

The invisible struggle of mental health in Asia:

Cultural barriers and evolving approaches

Mental health disorders are an increasing concern across Asia, but cultural perceptions and treatment approaches differ significantly from those in the Western world. Stigma, traditional beliefs and family dynamics play a crucial role in shaping how mental health is addressed in many Asian societies.

In many Asian cultures, mental illness is often perceived as a personal weakness, a failure of self-discipline or even a spiritual affliction. Historically, mental health issues were not recognised as medical conditions, but were instead viewed through moral or supernatural lenses. The concept of *face* – social reputation and honour – remains deeply embedded in these societies, making a mental health diagnosis a potential source of shame for both individuals and their families. As a result, many people avoid seeking professional help for fear of social ostracization. This stigma is pervasive across the region, from East Asia to South Asia, creating significant barriers to open discussions and early intervention.

For instance, in Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea, mental health issues are often concealed to maintain social harmony and avoid burdening others. In countries like Thailand and India, mental illness is sometimes attributed to supernatural causes – such as curses or karma – further complicating efforts to seek professional care. These cultural stigmas not only discourage individuals from seeking help, but also hinder public awareness and policy advancements in mental health care.



Challenges in mental health treatment

Seeking mental health treatment in Asia is often fraught with hesitation and delay. Many individuals turn to self-treatment, home remedies or alternative medicine before considering professional care. Traditional practices such as herbal medicine, acupuncture and spiritual healing are commonly relied upon as the first line of defence against mental health issues. Therapy, on the other hand, is frequently avoided, due to stigma, and when treatment is sought, there is often an expectation for a quick fix – typically in the form of medication – rather than long-term psychotherapy.

This preference for immediate solutions stems from both stigma and the desire to minimise engagement with the mental health system. In China, for example, demand for psychiatric medication is high, yet psychotherapy remains underutilised. Similarly, in Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines, limited access to mental health services pushes many to seek support from traditional healers or religious leaders.



Barriers to exploring insights

Cultural stigma also affects how mental health issues are reported and discussed, making traditional research methods less effective. Many individuals underreport symptoms or avoid discussing mental illness openly due to fear of judgement. This self-reporting bias leads to inaccurate data and an incomplete understanding of the true prevalence of mental health issues.

Social desirability bias presents another challenge, as respondents may provide answers which they believe are socially acceptable, rather than their true experiences. In surveys, individuals often downplay symptoms, or hesitate to admit to mental health struggles, to conform to societal expectations. Additionally, privacy concerns further complicate data collection, as many people decline participation in mental health studies altogether.



A culturally sensitive approach to mental health solutions

In our past insights and strategy work, we have tailored our approaches to account for cultural stigma and social norms, diving deep into the cultural nuances that shape mental health diagnosis and treatment. Our strategies have included:

AI-driven sentiment analysis

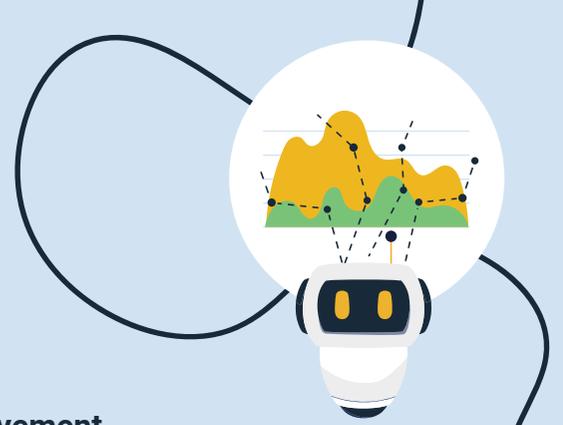
Leveraging digital and social listening tools to uncover emotional patterns in online discussions, providing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of public sentiment toward mental health.

Community engagement

Partnering with trusted local figures, such as patient advocacy groups, who are increasingly becoming the first point of contact for mental health concerns.

Family involvement

Creating online, closed platforms where caregivers can share their experiences in a safe space, fostering open dialogue and offering a more comprehensive view of the mental health landscape. Understanding how mental health is discussed within families also helps to shape more effective awareness campaigns.



Market-specific mental health strategies

Mental health care requires a tailored, region-specific approach. While countries like Australia emphasise therapy, digital solutions and open conversations, China and Southeast Asia are still navigating stigma and integrating mental health services into mainstream healthcare.

For pharmaceutical companies and healthcare providers, success in these markets depends on **culturally informed market research, collaborations with trusted local institutions and partnerships with advocacy organisations and influencers**. By respecting cultural sensitivities and leveraging these strategic partnerships, organisations can play a crucial role in improving mental healthcare accessibility and acceptance across Asia.



Get in touch

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