

Cross-Cultural Differences in the Use of Online Mental Health Support Forums

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Mental health forums exist as a result of a growing global need for quality mental health care combined with a large treatment gap, but **little is known about the impact of cultural identity on how people use online forums, express their mental health, or provide support.**

 r/depression

 r/SuicideWatch



Given the international nature of these online forums, how does culture affect forum use?

Background and Research Motivation

- Culture, gender, race, and class can all have significant impact on how people come to understand their experience and express mental health, such as use of somatic terms to refer to depression [1]
- Given significant identity-based differences in experience, natural question is how cultural identity interplays with social support practices in mental health forums.
- Based on past research on cultural differences in mental health [2] and their popularity on Talklife (an online mental health forum), we select three countries (India, Malaysia and Philippines) and present a comparative analysis of use of the platform

References

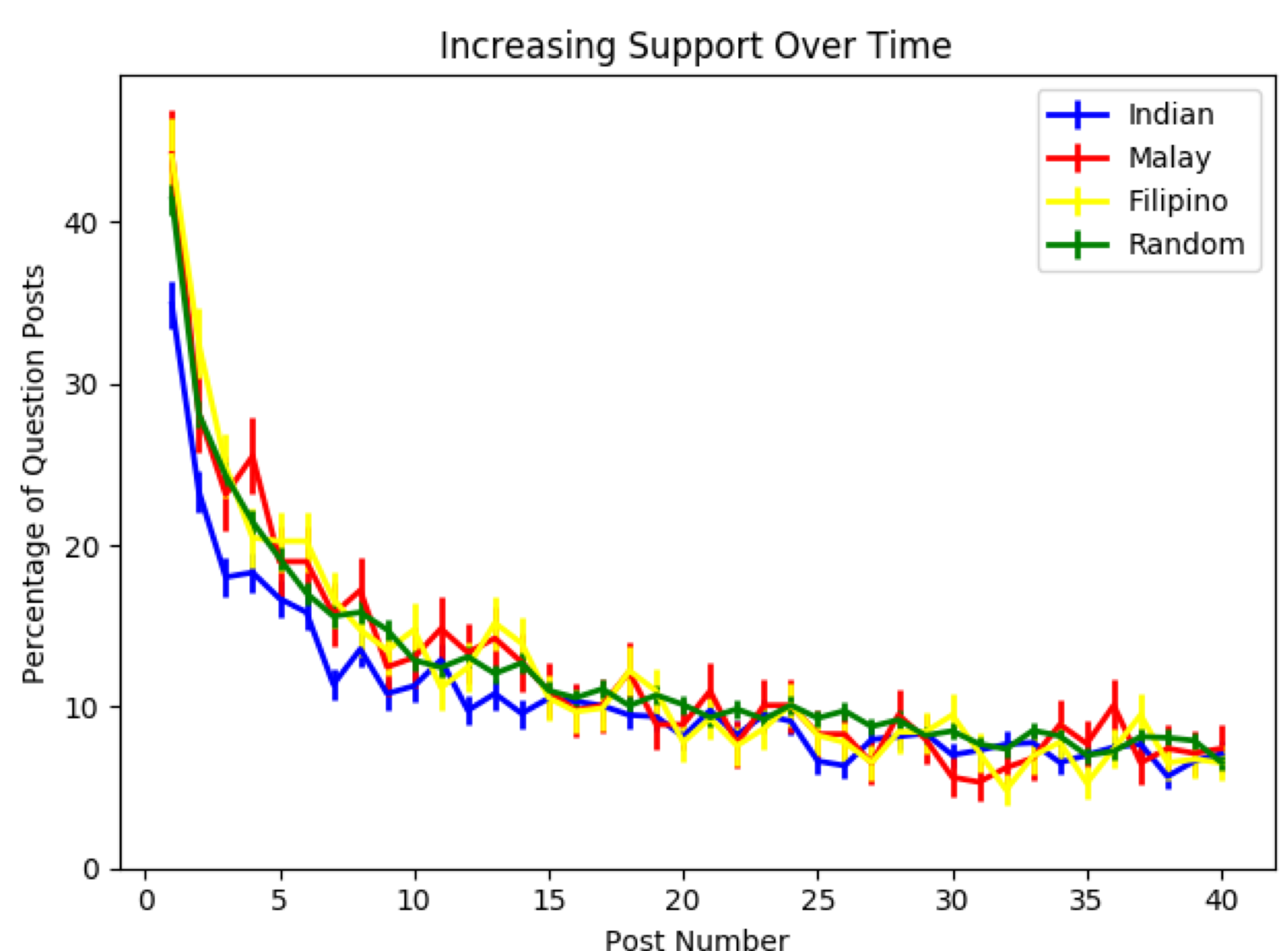
- [1] Kleinman, A., & Kleinman, J. (1985). Somatization: The Interconnections in Chinese Society among Culture, Depressive Experiences, and the Meanings of Pain. *Culture and depression: Studies in the anthropology and cross-cultural psychiatry of affect and disorder*, 16, 429.
- [2] De Choudhury, M., Sharma, S. S., Logar, T., Eekhout, W., & Nielsen, R. C. (2017, February). Gender and cross-cultural differences in social media disclosures of mental illness. In *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing* (pp. 353-369). ACM.

Findings

- **Does culture have an impact on the type of language used?**
 - Yes, people from all three countries analyzed have lower levels of clinical mental health language in posts (compared to a random sample of users)
- **Does use of medical terms increase over time?**
 - Not really --- the use of clinical language overall stays constant over time, regardless of poster country of origin
- **Does country of origin come up when people start using the forum?**
 - Indian and Malaysian users mention their country in their first post more often than the random sample
 - Indian, Malaysian, and Filipino users were significantly more likely than baseline (between 16x to 40x) to participate in a thread started by someone from their country of origin
- **Do people seeking help eventually become supporters?**
 - Yes! With continued use, the number of people asking questions decreases dramatically. See figure below!
 - All comparisons above are with high statistical significance

	India	Malaysia	The Philippines	Random
Percentage of questions with clinical language	14.20%	17.50%	17.10%	22.20%
Percentage of answers with clinical language	6.60%	7.30%	7.90%	8.60%
Percentage of first posts with mention of country	1.20%	1.20%	0.30%*	0.40%

* Not statistically significant



Implications and Future Work

- Most research done in mental health has been on participants in Western countries, studying cultural differences can help us understand how to generalize those findings
- **Our work shows that there are identity based differences in how people use online mental health forums**
- People from minority countries mention their country more often and have lower levels of clinical mental health language used. People also tend to become supporters over time, and are more likely to communicate with people from their country
- Need deeper qualitative and on-the-ground analysis, and better analysis of pathways to success on the platform