

Chapter Two provides background information on mental illness and the contemporary issues related to individuals with mental health conditions. The chapter also discusses on the Malaysian news media landscape, reviews the existing literature on news representations of individuals with mental illness, and examines the key theories and concepts that inform the study's theoretical framework.

Chapter Three provides a detailed description of the study's research design, and the procedures used in collecting and analysing data. A brief sample of data analysis is included in the chapter to illustrate the procedures employed in examining the thematic and linguistic structures of the selected news reports. The validity of the data and ethical considerations of this study are also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Four is divided into three parts, reflecting the findings at the macro-, micro-, and transitivity levels of the selected news reports from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*. Subsequently, findings at the ideological level based on the thematic and linguistic structures identified in the two online newspapers are presented in this chapter.

Chapter Five discusses the study's findings in relation to the research questions posed in Chapter One. The research questions were addressed by drawing connections to the findings of the previous studies reviewed in Chapter Two. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's contributions and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEWS

2.1 Introduction

This chapter contextualises the study by providing an overview of how mental illness is conceptualised, and the ways dominant historical views on mental disorders have shaped our understanding of individuals with mental health diagnoses. It also highlights discussions on mental health stigma, along with the policies and strategies developed to protect the human rights of those living with mental illness. The chapter then explores the country's news media landscape, covering its historical background, ownership and regulatory structures, distinctions between mainstream and independent newspapers, and the influence of media representations. Subsequently, the chapter reviews existing scholarly work relevant to the research topic and the theoretical underpinnings of the study. Finally, it outlines the key theories and concepts that inform the theoretical framework of this research.

2.2 Mental Illness: An Overview

The concept of mental illness or mental disorder has been subjected to its intractable debates over the years (Bolton, 2008; Clark et al., 2017; Thornton, 2022). Nevertheless, despite the challenges in establishing the boundary between what constitutes normality and abnormality, understanding what and why certain conditions are classified as mental illness is important (Wakefield, 2016; Weiten, 2021). This is particularly true given that sadness caused by a traumatic event or deviant behaviour may not always signify the presence of mental illness. That being said, for someone to be diagnosed with a mental disorder, they are required to meet several mandatory

diagnostic criteria, such as extreme deviance, distress, and dysfunction that interfere with their ability to perform daily activities (Comer, 2015; Sue et al., 2016). Therefore, what distinguishes a normal person from those with mental illness is exclusively a matter of degree, as everyone, at some point in their lives, endures emotional distress that may cause them to behave atypically.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (APA, 2013), a mental disorder is defined as “a syndrome characterized by a clinically significant disturbance in an individual’s cognition, emotion regulation, or behaviour that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning” (p. 20). The manual also suggests that mental illness leads to severe distress or disability in essential domains of an individual’s functioning, including social, work, and other daily routines. Similarly, the International Classification of Diseases: Classification of Mental, Behavioural or Neurodevelopmental Disorders (ICD-11) defines mental, behavioural, and neurodevelopmental disorders as “syndromes characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotional regulation, or behaviour that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes that underlie mental and behavioural functioning” (WHO, 2019, p. 1). In essence, both definitions show that mental illness entails the presence of collective symptoms that render an individual dysfunctional in many essential aspects of his or her life.

Mental disorders are heterogeneous, ranging from the most common (e.g. depression, and anxiety disorders) to the less common (e.g. schizophrenia and other personality disorders) (Hantke et al., 2020; National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, 2011; Weiten, 2021). They also differ in terms of their severity. The less severe

depression, for instance, is characterised by unremitting sadness and hopelessness, as well as a loss of pleasure in once-enjoyed activities, while the more severe schizophrenia involves psychosis with symptoms such as hallucinations, delusions, and uncoordinated thoughts and speech (APA, 2013; WHO, 2019). The occurrence of mental illness is typically linked to various risk factors such as biological, psychological, social, and sociocultural elements (race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.) (Davidson et al., 2016; Sue et al., 2016). However, researchers argued that an overly simplistic perspective on the causes of mental illness may limit our ability to consider the role of multiple risk factors in its progression (Sue et al., 2016; Zhang & Meaney, 2010). Hence, mental illness, similar to physical illnesses, is potentially caused by a complex interplay of genetic factors (e.g., a family history of mental illness) and non-genetic factors (e.g., life experiences, substance use, and other environmental influences).

2.3 Mental Illness: A Historical Perspective

While advances in health sciences have made significant contributions to defining, diagnosing, identifying the causes of, and treating mental illness, the historical perspectives of mental illness should not be overlooked. Terms such as "mental illness," "psychological disorder," and "psychopathology" (Weiten, 2021, p. 499) used in referring to abnormal behaviours today are derived from the medical model of mental illness that flourished during the 18th and 19th centuries. This model dominated how people perceived mental abnormalities as a form of illness. Prior to this, views on mental illness were primarily based on superstitions (Clark et al., 2017; Farreras, 2021; Weiten, 2021).

The Babylonians and Mesopotamians, for example, believed that mental suffering was induced by evil spirits, demonic possession, sorcery, or the act of divine forces punishing one's misdeeds (Porter, 2002). This explains why ancient surgical treatments, such as trephination, which involves the drilling of holes in the skulls to free evil spirits possessing the mentally ill, were once popular among early civilians. Likewise, other ancient civilisations, including the Chinese, Egyptians, and Hebrews, also held on to supernatural explanations for abnormal behaviour and resorted to exorcism to drive away evil spirits (Comer, 2015; Hooley et al., 2017). Such ancient cultural views on mental abnormalities, therefore, resulted in individuals with mental illness being ostracised and subjected to cruel treatment, with their symptoms attributed to demonic possession or divine retribution.

The supernatural beliefs, however, gradually faded with the emergence of biological explanations for the origins of mental illness, influenced by physicians and philosophers in Greek and Roman civilisations. Hippocrates (460–370 B.C.) strongly believed that mental illness had natural causes, as opposed to cultural views of illness (Woody & Viney, 2017, p. 67). He believed that the brain was the central organ of intellectual activity and that mental disorders were caused by brain pathology. His approach to treating mental illness was rational and humane as it was devoid of superstitious and religious practices. However, the medicalisation of mental illness posed several challenges as it increased the possibility of rationalising someone's bad behaviour and absolving people of their responsibility for heinous acts (Mizock & Russinova, 2016).