



# ***HIDDEN BEHIND COLOURS***

Art Piece & Reflection on the Impact of Cultural Identity on  
Mental Health

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*\*Trigger Warning – reflection contains content surrounding eating disorder,  
anxiety and depression\**

## About the Artwork – Cultural Identity

This artwork illustrates the confrontation that occurs between cultural identity and mental health. This piece is reflective of my own cultural identity as a Malaysian but also being part of the Peranakan community. Moreover, the three different mental health struggles illustrated in this piece: anxiety, depression and an eating disorder, are my interpretation of each of these issues. The personalisation of this piece aims to highlight the distinctiveness of the mental health experience.

The focal point of the art piece is the individual wearing a vibrant and bright *baju kebaya*, while the rest of the artwork is a greyscale illustration. The *baju kebaya* is a dress worn by the Peranakan community during special occasions. The Peranakan community are a diasporic community, “which formed out of mixed ethnic ancestry, predominantly with the Chinese, Indians, and Arabs who intermarried with local women.” (Neo et al., 2019, p. 25) The Peranakan community is unique to the Southeast Asian region and has had an immense influence on my upbringing [my paternal grandmother was a proud Nonya, a term referring to the Peranakan women]. Therefore, I chose to have the focal point of this piece to pay homage to my home country and upbringing.

The *baju kebaya* is colourful and consists of floral and nature-related designs. As such, I tried to encompass these features within this piece, where I sketched the individual to wear a bright pink tunic with a long red sarong (skirt) with floral designs at the bottom. Consequently, the individual becomes the focal point, which also draws attention away from the mental health issues the individual is struggling with, as shown in the background.

The cultural identity component of this piece serves to highlight the immense expectation that is placed upon Asian females within the community. Within the context of the Peranakan community, a study conducted by Neo et al. (2019) shared how a respondent emphasised the expectation placed upon Nonyas, while there was no expectation for Babas

[Peranakan males]. These expectations included maintaining composure and protecting one's image and reputation (Neo et al., 2019). These expectations, to behave and uphold a certain reputation, further promotes social stigma associated with mental health. As previously demonstrated by Livingston et al. (2018), stigma greatly affects mental health as it inhibits health-seeking behaviours. As such, upholding one's reputation and 'saving face' is a higher priority than addressing or conversing about mental health struggles. Thereby, the exuberant colours of the individual draw attention away from the array of mental health struggles. Additionally, the lack of facial expression represents the lack of communication concerning mental health within the Asian community, a significant issue that was highlighted in Virdee's (2020) article and is acknowledged within Livingston et al.'s (2018) research concerning social stigma amongst Asian men concerning mental health. The lack of proper dialogue regarding mental health further encourages social stigma around mental health as this is seen as an issue to be frowned upon and taboo. For that reason, this piece emphasises the significance of dialogue surrounding mental health within Asian communities. In which, the intersectional experiences need to be shared, to develop appropriate mental health strategies to help the community. As a result, cultural identity and cultural values immensely influence the perception and prioritisation of mental health issues.

#### About the Artwork – Mental Health – Eating Disorder

The illustration in the bottom left corner symbolises the struggle of having an eating disorder. The illustration depicts a woman pulling the strings to tighten the corset, while the other is gripping onto the mirror in front of her. The corset is significant as it demonstrates the external pressure that is placed on Asian women to fit into the societal beauty standards, despite the individual's effort to be happy and comfortable with their body. This external pressure can be seen on a micro-level, which can be seen through family criticism, or on a

macro-level, which is the media's portrayal of beauty. The issue of body image is a prevalent issue within the Asian community, especially amongst Asian women which I continue to see and have experienced.

A study conducted by Evans and McConnell (2003) noted that Asian women resembled similarly to White women in their strive for mainstream beauty ideals. In this manner, it should be recognised how the strive for western beauty standards is consequential of colonialism, which has altered the perception and racialised Asian beauty. Furthermore, Brady et al., (2017) demonstrated that the [Asian] women from their study highlighted an array of challenges that present to Asian women and body acceptance. This includes but is not limited to family body criticism, appearance-related comparison and cultural differences in defining attraction. As such, I sketched this particular image of a women pulling on the corset of another to signify how common it is for many young Asian women to have their weight criticised on by family members. Thus, family criticisms are the main factor I wished to highlight in this piece, demonstrating how they perpetuate body dissatisfaction and showcasing how difficult it can be to break the cycle of body comparison and achieve body acceptance within an environment that is highly critical. In short, I wanted to incorporate this issue into this piece as I understand many Asian women may be silently struggling with eating disorders consequently due to culture as well as colonialism.

#### About the Artwork – Mental Health – Anxiety

The middle image represents my interpretation of anxiety. The image portrayed was influenced by my personal experience with anxiety. This is encompassed by two hooded figures asking two simple questions: are you sure? And what if? These questions, although simple in nature, can lead to detrimental effects. As such, these two simple questions can trigger unhealthy levels of overthinking, which hyper fixate on negative feelings such as

nervousness, fear and insecurity. Consequently, these can affect mood, wellbeing and functionality. The placement of the image, as above (or behind) the individual signifies the constant feeling of doubt, that is present at the back of one's mind. My personal experience with anxiety is showcased in this work, where I constantly feel my mind is haunted by unknown figures, fuelling doubts and 'unnecessary' worries. Therefore, this illustrates how these simple thoughts can evolve daunting ones, inhibiting one's ability to function or control.

### About the Artwork – Mental Health – Depression

Lastly, the image on the right depicts the state of depression. My interpretation of depression stems from a strong sense of being alone. Moreover, the circular sphere encapsulates the dark state you seem to enter during a depressive episode. Similarly, to the other two components, there is a bewitching figure controlling and altering the atmosphere. As such, the individual is trying to shut out the atmosphere around it, attempting to protect itself from the effects of bewitching hand. The commonality between these pieces (which is the power of these external beings controlling you) demonstrates the loss of control during these dark periods or episodes. As such, I wanted to highlight this perspective of mental health, to demonstrate and highlight the misconception of mental health as being something that can be easily adjusted. As there does exist, some misunderstanding over mental health as something that can be easily fixed by diet, sleep, etc. [I do acknowledge how these factors do also exacerbate or improve mental health; however, I intend to demonstrate the complexity of mental health as beyond one's control.] Therefore, this common theme within these three areas of mental health emphasises the complexity and struggles individuals may be facing but have been compelled to restrain from seeking help or talking about mental health due to cultural behaviours or values.

## Relevance to Course Content – The Asian Experience

Although this piece touches on issues that were not discussed during the course, it emphasises the unique mental health experience the Asian community have. Furthermore, the choice of this piece to reflect the identity of a small Southeast Asian diasporic community calls for intersectional research. Tiwari and Wang's (2008) research differentiates the different ethnic groups within Asia and explores their experiences with mental health services. Similarly, more research needs to consider the diversity within Asian communities. This will discourage over-generalisations within the community and highlight inhibiting factors to mental health access that may be unique to each community. This is a rather exhaustive approach, however very necessary to create a better understanding of mental health and promote more appropriate mental health strategies amongst the Asian community, who possess different cultural values than western ideals.

Furthermore, this piece also touches on the importance of dialogue. There needs to be a safe space within the Asian community to share and create a dialogue concerning mental health. Virdee (2020) highlighted the importance of starting a dialogue on mental health, promoting a better understanding of mental health. I personally did not have the right terminology to have a conversation about mental until two or three years ago. As such, it is important to support programs and initiatives that educate the public on the proper terminology to start these conversations. In particular, language translations continue to be one of the biggest barriers that inhibit conversations surrounding mental health. Therefore, supporting these initiatives, whether through monetary means or social media presence, can help to expand important terminologies within different languages to equip different communities to start having these conversations.

## References (APA)

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