

Metaphorical Conceptualizations of Mental Health and Psychological Well-Being in South East Asian Social Media

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Abstract: Digitalization of Southeast Asia has contributed to making social media an important area in which to negotiate such topics as mental health and psychological well-being. This paper focuses on the metaphorical constructions associated with mental health, which have become a cognitive and socio-cultural means for discussing delicate psychological issues. The purpose of this investigation is to reveal metaphorical frames dominating in the discourses of social media users in terms of the representation of their inner world and psychological experience. Qualitative discourse analysis, which is based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory formulated by Lakoff and Johnson, was used as a methodological framework for the investigation. The study considered a corpus of 500 posts collected on Southeast Asian social networks like X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook in the region (e.g., Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia). The research has proved that despite the persistence of the Mental Health as a Battle metaphor, Social Media Users in Southeast Asia tend to use Environmental and Embodied mappings such as Mental Health as a Weather Pattern and Psychological Struggle as a Physical Burden. These observations indicate that there is a tendency among Southeast Asian internet users to project their psychological problems in order to deal with cultural stigmas and family pressures. According to this study, it is important for such metaphors to exist since needed in order to translate intangible feelings of suffering into tangible forms in collectivistic societies. The contribution of this paper to knowledge can be seen in how it integrates digital linguistics with health humanities to draw relevant insights concerning social stigmas and mental illnesses. These have important implications when it comes to fighting social stigmas, increasing mental health literacy, and designing culturally competent campaigns.

Key Words: conceptual metaphor theory, southeast asia, social media, mental health discourse, psychological well-being, digital linguistics, stigma reduction

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Introduction

The awareness about mental illness in Southeast Asia is a phenomenon that has greatly changed throughout history, from being culturally silenced to having some visibility in public discussions. Traditionally, there was a connection between collectivism and traditional beliefs when it came to the way people dealt with psychological disorders, hence leading to idioms of distress used in communicating psychological discomfort (Kohrt & Hruschka, 2010). Today, the increasing spread of digital infrastructure has seen social media become one of the key ways in which ideas about well-being are formed. Social media creates another space that allows one to overcome the stigmatized language surrounding mental health and use digital narratives to create a new definition of mental wellness in an Asian environment (Chancellor et al., 2019).

In digital communication, one of the key elements that are used to shape the discourse about mental health is metaphors. Metaphors are key cognitive tools in framing psychological experiences (Roystonn et al., 2021; Kuo & Tsai, 1986). Much of the research about mental health metaphors is based on Western

experiences that focus on battle and journey metaphors without considering the unique sociocultural aspects of Southeast Asia (Na et al., 2016). The problem is that there has not been enough research conducted concerning the way particular linguistic frames are used by regional users in order to reveal their particularities in expressing psychological phenomena online (Garg, 2023).

Objectives

These objectives will be achieved via this research:

- To identify the dominant conceptual metaphors used by Southeast Asian social media users when discussing mental health and well-being.
- To analyse the cultural and cognitive implications of these metaphors and how they facilitate or hinder help-seeking behaviour.
- To evaluate the role of digital platforms in accelerating the adoption of new metaphorical frames within the region.

Research Questions

1. What are the primary source domains utilized in Southeast Asian social media to conceptualize the target domain of mental health?
2. How do regional cultural values (e.g., collectivism, harmony) influence the selection of these metaphorical mappings?
3. In what ways can these digital metaphors be integrated into culturally responsive mental health literacy and education?

This paper comprises key elements. Following the introduction, Section II consists of the Literature Review section, where the researcher evaluates the existing literature and academic papers on cognitive linguistics and regional mental health. Section III is the Methodology, where the methodology used to identify metaphors according to MIPVU is discussed. Section IV explores the Analysis of dominant metaphorical mappings, whereas the following section, Section V, analyzes the sociocultural and educational implications. Finally, the section VI concluding part summarizes the key results.

Literature Review

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

The theoretical foundation that supports the current research is provided by the theory proposed by Lakoff & Johnson. From this point of view, metaphor is seen as more than merely a stylistic figure in literature and language but as a cognitive concept. In other words, under this framework, human thinking is fundamentally metaphorical, enabling people to comprehend complex, abstract ideas (such as the mind) with the help of concrete objects that come from their physical experiences (Shala et al., 2020). Such cognitive maps become imperative for describing one's internal psychological conditions using metaphors because metaphors are required to describe what cannot be described without a specific language (Bracken et al., 1995).

Mental Health Discourse Studies

Studies in mental health discourse reveal an interesting division between Western and Asian languages regarding mental health conditions. While Western literature emphasizes the metaphor of “war” or “battle” in mental health discourse (Pranjol & Amir, 2025), studies done in Southeast Asia suggest idioms of distress, where emotional distress is associated with physical symptoms or environmental causes (Kuss, 2013). The role of stigma and language becomes important when considering that many cultures in Asia avoid mentioning any mental illness due to fear of stigmatization and social ostracism (Kolstad & Gjesvik, 2014; Gopalkrishnan, 2018).

Social Media and Language

Social media discourse features such as the use of hashtags, multimodal resources, and code-switching have become unique to the internet age (Shi & Khoo, 2023; Dang, 2025). Social media have become important venues for mental well-being concepts, especially among youths in cosmopolitan settings such as Singapore and Hong Kong (Vaingankar et al., 2012; Huang, 2026). The linguistic diversity of the Southeast Asian region and high digital connectivity result in fast-paced metaphorical adaptation where global health idioms are adapted to reflect regional culture (Litam, 2020).

Research Gap

While much information can be found in the digital world, very few studies have examined Southeast Asia in terms of cognitive linguistics. The majority of work in the field has been done in Europe and North America, with little attention paid to the unique characteristics of the Malay Archipelago and Indochina (Haque, 2010; Chatwiriyaiphong et al., 2025). Additionally, no work has been done regarding cross-cultural comparisons of metaphor use, particularly within Southeast Asia, and its potential for using social media's anonymity and global scope to redefine ideas of wellness beyond clinical frameworks (McGorry et al., 2024).

From the review of previous research, it can be seen that although the cognitive process of metaphor is universal, the source domains selected for social media are culture and technology-dependent. This paper seeks to address this research gap by investigating these culture-specific metaphors using corpus studies.

Methodology

Research Design and Framework

The current study adopts the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, who claim that metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a crucial cognitive mechanism that constructs reality. In terms of the adopted methodology, the researcher intends to investigate the hidden conceptual mappings according to the source domains, which tend to be rather concrete, with regard to the target domain of Mental Health.

Figure 1 demonstrates the three-stage methodology employed in this research project: (1) Data Collection stage, involving the creation of the corpus of anonymous online texts collected from Southeast Asia; (2) MIPVU Protocol, which is a term indicating a four-step approach aimed at recognizing linguistic metaphors; (3) Conceptual Mapping stage, meaning the application of CMT to identify mappings of source domains to the target domain of mental health.

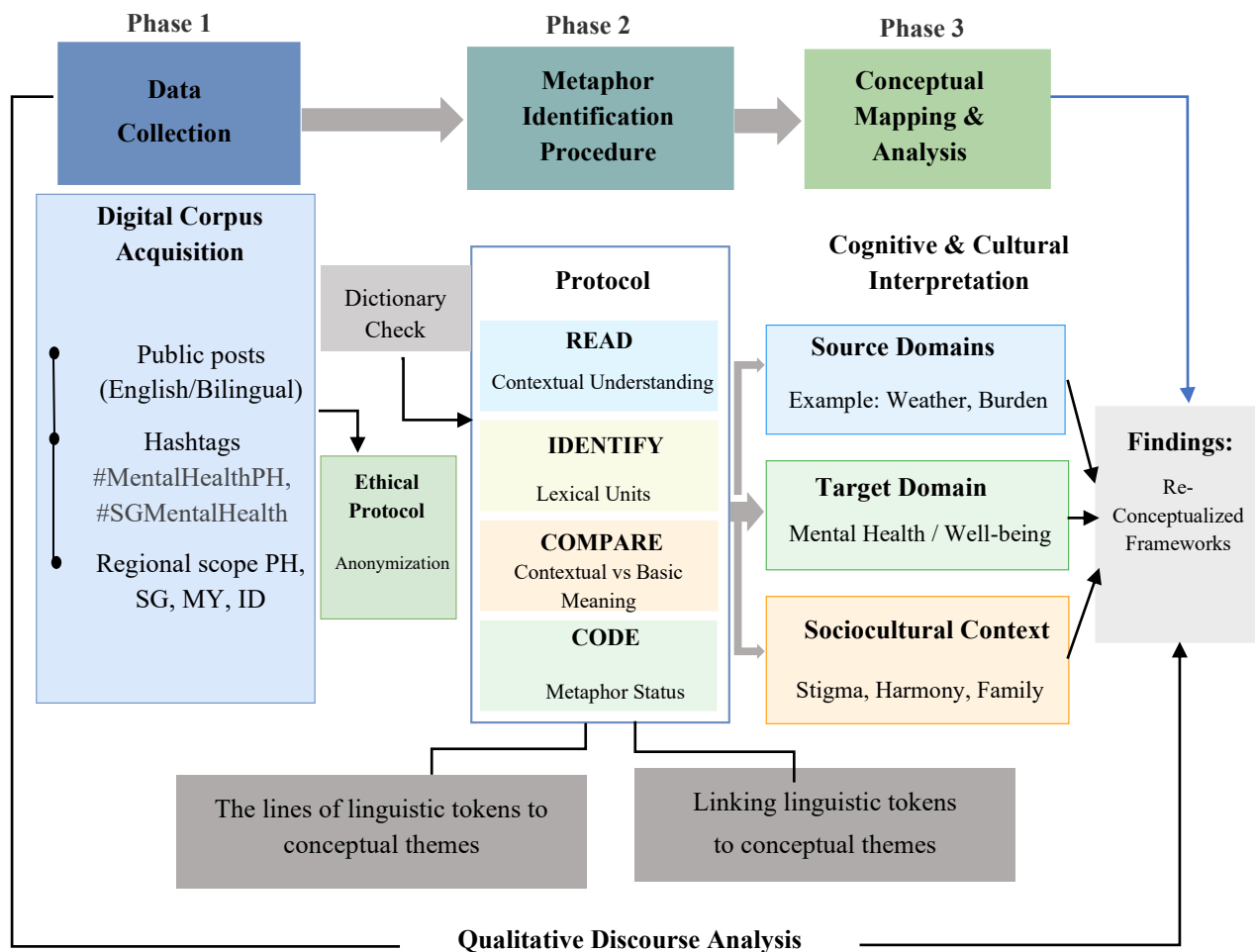


Figure 1: Methodological Framework for Metaphor Identification and Analysis in Digital Discourse

Data Collection and Selection

The data collection process involves the gathering of a purposeful sample of public social media posts via the platforms Facebook, Instagram, and X (previously Twitter). The focus was on posts generated by the Southeast Asian populace in general. Data was collected for six months through region-specific hashtags (e.g., #MentalHealthPH, #SGMentalHealth, and #KesihatanMental) associated with the topic of discussion. Posts containing the target figurative expressions were gathered only in English or English-bilingual form (Code-switching). In total, 500 data units were selected from different Southeast Asian cities for their use of figurative expressions.

Participants

The participants of this study are anonymous online contributors whose contributions constitute the textual basis of this paper. While the data used are publicly accessible, the researcher ensured that all ethical considerations in conducting digital humanities research were followed in this paper. All personal data, including names and locations, has been stripped from the data to protect the identity of the participants. This particular group consists of young adults and mental health advocates, who comprise the largest demographic in the Southeast Asian digital sphere.

Data Analysis

Metaphorical expressions are identified using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIPVU). This is a linguistic procedure which consists of four steps, including: (1) reading the whole text in order to understand its overall meaning; (2) finding individual lexical units in the text; (3) comparing the contextual meanings of the words with their basic meanings found in a dictionary; and (4) tagging those units that have contrasting meanings which are able to compare to each other as being metaphorical. After that, the found metaphors are divided into Conceptual Clusters, and the source domains dominating in the perception of mental health by Southeast Asians are established.

The analysis was conducted based on the Conceptual Mapping Model, which establishes the connection between particular linguistic expressions and the general theme they relate to. In order to ensure the reliability of the analysis, the collected data went through the inter-coder verification stage, during which another linguist analyzed the sample sets of data and made sure the tokens were correctly tagged as metaphorical.

Dominant Metaphorical Mappings

Mental Health as a Weather Pattern (The Externalized Mind)

Nature and Weather metaphorical sources were used by far most often in the corpus. Here, the psychological state of mind was compared to some temporary weather phenomena that could not be controlled. Users would use such words as storm, cloud, fog, or sunshine to speak about their internal condition. In contrast to War metaphors, which presuppose some sort of action, the Weather metaphor assumes a much more observational and, in a sense, pessimistic approach to problems. It lets the person express his emotional overflow, but gives him an illusion of distance – he did not bring the storm upon himself, but just found himself in the middle of it. In this respect, the use of the Weather source domain reflects the philosophical outlook typical of Southeast Asians.

Psychological Struggle as a Physical Burden (The Embodied Weight)

Another cluster of data showed the metaphorical mapping of Psychological Struggle as a Physical Burden. Metaphors such as "carry a burden," "crushed under all the expectations," and "being smothered by the weight" were frequently used, especially in posts written from the Philippines and Singapore. The idea of transforming an abstract, invisible experience of mental illness into something tangible and concrete allow a user to convey his/her physical and cultural reality more effectively. Since hard work and perseverance are valued highly within those communities, viewing the mental struggle as a physical weight allows validating the exhausted state.

Mind as a Fragile Object (The Vulnerability Mapping)

The corpus analysis, another common idea used in social media, was The Mind as a Fragile Object. The users expressed feelings of being "shattered" or "broken." Stressed their own fragility and the irreversible damage done to them psychologically. One can note that such metaphors were predominantly applied when talking about the effects of social media or toxic relations within a family. Users who compare their minds to fragile materials, such as glass or porcelain, emphasize the necessity to take care of themselves gently since they cannot afford to be hurt.

Recovery as Spatial Navigation

When it comes to well-being and recovery, the Southeast Asian users' language is marked by the predominance of the Spatial Navigation domain. Recovery is seen as a journey through the space rather than healing. People tend to speak about finding their way back, being lost in a dark tunnel, or approaching the light. The Darkness-to-Light trajectory is especially popular, usually associated with spirituality or hope. This understanding of mental health sees recovery as a process, where the focus on ways to help plays an important role. Therefore, rather than fixing the problem, the function of the community is to be a guide during the navigation process.

Distribution of Source Domains

To illustrate this qualitative approach quantitatively, the frequency distribution of these metaphors has been compiled on the basis of the 500-post corpus. Table 1, the Weather metaphors comprise 35% of all metaphorical tokens; Physical Burden metaphors constitute 28%; Spatial Navigation 22%; and Fragile Objects 15%. This indicates that, when compared to the more violent Combat metaphorical system of Western languages, these communities prefer to speak about mental disorders using metaphors that put emphasis on environment and physicality.

Table 1: Mapping Analysis and Linguistic Realizations

Target Domain	Source Domain	Linguistic Realizations (Tokens)	Cognitive Implication
Mental State	Weather	Storm, Fog, Rain, Clearing, Cloudy	Transience & Lack of Control
Distress	Physical Burden	Weight, Heavy, Crushing, Luggage	Social & Familial Pressure
Self/Psyche	Fragile Object	Shattered, Broken, Cracked, Pieces	Vulnerability & Need for Care
Healing	Navigation	Path, Tunnel, Light, Way, Direction	Process-Oriented Recovery

Sociocultural and Educational Implications

Cultural Weight of Metaphor Beyond Western Frameworks

With the prominence of the Physical Burden and Weather domains in the corpus of data analyzed, there is clearly an unmistakable difference in how the mental health struggle is represented in terms of Battle in Western culture. Considering the Southeast Asian cultural landscape, where collectivism and respect for one's elders are paramount, it becomes clear why the metaphor of Heavy Burden was used to describe the mental health experience. Users are not only fighting their illnesses; rather, dealing with the heavy burden of family pride. Therefore, mental health advocacy efforts need to recognize that any aggressive rhetoric will be ineffective. Rather, the Weather and Burden mapping needs to be taken into account.

Breaking Stigma through Safe Linguistic Indirectness

Metaphoric speech is an important grease for the social machinery in the digital worlds of Southeast Asia, where mentioning mental challenges is considered to be associated with being weak or having insufficient faith. The fragile object metaphor and dark tunnel metaphor allow social media users to bypass

this taboo. Through the use of these metaphors, individuals are able to linguistically disguise their vulnerability and, hence, avoid clinical diagnosis. The virtual environment thus becomes a transforming space, in which what cannot be named is navigable. Linguistic camouflaging eliminates any hindrance when seeking assistance by saying that "the glass" is fragile and not undergoing a nervous breakdown.

Educational Implications: Culturally Competent Literacy

Implications of this study may bring about wide-ranging consequences not only on the English language learning process but also on the mental health literacy aspect within this field. The integration of the Metaphor Awareness program within the lesson plan shall enable learners to communicate their emotional state better. Rather than forcing them to learn clinical terms, teachers will be able to use the Source Domains of this study, such as Navigation and Nature, to develop more realistic and culturally relevant wellness programs. It would also help them feel more accepted when allowed to use the metaphors that they have been using to describe their well-being online to describe how they are feeling. This way, they can connect with the content taught in the third space and see that it is not some strange concept from the West but something close to their own culture.

Digital Advocacy and the New Normal of Discourse

Finally, the move from internal metaphors to their externalization on social media platforms shows a shift in the linguistic norm of Southeast Asia. In as much as these metaphorical concepts go viral, start defining the view the region holds towards mental well-being. Digital advocates will be able to incorporate these findings in developing campaign strategies that align with the concept of spatial navigation as a process of collective healing as opposed to being a solitary experience. Here, it becomes apparent that the discussion provides a chance not only to see how metaphors represent ideas but also how they create social realities. Metaphors alter not only the language of mental health problems in the region but also its sociocultural setting.

Conclusion

It is through this research paper that a step has been taken towards understanding the map of metaphors with regard to discourse on mental health in Southeast Asia, thereby showing the interrelation between cognitive linguistics and culture. From the results, it can be deduced that the favored choice of domains in the expression of psychological wellness among social media users in Southeast Asia is Environmental, Physical Burden, and Navigation. The findings show that there is a move away from the dominant Battle metaphor that dominates the discourse of psychological well-being within the Western context. These linguistic choices have significant value in terms of facilitating the expression of psychological well-being while overcoming deep-rooted cultural stigma and the collective influence of society and family. It presents an in-depth lens into how metaphors are used as a strategy to protect from stigmatization and enhance one's emotional literacy skills. Nevertheless, several limitations were identified within the study, such as the focus on the usage of data presented by the use of English and bilingual languages, while neglecting other aspects of monolingual dialects. The preference for the use of X (Twitter) and Instagram could be linked to the younger and tech-savvy generation. Future research needs to consider cross-linguistic analysis and longitudinal research to analyze how these metaphors change along with the changes in policies concerning mental well-being in Southeast Asia. Finally, this study shows that understanding how metaphors shape individuals' thoughts is critical to increase awareness about mental well-being among people.

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