

Article Info:

Received Date: 09 May 2020

Accepted Date: 28 May 2020

Published Date: 31 May 2020

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Webcomic As Means to Fight Stigmatization of Mental Disorders Among Adolescents

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Abstract

Mental disorders are a serious issue often being avoided. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental disorders are one of the most severe public health issues of the 21st century, as new studies show that mental disorders impact children and adolescents all over the world where half of all mental disorders begin at the age of 14 years old. That makes the issue an important part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda for improving the future by 2030. Notably, the suicidal trend among adolescents in Malaysia is rising alarmingly due to technological advancement and stigmatization. Stigma is closely related to faith and culture. It is a negative belief that causes bias within a group of individuals, resulting in stereotyping and discrimination. Those challenges have the heavy effect that the stigma has on them. The research aims to establish whether webcomics can rationalize knowledge or understanding and the potential to combat stigma against mental disorders and to propose a series of webcomics as awareness and means to fight stigmatization. The selected webcomics were then analyzed qualitatively, using both formal analysis and content analysis. The most influential keyword in these webcomics was 'depression and anxiety.' While the issue is taken seriously and requires more focus to express social messages, the webcomic needs a positive denotation to enlighten, motivate and persuade the audience to an impression towards Etsuro: "Shin no Manga". The webcomic series would somehow manage to communicate a profound impact on a suitable medium that through the powerfulness of the visual language may help bring the mental disorder to insight and recognition.

Keyword: Adolescents, Awareness, Mental Disorders, Stigma, Webcomic

INTRODUCTION

Mental health issue was a critical issue that people mostly avoided. Mental disorders, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), represent one of the most serious public health problems of the 21st century. Nonetheless, recent findings reveal that mental disorders affect children and adolescents worldwide where half of all mental disorders begin at age 14. Mental disorders are an important part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda to improve the future by 2030 (Hassan et al., 2018). While the causes of mental disorders are unclear, they are among the strongest predictors of suicide, as more than 80 percent of patients committing suicide were untreated at the time of their death (Nock et al., 2009 as cited in Wong et al., 2019). Since suicidal adolescents are antagonized by traumatic experiences, they have chosen negative ways to cope with the pressures than non-suicidal adolescents where those who suffer could have catastrophic self-impact and tend to develop suicidal behavior (Chagnon, 2007; Hassan et al., 2018).

Problems of mental health among children and adolescents cause distress and can have wide-ranging effects, including impacts on educational achievement and social relationships, and affect life chances and physical health where a lack of awareness of mental disorder threatens mental health conditions (Institute for Public Health, 2015; Hassan et al., 2018). There is an alarming rise in suicidal

trend among adolescents in Malaysia, as technology continues to progress, the Internet and social media network has become the dominant forces in our lives and can affect the mental health of adolescents. Twenge (2017) states adolescents are the technology generation that spends most of their adolescent years on a smartphone. Adolescents spend less time in person with their peers as they engage with social media, leading them to experience unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression, and isolation. This group's perspective is so critical, creative, and its lifestyle is widely exposed to global interest because these generations have different preferences and worldviews as what they expected, which appeals to shorter spans of attention (Siti Mahani Muhazir & Nazlinda Ismail, 2015; McCrindle, 2018).

Meanwhile, Schwab (2016), believes that we are at the beginning of a challenging period that might not be able to avoid the stigmatized negative harm that affects the mental health of our adolescent as the new ideology moves at an exponential pace. This is because the world of life in which we live today is becoming profoundly complex and highly interconnected, and the fact that modern technologies must change in response to more advanced and professional technologies. However, it is critical as knowledge and insights establish a commitment and dedication to continually share ideas about morality and ethics. Adolescent personal social media accounts indicate that depression is associated with extreme anxiety and threatens social contact, communication, and identity (Armitage, Parkinson, Halligan & Reynolds, 2020).

In Malaysia, 29.2 percent of the total population of Malaysia (4.2 million) is reported to be suffering from depression and anxiety disorder where Malaysian adolescents suffer seriously from mental health issues such as anxiety or depression due to life experience or environmental factors (Institute for Public Health, 2017; Sharifah Sakinah, 2019). Besides, a new study indicates the fear of losing out (FOMO) has become prominent in society. To resolve the problems that arise, Institute for Public Health (2017) encourages adolescents in Malaysia to join public health initiatives, education, and awareness programs about depression, anxiety, and stress.

A 16-year-old boy was fatally suicidal after his teachers reportedly harassed him. The deceased was also humiliated by his class teachers by reprimanding him on his hair and clothes. His mother discovered the deceased, who found him hanging in his bed from a blanket tied with the ceiling fan.

(The New Straits Times, 4th February 2020)

Suicidal cases are very common in Malaysia, and there has been a rise in the number of recorded suicidal cases among students over the years attempting to commit suicide. The above news is one of the groundbreaking news that has been highlighted in various Malaysian newspapers and online media in recent years, and perhaps an alarming situation around us. To deal with this issue, the Ministry of Health has provided screening and treatment services for mental health issues at 60 public hospitals; 1,001 primary health clinics, and 25 Mental Health Community Centres (Mentari).

Stigma

Stigma is closely associated with religion and culture. It is a negative perception that induces prejudice resulting in stereotyping and discrimination within a group of individuals (Hassan et al., 2018). From a cultural point of view, there is an intense stigma associated with mental disorders focused on nonsense assumptions and myths as many people with mental disorders experienced the strong impact the stigma has on them (Yee, 2018).

Malaysia consists of three major ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, and Indians, who have carried a different interpretation of mental health (Hassan et al., 2018). This negative reaction also leads people with mental disorders to suffer in silence (YADIM, 2018). Because of this, it greatly impacts the opinions of health care practitioners when coping with these conditions and patients. To implement and encourage more anti-stigma programs aimed at promoting an optimistic supportive public mindset, we should highlight the mental health issue where patients with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major

depressive disorder (MDD) have become the most stigmatized and discriminated (Hassan et al., 2018; Hanafah & Bortel, 2015 as cited in Wong et al., 2020).

We have seen more awareness-raising efforts on mental health over the last few years. Participation in mental health awareness is increasing, and attempts have been made to improve health conditions and to encourage mental wellness. Nevertheless, most of the studies focused only on webcomic's impact on education. Research has not yet been conducted into the contribution of the webcomic to healthy mental well-being. Since webcomics were not yet practiced in Malaysia, the study would be more interesting as there is much more to be learned about intrinsic webcomic relationships. Given these initiatives, understanding is achieved not only through direct experience, but also through observation, refinement, and engagement of approaches, role, and function to form a community and; as a body of knowledge. The study, however, still at the basic and exploratory stage; comparison with previous studies from other countries, populations, and socio-demographic variables may not be adequately addressed. The objective is to determine how webcomics could rationalize understanding and the possibility of countering stigmatization against mental disorders.

Strength of Webcomics

Webcomics are commonly created digitally and posted to a website or social media to reach comic readers for all to see and comics as a special medium for visual narrative exploration. The plot is represented both visually and in a scripted form (Nor Hanisah Kamaruzaman, 2016; Widayanti & Muntaha 2018). McCloud's work is arguably one of the most creative and imaginative in a variety of comic studies and writings. McCloud's contribution is invaluable, especially in the study and analysis of comics through comic art itself (Muliyadi Mahamood, 2010). Moreover, the webcomic has already helped us reach a wider audience. It allows readers to objectively understand the intrinsic and sometimes unseen aspects of illness as opposed to mere text, such as mental disorders including anxiety and depression (Hamdy & Nye, 2019). Most importantly, the webcomic can provide an immersive experience that encourages reader engagement within the story while expanding broad contact at the same time; as the interactive webcomic, experience improves user interaction with the plot (Shelton, 2014).

Visual Persuasion

Notably, the persuasion of critical issues and causality would be exquisitely difficult (Cialdini, 2016, p. 66). According to Lyttle (2001), visual persuasion is designed to enhance, develop, or change individuals' attitudes or behaviors. The use of self-effacing humor would make the message more convincing. Thus, persuasive results will flow from approaches that transfer focus to agents of change. It is a goal-oriented means toward the end that can attempt to influence the values, attitudes, expectations, motives, or behaviors of an individual (Benoit & Benoit. 2008. p.10-11). Importantly, the visual mode of communication, and its rhetorical power of construction and persuasion as a means of persuasion, results primarily from its visual existence alongside semantics and logic following Kato Etsuro's: "*Shin No Manga*" (True Cartoons) (1899-1959), regarded as being able to enlighten, inspire and motivate the masses and demonstrate exceptional courage in some way. (Mayo, Rimer & Kerkham, 2001; Saiful Akram Che Cob, 2016; 2018). Based on Etsuro's point of view, it is notable that being merely funny where it can cause laughter has no significance at the end because it does not have a deep effect that may bring awareness to the mental health issue.

METHODOLOGY

The study is to address mental disorders and the incorporation of stigmatization to acquire a wider perspective on how webcomic can further improve the way we think about these issues and to highlight the reality of mental health problems among adolescents.

Many artists have shared their artwork about depression. However, the researcher intends to study solely on Holly Chisholm’s work as the artist herself was diagnosed with depression and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Webcomic was her compromise between drawing and journaling which helped her to record her feeling and sharing something she had been through. With four (4) years of experience, Chisholm wants to demonstrate that depression and anxiety are not some shameful afflictions, so she shares her thoughts and drawings online with people particularly those who are at the same age as the target audience intended. She currently has 83.4 K followers on Instagram.

Three (3) webcomics posted on Instagram by Chisholm (2019) will be studied, based on the mental disorders’ issues discussed. The selected webcomics were then qualitatively analyzed using both formal and content analysis. The data is analyzed to learn, describe, explain, and interpret a series of decisions made by the artist. In such webcomics, the most popular keyword was 'depression and anxiety.'

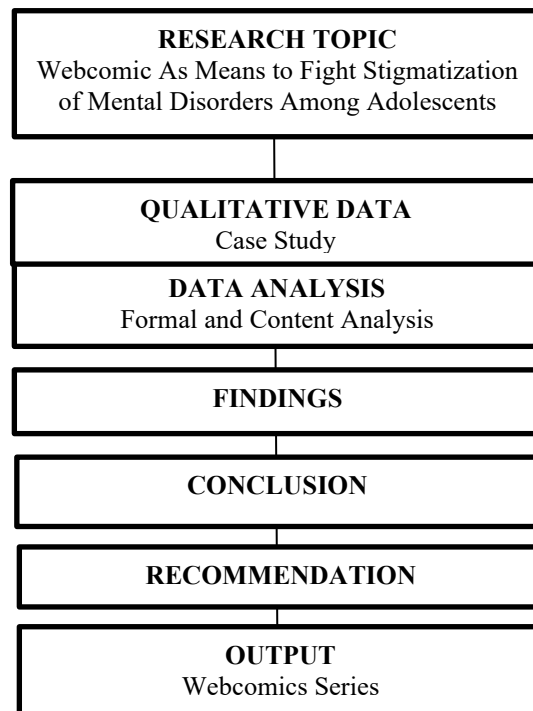


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework

Based on the framework, the relevant information is collected from the case study to help the establishment of theoretical frameworks on the phenomenon and the expansion of knowledge as illustrated in Fig. 2, 3, and 4 below.

MENTAL HEALTH FACT #3

Half of all chronic mental illness begins by age 14; three-quarters by age 24. Despite effective treatment, there are long delays – sometimes decades – between the first appearance of symptoms and when people get help.

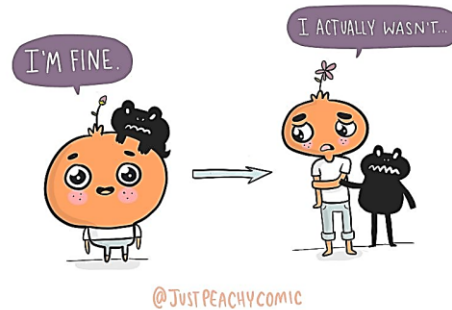


Fig.2: Mental Health Fact (Chisholm, 2019)

MENTAL HEALTH FACT #5

Most people with mental illness are not violent and only 3%-5% of violent acts can be attributed to individuals living with a serious mental illness. In fact, people with severe mental illnesses are over 10 times more likely to be victims of violent crime than the general population.



Fig.3: Mental Health Fact (Chisholm, 2019)

MENTAL HEALTH FACT #6

Mental health problems have nothing to do with being lazy or weak and many people need help to get better.



Fig.4: Mental Health Fact (Chisholm, 2019)

As the study focuses mainly on those dealing with depression and anxiety alone, careful consideration

is needed to avoid causing the (Victims of Torture (VOT)) to be in the worst position because of the aspect that triggers the situation and the depression level is different. Typically, it should reflect real human nature so readers could relate. The supporting character is another fictional character such as family and friends or original character which had no specific nature. It seems to be more of a reflection of mental disorders.

FINDINGS

The results were close to what has been documented in other studies. This proved that depression could not be taken lightly; the age of globalization and new technology subjected adolescents to mental disorders. In Malaysia, we are still overcome by the stigma of society, which discourages people from seeking treatment. There's a clear need to deal with the stigma and empower readers who struggle with depression to feel accepted and confident in discussing their circumstances so they can get the support or guidance they need, without being judged because it's going to be the biggest obstacle to recovery. All those who struggle need to stand up against the social stigma because it's not a few degrading afflictions. Thus, we need to be aware of mental disorders, empathy, support, and stop causing or triggering the Victims of Torture (VOT).

Notably, Malaysians have started recognizing the mental disorder. There is also a lot of work being done to promote awareness. The government also encourages healthcare professionals to use infographics and other media to educate the public where Facebook pages are already available to address the illnesses. Psychoeducation, therefore, offers a wide variety of programs that incorporate education with other activities such as therapy and supporting treatments.

Thus, webcomics in the field of therapy could intensify depressive symptoms and shed light on the nature of adolescent mental health issues as webcomics could act as entertainment, guidance, and storytelling practices. It may be an effective method of communicating by using analogies and metaphors published on social media, it is opening doors to real interactions with people going through the same problems. It can connect people and respond to how they feel and nourish a sense of empathy, while the narratives also can inspire people to spread positive vibes. To do so, artists will need to study the trend and the related media and platforms when working with adolescents to spreading awareness, as adolescents do not read much.

It is important to realize that webcomic has various genres that characterize their stories and storylines. However, most webcomics do not conform to any one genre, instead, it takes inspiration from multiple areas. "*Slice of life*" is typically used among the broad genre of webcomic when the artist wanted to portray the dilemma as the non-fictional (autobiographical) webcomic that further delivers about the character's experiences. Yet those who read will consider illustration in webcomic customized according to preferences. It could be part of therapy bringing up something very deep as social messaging and to insight empathy. The webcomics below are proposed in both Bahasa Melayu and English for communicating more effectively irrespective of the language barrier that may occur. In this regard, the researcher would like to propose a webcomic series that address concerns being discussed at length to combat the society's stigma as in Fig. 5, 6, and 7 below.



Fig.5: Persuasive webcomic I

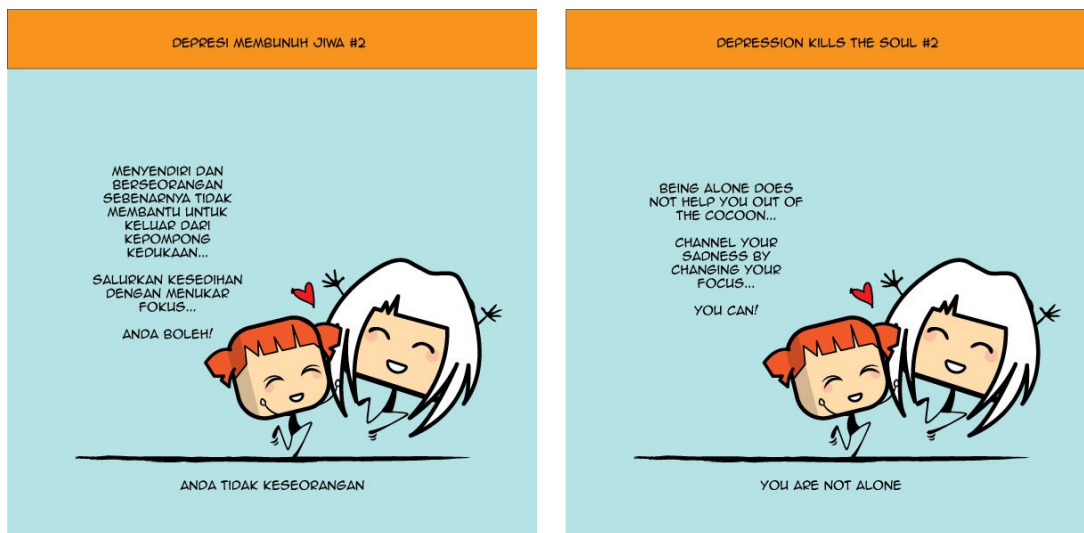


Fig.6: Persuasive webcomic II

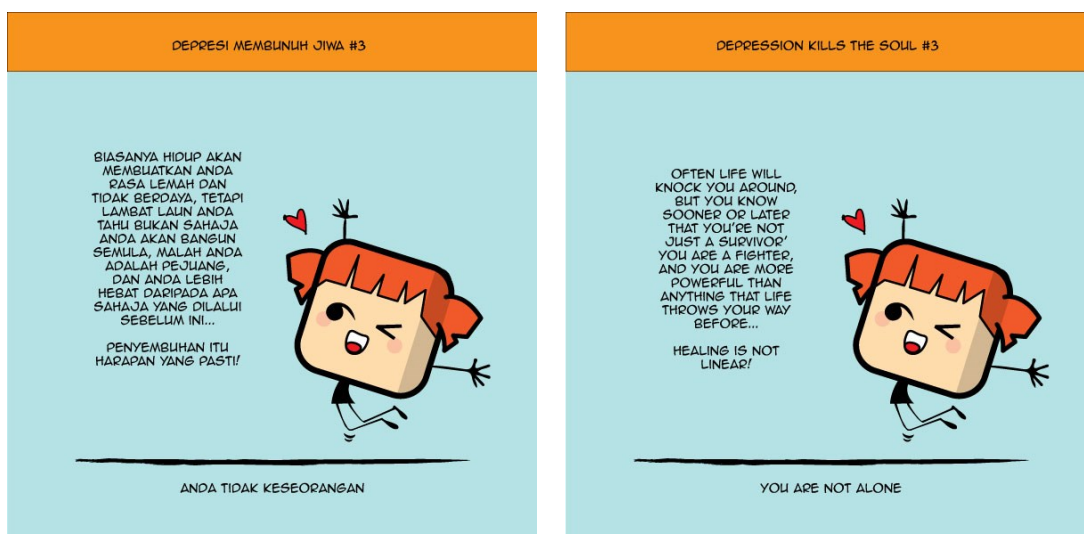


Fig.7: Persuasive webcomic III

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, webcomics may discuss issues that are still unspoken out of embarrassment, aiming to remove the stigma and bring those awkward discussions to light and help create a group of people to heal together. Webcomics can rationalize knowledge or understanding and the potential to combat stigma against mental disorders. A series of webcomics is proposed as awareness to support big ideas. It may encourage the awareness that feeling anxious, sad, or depressed is okay to hold something other people can relate to. Since mental disorders is a very deep-rooted problem it can help people not feel isolated by attempting to make it fun and entertaining. Correspondingly, a study on the target audience's preferences and choice of the platform is taken into consideration to propose a series of the webcomic. "Slice of Life" (depression) genre is observed and reflected through the designer/illustrator's perspective. The webcomic characters need to be well adapted to the theme to help readers connect easily to the social context. It looks more distinctive and captivates webcomics that may draw the attention of adolescents. Also, the simple and often more common forms are very useful in displaying effective facial expressions and gestures. Since the topic is taken seriously and requires further emphasis to convey social messages, the characters have a constructive denotation to enlighten, inspire and console the audience and have shown exemplary strength as Etsuro: "*Shin no Manga*".

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