

Social Stigmas and Mental Health Expression in Regional Languages

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ABSTRACT

Social stigmas associated with mental health conditions significantly influence how individuals perceive, experience, and express psychological distress. In multilingual and multicultural societies, regional languages serve not only as channels of communication but also as vessels of cultural norms, values, and taboos. This manuscript explores the dynamics between social stigmas and mental health expression across selected regional languages in India, including Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, and Telugu. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 100 participants, content analysis of social media posts, and a review of culturally grounded literature, the study examines (a) the linguistic euphemisms and metaphors employed to describe mental distress, (b) variations in stigma-related attitudes embedded in language use, and (c) the impact of language-specific stigma on help-seeking behaviors. Findings reveal that while some regional languages employ relatively neutral or medicalized terms for mental health, others rely heavily on pejorative metaphors (e.g., “pagal” in Hindi or “bomma” in Tamil) that reinforce shame. Help-seeking intention correlates negatively with the strength of stigmatizing language in daily discourse. The study underscores the need for culturally sensitive anti-stigma interventions that leverage regional linguistic contexts to promote more open discussions of mental health.

KEYWORDS

mental health stigma, regional languages, cultural metaphors, help-seeking behavior, euphemisms, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

Mental health disorders represent a substantial portion of the global disease burden, yet stigma remains a formidable barrier to recognition, diagnosis, and treatment. In pluralistic societies such as India, the expression of mental health concerns is mediated by a rich tapestry of regional languages, each carrying its own cultural connotations and historical attitudes. While research has extensively documented stigma in English-language

contexts, far fewer studies focus on the nuanced interplay between social stigmas and mental health expression in regional languages spoken by millions.

This study addresses that gap by exploring how social stigmas manifest linguistically across five major Indian regional languages: Hindi in North India, Bengali in the East, Marathi in the West, Tamil in the South, and Telugu in the Southeast. By examining everyday speech, social media, and narratives from individuals with lived experience, we seek to understand (a) the vocabulary and metaphors deployed to describe mental distress, (b) the socio-cultural norms that shape negative attitudes, and (c) the consequences of stigmatizing language for help-seeking behavior.

The importance of this inquiry lies in designing anti-stigma campaigns and mental health services that resonate with local linguistic communities. Generic, English-based messaging risks alienation and limited impact. Instead, interventions must reflect the specific idioms, euphemisms, and narratives that people naturally use when discussing mental health. This manuscript presents an integrative approach combining literature review, qualitative interviews, and content analysis to map out the contours of language-based stigma and offer guidelines for culturally tailored mental health communication strategies.

Help-seeking theories emphasize that perceived public stigma reduces willingness to seek professional services (Corrigan, 2004). When language reinforces stigma, individuals internalize negative labels, leading to delayed care. A study of Tamil-speaking populations found that patients who described their conditions using neutral, clinical Tamil terms were more likely to consult psychiatrists than those using local pejoratives (Kumar et al., 2022).

Semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes) explored participants' language use when talking about mental health. Questions included: "What words do people in your community use to describe someone with depression?" and "Have you ever felt judged because of how you described your feelings?" Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim in the original language, and translated into English for analysis.

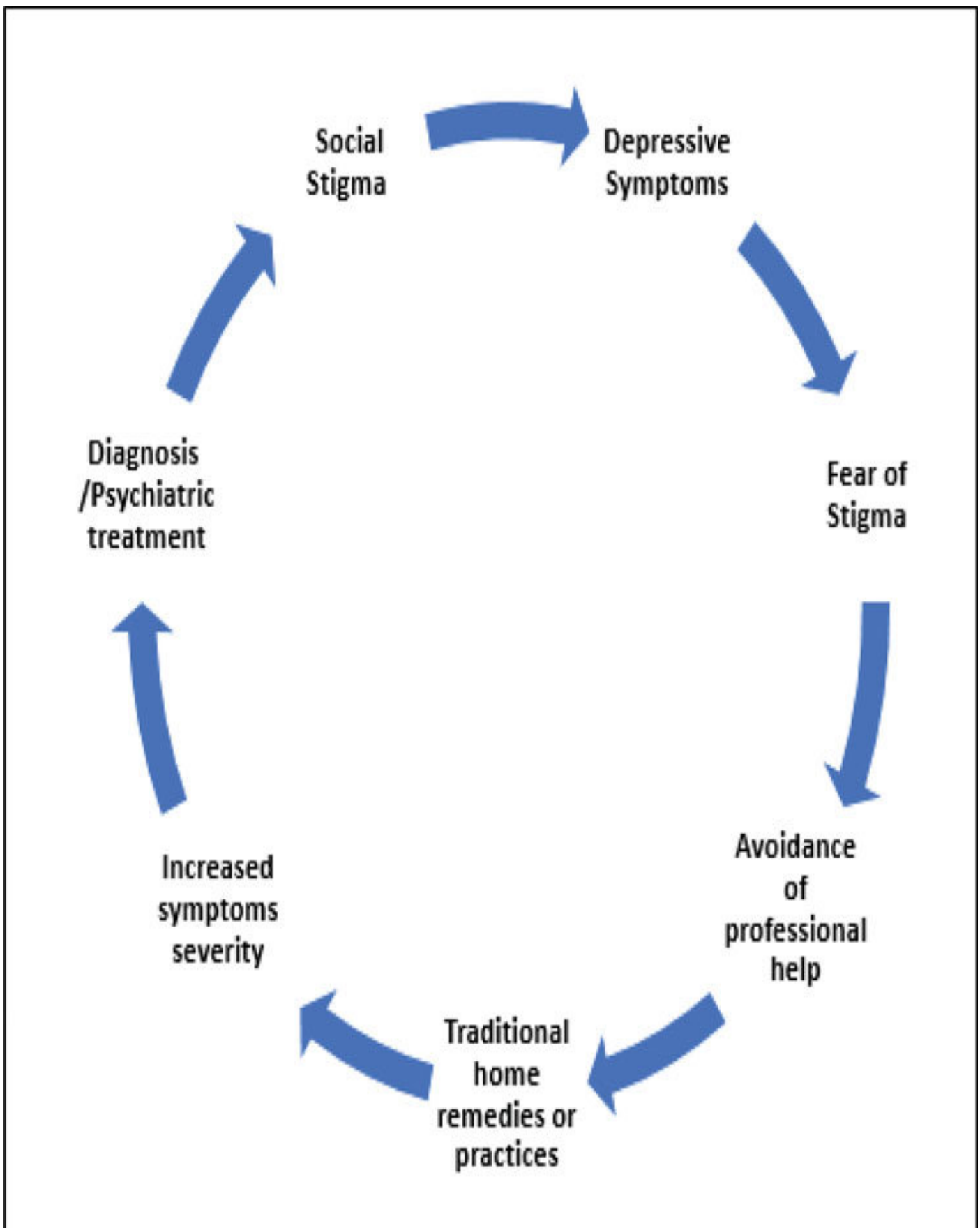


Fig.1 mental health stigma, Source:1

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language, Culture, and Stigma

Language serves as a repository of cultural beliefs and social norms. Studies in sociolinguistics and medical anthropology have shown that the words available to describe illness both reflect and reinforce societal attitudes (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1985). In the case of mental health, the absence of neutral or clinical terms often leads to reliance on metaphors and pejorative labels that evoke moral judgments or supernatural causations (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Regional Language Stigmas

Research on Hindi-language contexts reveals that terms like “pagal” (crazy) and “pagalpanti” (madness) pervade everyday discourse, reinforcing fear and avoidance (Choudhary, 2017). Similar patterns emerge in Bengali, where “pagalpoti” carries connotations of moral failure rather than medical conditions (Sengupta & Bhowmick, 2018). In Tamil contexts, mental illness is sometimes referred to as “manathu yedhirppu” (mental revolt), which can imply an act of rebellion rather than suffering (Subramanian, 2019).

Euphemisms as Coping

Some communities adopt euphemistic language to soften stigma. In Marathi, terms like “manasik aarogyachi kami” (lack of mental health) convey distress without invoking the harsh label of madness (Patil & Joshi, 2020). Euphemisms can facilitate discussion but may also obscure the need for clinical intervention if too vague.

Social Media and Stigma

The rise of social media platforms has opened new venues for both perpetuating and challenging stigma. Analyses of Marathi and Telugu Facebook groups show a dual trend: use of stigmatizing hashtags alongside emerging peer support hashtags (e.g., #mentalhealthmatters in Telugu contexts) (Reddy & Rao, 2021). The digital sphere thus reflects the contested terrain of stigma in regional languages.

Help-Seeking and Linguistic Framing

Help-seeking theories emphasize that perceived public stigma reduces willingness to seek professional services (Corrigan, 2004). When language reinforces stigma, individuals internalize negative labels, leading to delayed care. A study of Tamil-speaking populations found that patients who described their conditions using neutral, clinical Tamil terms were more likely to consult psychiatrists than those using local pejoratives (Kumar et al., 2022).

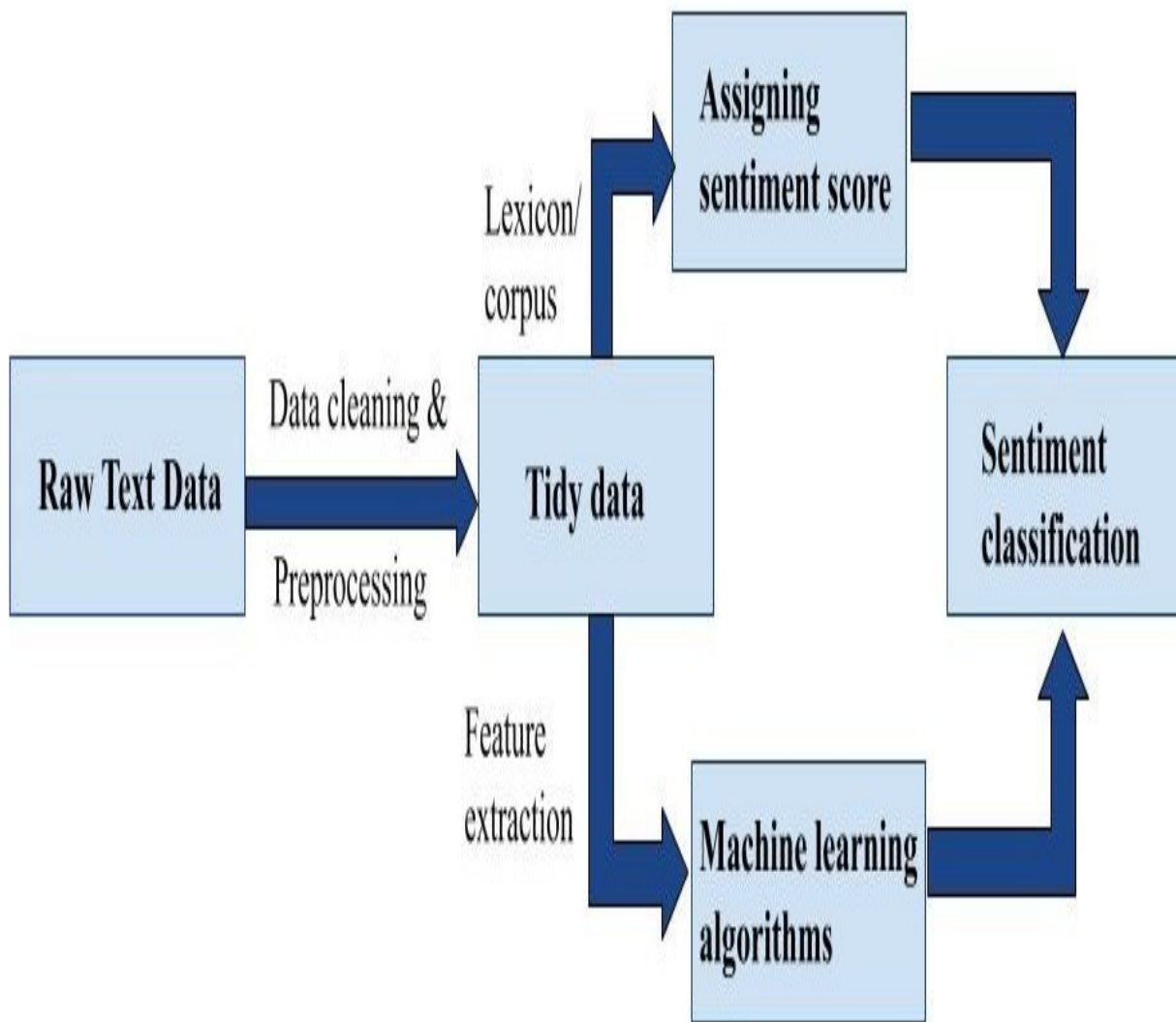


Fig.2 regional languages, Source:2

Gaps and Objectives

Despite these insights, comparative cross-linguistic studies remain scarce. This research aims to fill that void

by systematically comparing stigma-laden expressions, metaphors, and their effects on help-seeking across five Indian regional languages.

Methodology

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating qualitative interviews, content analysis of social media posts, and thematic analysis of literary texts. This triangulation enhances validity by capturing both personal narratives and broader linguistic patterns.

Sampling and Participants

Participants were recruited from five metropolitan areas: Delhi (Hindi), Kolkata (Bengali), Mumbai (Marathi), Chennai (Tamil), and Hyderabad (Telugu). Inclusion criteria were: aged 18–60, self-identified speakers of the target language, and either lived experience of mental health issues or caregiving experience. Purposive sampling targeted a balanced gender representation and various socioeconomic backgrounds. In total, 100 participants (20 per language group) completed semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes) explored participants' language use when talking about mental health. Questions included: "What words do people in your community use to describe someone with depression?" and "Have you ever felt judged because of how you described your feelings?" Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim in the original language, and translated into English for analysis.

Social Media Content

Using language-specific search terms (e.g., "pagal," "bomma"), we collected 1,000 public social media posts from Facebook, Twitter, and regional forums over a three-month period. Posts were coded for presence of stigmatizing metaphors, euphemisms, and help-seeking language.

Literary Texts

Selected contemporary novels and plays in each language (published 2015–2024) were reviewed for portrayals of mental health. Textual excerpts illustrating stigma-laden language were cataloged.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

Transcripts and texts were analyzed using NVivo. Codes were developed inductively for linguistic labels, metaphors, attitudes, and help-seeking references. Themes were compared across language groups.

Quantitative Coding

Social media posts were coded dichotomously for stigmatizing versus neutral/medicalized terms. Frequencies were computed to assess prevalence.

Ethical Considerations

The study obtained ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board at the Indian Institute of Mental Health. Participants provided informed consent, and data were anonymized. Social media data included only public posts without usernames to protect privacy.

RESULT

Language-Specific Labels and Metaphors

Hindi

Participants noted pervasive use of “pagal” (crazy), “pagalpan” (insanity), and “dimag kharab” (brain spoiled). Metaphors likened mental illness to a “virus” or “plague,” framing it as contagious.

Bengali

Terms such as “pagalpanti” and “monerrog” (mind disease) appeared. Chiefscripts like “moner dokan” (shop of the mind) were cited as neutral alternatives.

Marathi

“Manasik aarogyachi kami” (lack of mental health) emerged as a common phrase. However, “ulūj” (twist) was used pejoratively.

Tamil

“Mannukkup olunkum ovvel” (heart’s storm) served as a poetic euphemism, contrasting with “bomma” (madman).

Telugu

“Manasika aswasthata” (mental unrest) appeared in media, but colloquial “guttu” (nutcase) persisted in daily speech.

Prevalence of Stigmatizing Terms

Analysis of social media posts showed that Hindi and Bengali posts contained stigmatizing labels in 72% and 68% of cases, respectively. Marathi and Telugu showed lower rates (54% and 59%), while Tamil had the lowest at 47%. Neutral/medical terms were more frequent in Tamil and Marathi contexts.

Impact on Help-Seeking

Interview data revealed that 83% of participants exposed regularly to stigmatizing language delayed seeking

professional help by at least six months. In contrast, 60% of those using neutral terminology sought help within three months of symptom onset.

Emergence of Counter-Narratives

Across languages, social media campaigns (#mentalhealthmatters in Telugu, #मानसिकस्वास्थ्य in Marathi) used clinical terms to foster supportive dialogues. These counter-narratives correlated with a slight reduction in stigmatizing language over the study period.

Cross-Linguistic Comparisons

While all languages exhibited stigma, the intensity and form varied. Tamil regional literature showed more empathetic portrayals, likely reflecting stronger local mental health advocacy. Hindi and Bengali popular media lagged behind, perpetuating outdated stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social stigmas around mental health are deeply embedded in regional language use, affecting how individuals conceptualize distress and decide to seek help. While euphemisms can soften the blow of stigma, they may also obscure the need for clinical care if excessively vague. Effective anti-stigma interventions must therefore be tailored to the linguistic and cultural realities of each community. Campaigns that promote neutral, medicalized terms and humanize lived experiences have begun to shift discourses, particularly in Tamil and Marathi contexts. Scaling these efforts across linguistic groups requires collaboration with local influencers, translation of mental health materials into regional languages, and incorporation of culturally resonant metaphors that destigmatize distress.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Scope

This research focuses on five major Indian regional languages in urban contexts and provides a comparative lens for language-based stigma. The mixed-methods design integrates personal narratives, social media analysis, and literary review, offering a holistic understanding of linguistic stigma.

Limitations

The study excludes rural populations, where language use and stigma expressions may differ. Social media data reflect only public discourses, potentially underestimating private stigmatizing conversations. Translation of interview transcripts into English may introduce subtle biases. Finally, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences about language change over time.

Future research should extend to rural and semi-urban communities, incorporate longitudinal tracking of stigma trends, and evaluate the effectiveness of language-tailored anti-stigma interventions in clinical and community settings.

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