

Exploring Mental Health using Narrative Techniques among Performing Art Students in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how narrative techniques are used and how they affect Malaysian performing arts students' mental health. This study fills a major knowledge gap regarding mental health in the Malaysian performing arts community, as most of the previous research has focused on physical health and Western contexts. The study investigates the coping strategies that these students employ, the themes that are expressed, and how they use narrative techniques to communicate their experiences with mental health. Twelve Malaysian performing arts students, ages 20 to 25, representing a range of gender identities, participate in the study using semi-structured interviews and purposive sampling. Three main conclusions emerge from thematic analysis: students struggle with what to reveal in their narratives out of fear of being judged or misunderstood; narrative techniques, like writing and performance, are essential for managing and coping with mental health challenges; and narrative techniques help dispel societal misconceptions about mental health, promote empathy, and increase awareness. This qualitative study offers a more comprehensive, contextually appropriate framework for mental health support in Malaysia's performing arts industry. Incorporating narrative techniques fosters emotional development and healing, indicating that this method may prove beneficial for managing mental health challenges. The results, however, are unique to students in

the performing arts and cannot be applied to other populations. Future studies should involve a wider range of participants and investigate the long-term impacts of narrative techniques. Training facilitators may also improve these practices' therapeutic effects.

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health challenges are a serious global concern, especially among young adults traversing the world of academic, professional, and personal growth (Halat et al. 2023; Moitra et al., 2023). Mental health challenges seem to often remain undetected because many are oblivious when experiencing symptoms of mental health challenges. Moreover, in some societies, the stigma of 'insanity' associated with mental health prevents people from actively seeking information and ends up being a barrier to effective intervention (Ahad et al., 2023; Samsudin et al., 2023).

Performing arts students represent a unique section of individuals whose mental well-being is closely entwined with the demands and expression of their craft. These students experience their own distinct challenges that can impact their wellbeing with some of said challenges relating to creative training which can consist of long hours (Lee et al., 2023). Recent studies recorded a clear trend for increased mental health challenges across the performing arts (Equity, 2022). Employing narrative techniques in addressing mental health has gained traction in the past few years because of the nature of techniques which allow individuals to introspect, articulate and deal with mental health challenges through unconventional means of exploration and expression.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of studying mental health among Malaysian performing

arts undergraduates, narrative therapy techniques were integrated into a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy framework (CBT), which is a widely researched and applied psychotherapeutic approach that focuses on the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. Narrative approaches allow individuals to externalise their setbacks and reflect on their life stories, which helps them detect recurring patterns of thought that impact their emotional experiences (Bastemur & Bas, 2021). Students communicate their inner thoughts and emotional problems through expressive storytelling and reflective discussion, making their cognitive processes apparent and assisting in re-evaluation. This approach is consistent with CBT's goal of cognitive restructuring, as it allows individuals to challenge negative self-beliefs and restructure their narratives to reflect more empowering perspectives.

Through the exploration of their personal ideas about stress, anxiety, and performance pressure, students can get insight into how their thought habits affect their mental health and create improved coping methods. According to CBT, psychological distress is frequently caused by maladaptive thinking patterns, which can be observed and adjusted to enhance emotional regulation and behavioural implications (Rosal, 2018). The cognitive principle is central to CBT, and it states that how people perceive or interpret a situation has a significant impact on how they feel and act. For example, a performing arts student who interprets a performance critique as a

reflection of personal failure may experience increased anxiety or sadness, affecting future performances and self-worth.

Mental Health Challenges in Performing Arts Students

The scientific evidence points to a global deterioration in mental health, notably among university students, with performing arts students confronting distinct stressors such as performance anxiety, intense preparation, and public scrutiny (Emmerton et al., 2023). Performing arts, which include dance, music, theatre, and comedy, are important representations of human emotion and cultural identity that increase society well-being through mainstream media, communal rituals, and personal catharsis (Bascomb, 2019; Cid-Vega & Brown, 2023). Both creators and audiences gain from artistic engagement in terms of mental health: artists express themselves creatively, while audiences feel connection and relief (Clift, 2020; Gupta, 2020). Studies further suggest that acting fosters self-confidence, reduces anxiety, and strengthens social bonds (Perkins et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the demands of artistic training and performance pose significant psychological risks. Performance anxiety, caused by fear of negative evaluation, is widespread and exacerbated by occupational stressors common to the creative industries (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). These fields face greater psychosocial challenges than many other professions, including public exposure, competition, and criticism (Burak & Atabek, 2019; Détári et al., 2020). Musicians, for

example, report higher levels of anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders, as well as increased reliance on mental health services (Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Kegelaers et al., 2021; Vaag et al., 2015, 2016). Dancers face multiple pressures, including rigid body standards, demanding rehearsal schedules, and complex relationship dynamics within their companies. Physical demands, such as playing-related musculoskeletal disorders in musicians, further exacerbate stress and impair performance quality (Cruder et al., 2023; Niemeier & Larsen, 2020).

Stressors, both interpersonal and intrapersonal, play important roles. Collaborative environments require artists to manage relationships with peers, management, and audiences, where collegiality can boost innovation but competing agendas can strain mental health (Ozer & Zhang, 2021). Internally, perfectionistic tendencies promote achievement while increasing vulnerability to stress (Hays, 2017). Furthermore, creativity is associated with an increased risk of affective disorders, highlighting the dual nature of creative endeavors as both therapeutic and destabilizing (Ginis et al., 2022; Kyaga et al., 2012).

Performing artists experience unique psychological stressors associated with embodying characters and narratives, which can blur their individual identities and exacerbate emotional strain (Cid-Vega & Brown, 2023; Bascomb, 2019). Narrative techniques, such as storytelling, self-narratives, and verbal/written expression, can be used to reframe identity, challenge

dominant narratives, and view struggles as possibilities for growth (White & Epston, 1990; Jean-Berluce, 2024; Macapugay & Nakamura, 2024). These methods have been linked to increased emotional well-being, decreased stress, and improved coping skills, thereby aligning therapeutic and artistic goals (Jean-Berluce, 2024).

Performing arts students utilize these techniques to meet their psychological and creative needs. Autobiographical work allows them to redefine their identities through self-reflection, whereas role-playing provides structured approaches to confronting difficult emotions (Pendzik et al., 2016; Moreno, 1946). Improvisation serves both therapeutic and artistic purposes, transforming one's own struggles into creative material (Boal, 1995). Collaborative processes, like group storytelling, foster resiliency and cohesion, preparing students to handle the emotional demands of their training (Pendzik et al., 2016).

Ethical considerations are critical when incorporating personal narratives into performance. Kandil (2016) emphasises the importance of emotional security and agency, especially for students who are vulnerable during creative processes.

Dynamic narrativity—the transformative power of storytelling to reframe trauma and identity—provides performing arts students with a structured approach to addressing mental health issues related to personal challenges and public scrutiny (Brown, 2021). Although the therapeutic benefits of these methods are widely established, little is known about their pedagogical

potential. There is a gap between the availability of techniques like role-playing and autobiographical storytelling and their actual use in classrooms since students frequently lack the direction they need to use them successfully. This disparity highlights the need for focused instruction and curriculum integration by limiting students' access to narrative techniques for identity formation, creativity, and interpersonal development (Baim, 2017; Kandil, 2016; Radić & Hren, 2022).

Adoption of narrative techniques is further complicated by cultural and ethical considerations. Practices such as self-revelatory theatre, rooted in Western individualist frameworks (Boal, 1995; White & Epston, 1990), may clash with collectivist values in contexts like Malaysia, where communal harmony and emotional restraint are prioritised. Particularly for students juggling their personal vulnerability with the public demands of their craft, ethical safeguards such as confidentiality and stigma mitigation are essential in such settings (Kandil, 2016; Cid-Vega & Brown, 2023; Loong et al., 2024). Techniques like improvisation or collaborative storytelling run the risk of alienating participants or reiterating preexisting barriers to mental health support in the absence of culturally appropriate protocols.

There are still unanswered questions about the particular stressors that distinguish performing arts students from other artistic populations, such as identity confusion and performance anxiety (Macapugay & Nakamura, 2024). Furthermore, little is

known about how narrative techniques are adapted across cultures, especially in non-Western contexts. For instance, autobiographical practices requiring personal disclosure may be difficult for Malaysian students navigating collectivist norms, underscoring the need for approaches that balance cultural expectations with individual expression (Loong et al., 2024). The global applicability of current frameworks is also limited by the lack of research on the effectiveness of role-playing in societies affected by conflict as opposed to stable areas.

Future studies should prioritize performing arts students in Malaysia, focusing on three key areas: (1) how cultural norms shape engagement with techniques like improvisation or psychodrama, (2) strategies to adapt Western-derived methods to collectivist values, and (3) the role of narrative practices in reducing mental health stigma. By addressing these gaps, researchers can develop tailored approaches that empower students to externalize struggles while respecting cultural boundaries—a critical step toward fostering resilience in a high-pressure, public-facing discipline.

In conclusion, despite the promising potential of narrative techniques to help deal with mental health concerns in Performing Arts students, the actual utilisation in different cultural contexts within this group is deeply lacking and that gap is even more evident when it comes to the Malaysian context. By filling these gaps, researchers can contribute to a more inclusive and

contextually relevant framework for supporting mental health through narrative practices in Malaysia.

METHODS

Reflexivity in this paper includes personal characteristics of the primary researcher as a postgraduate counselling student with qualifications in Psychology and Counselling and a strong research background alongside an ardent academic interest in creative arts and mental health. The other co-researchers did not have any direct contact or relationship with the participants except for one of the co-researchers who is a lecturer to the same group of students. However, there was no direct contact between them throughout the research process. Moreover, even though the primary researcher/interviewer did not have any pre-existing relationship with any of the participants, certain commonalities like age range and university affiliation helped facilitate the rapport-building during interviews in addition to the said researcher's counselling knowledge.

All the participants were informed in advance about the researcher's qualifications as well as the purpose of the study before the interviews began. Reflexivity was consistently maintained all through the process by the researcher by keeping record of it and reviewing notes. By reflecting in such ways, the researcher could be more conscious of their standpoint and comprehend emotional responses and identify any potential biases that could impact the interpretation of data. Thus, the risk of subjective bias was reduced, and

transparency was maintained through these efforts (Zainal Abidin et al., 2024).

Study Design

The theoretical framework for this study was informed by a combination of narrative inquiry and phenomenological approaches. The narrative approach was well-suited to understand how performing arts students find and present their account of and meaning about mental health through means of storytelling. Concurrently, the phenomenological lens enabled the researchers to focus on the lived experiences and individual interpretation of participants. Together this framework allowed for a profound and authentic exploration of narrative techniques as both tools for expression and coping mechanisms (Aren & Sambasivan, 2021; Trahar, 2013).

Participant Selection

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that the participants met the study's specific objectives. Malaysian performing arts students from the ages eighteen and above, belonging to diverse ethnic backgrounds and from various performance disciplines such as theatre, music, and dance, were invited to take part. All participants needed to have had experience in using narrative techniques to express or cope with mental health challenges, either now or in the past. In total, about twelve participants were selected. They reflected a gender-diverse group which included five female, five male, and two non-binary individuals. The sample included

both undergraduate students in their second, third, and final years, as well as postgraduate students, thus presenting a wide spectrum of academic and life experiences within the performing arts sphere (Shaheen et al., 2018).

Inclusion Criteria

Participants were chosen based on their current enrolment as Malaysian performing arts students, aged eighteen years or older, and especially if they used narrative techniques to explore or cope with mental health issues. Sufficient language proficiency was also a requirement so that they would be able to properly articulate their experiences. Lastly, but most importantly those who were willing to provide their informed consent were included. Cultural sensitivity and respect for personal narrative styles was emphasised all through the recruitment and data collection process

Cultural sensitivity and respect for individual narrative styles was emphasised throughout the recruitment and data collection process. The co-researchers worked together to create the interview guide and ensure that each question was worded carefully to be neutral, inclusive, and unbiased. The questions were open-ended and enabled participants to share their personal experiences in their own terms thereby allowing for a variety of cultural identities and storytelling practices. For example, rather than asking participants to describe specific symptoms of a mental health condition they might have experienced, the questions were framed

to let them reflect about their emotional experiences and how they made sense of them through their creative expression. This approach made for a non-directive, participant-led dialogue that honoured personal expression and minimised the risk of cultural or psychological bias from the interviewer's perspective (Lie-A-Ling et al., 2023).

Setting and Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which took place either online via Zoom, depending on the participants' preferences. The questions asked from the semi-structured interviews were reflective of the research questions and objectives ensuring that it was accurate to the aim of the study. During each interview session only the interviewer and the participant were present. The guide used for the interview was flexible yet focused where needed to properly explore topics like individual mental health experiences, creative identity, stigma and coping strategies, as well as their respective support systems. The interview duration was from 45-75 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. To later perform thematic and narrative analyses, the verbatim transcriptions of the recordings were also produced.

Ethics and Consent

The ethical approval for this study was obtained from the university's ethics review committee. The potential participants were

given the chance to voice any concerns they had before the interviews began. All participants were informed about confidentiality of their information, the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw from the study at any point. The participants were asked for their written informed consent, and were provided with a participation sheet that details the title of the study, names of researchers involved and the aim of the study. Furthermore, to ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used for their names in the paper. The participants in need of university counselling services were provided.

Data Analysis

This study employed thematic narrative analysis to evaluate both the structure (how) and content (what) of the narratives that were presented. The analysis involved a structured, iterative process wherein the researcher reviewed the verbatim transcripts for initial open coding. These codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories and patterns were distinguished in narrative arcs and storytelling techniques; utilising phenomenological approach, thematic analysis identified recurring patterns and themes in participant data, offering a more thorough explanation of their experiences. This combined approach allowed the researchers to understand what the participants shared and how they conveyed their experiences to reveal deeper emotional and cognitive insights related to mental health (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was supported through several strategies. To confirm the accuracy of the interpretation’s member checking was employed with the participants. The researchers also undertook peer debriefing sessions so as to refine the codes and emerging themes. During the whole process an audit trail was consistently maintained to document the researchers’ analytic decisions and coding processes alongside the interviewer’s journaling notes. Triangulation was used across participant narratives that helped to further identify recurring themes and patterns, offering clarity and coherence in understanding their experiences. These strategies have improved the credibility, transparency and overall analytical depth of the research.

Reporting

The results and findings were reported with direct quotations from participants to

demonstrate major themes and emotional tone within their narratives. Each quote was shared with proper context to present the participant’s voice in a clear and comprehensible manner.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographics

The age range of the respondents was 20 to 25 years old (see Table 1). The age groupings were distributed as follows: five being female and five being male, with two more identifying as non-binary. This was done to accurately represent the experiences of each gender. The age range was to encompass a wide variety of student life experiences within the performing arts programme and comprised students from their second year, third and final year as well as postgraduates. The respondents wholly comprised performing art students.

Table 1
Demographic table

Participants	Age	Gender	Academic Year (out of 3)
Angela	23	Female	Post-Grad
Shane	22	Male	3
Courtney	25	Female	3
Arasha	21	Female	2
Spencer	20	Male	3
Tommy	21	Male	2
Amanda	21	Female	3
Anthony	25	Male	3
Erin	23	Non-Binary	Post-Grad
Rekha	21	Non-Binary	2
Alex	22	Male	3
Erica	22	Female	2

Results

The findings of this study were categorised into key themes and subthemes that emerged using thematic analysis. Each theme is supported by subthemes and illustrative quotes from the interview that provide insight into the participants' use of narrative techniques.

The first theme discussed narrative techniques, such as writing and performance that serve as vital tools in managing and coping with mental health challenges and links to how these techniques provide a method for both expressing and processing emotions. The second theme elaborated on the difficulties the participants face when deciding what to reveal in their narratives and explores the internal conflict of being open and the fear of judgment or misunderstanding. The third theme explores the participants' use of narrative techniques to help them cope and the aim to raise awareness about mental health struggles. The sharing of their stories inspire hope to foster empathy and challenge societal misconceptions.

Table 2 indicates the first theme of the findings, which is narrative techniques as a coping mechanism for mental health struggles. The first theme found that for most of the participants, narrative techniques came naturally to them and it was difficult to identify a specific narrative technique that they were applying to their struggles. All the participants agreed that writing and performing acted as a form of cathartic release and the narratives created were symbolic of navigating stressors that

emerged in real life and thus representative of their mental health struggles. Based on Subtheme 1 (Writing and Performing as A Form of Cathartic Release). The participants stated that writing, particularly monologues, served as a cathartic process. This allowed the release of pent-up emotions and organisation of thoughts, providing a sense of relief. This manifested in the use of repetition in their narratives to weave scattered thoughts into something more manageable. A similar sentiment was shared by another participant who likened the repetition to increasing intensity that allowed the normalisation of mental health struggles she was facing.

Another participant shared the same point of view of being able to normalise their mental health struggles that emerged from daily interpersonal conflicts through narrative techniques by integrating their experiences into the scripts they wrote. Performance whether through dance or monologues, was another popular form of cathartic release for the participants as it served as an outlet to release emotional tension. This narrative technique allowed the participants to express feelings that are difficult to articulate in words.

The second subtheme (Symbolic Narratives to Navigate Stress) detailed how the participants utilise their narratives to externalise stress and anxiety, creating a symbolic representation of their mental health struggles. This enabled addressing difficult feelings by transforming it into tangible forms such as a monologue or performance piece that could be controlled

and manipulated. One participant likened it to a form of escapism where stress could be channelled. Interestingly, for one participant, this was not the case. She felt pressured for

Table 2
Interview findings on narrative techniques

Theme	Sub-Themes	Quotes
Narrative Techniques as a Coping Mechanism for Mental Health Struggles	Writing and Performing As A Form of Cathartic Release	<p>“...the more that you do it the more that you still feel it, but less likely as how you felt that the first time...and you will find eventually the balance of how you cope with it.” (Shane, 22, 3rd Year Student)</p> <p>“I can build the intensity of the lines when I say that, until it reaches a certain extent, and that could be really cathartic.” (Amanda, 21, 3rd Year Student)</p> <p>“I’ve directed like five different theatre plays and I tried to include like some problem that I have in life...it can be somewhat comical and kind of healing for myself to watch...it minimizes the problem.” (Erin, 23, Post-Graduate).</p> <p>“...one would be dance or more specifically movement...the physicality of it may help express or...have a release...of strong feelings we have inside.” (Spencer, 20, 3rd Year Student).</p>
	Symbolic Narratives to Navigate Stress	<p>“When I get to not restrict myself anymore. Whether it’s like screaming or experiencing a different life. It is like an escape.” (Anthony, 25, 3rd Year Student).</p> <p>“...after I joined the rehearsal, I couldn’t get what the director wants...what the actors want... After rehearsal, I just go somewhere like a park, and then I just cry it out.” (Courtney, 25, 3rd Year Student).</p>

trying to perform exactly how she intended and this added to her stress instead. The narrative involved taking from a personal experience of a tumultuous breakup. This increased the difficulty of expressing herself.

In conclusion, this theme emphasises how crucial narrative strategies like writing and performances are for handling mental health struggles. Writing, particularly monologues, offers a cathartic release and aids in mental organisation, which is relieving. An outlet for emotional strain, performance which includes dance and monologues, allows for the expression of feelings that are difficult to convey through words. These techniques allow the participants to externalise stress and worry and transform their mental health struggles into manageable physical forms. All things considered, narrative strategies work well for processing and managing challenging emotions.

Table 3 indicates the second theme of the findings, The Challenges of Vulnerability and Boundaries in Expressing Mental Health. The second theme found that the participants detail their fear of being misunderstood, the need to set personal boundaries when expressing themselves through narrative techniques, and to protect their mental health by distancing themselves from the narratives. This theme examined the difficulties they may face when enacting said distance.

Based on Subtheme 1 (Navigating the Fear of Misunderstanding), the participants expressed concern that others may misinterpret their mental health struggles,

particularly when their external appearance contradicts their internal experiences. This fear leads to hesitation in fully sharing their emotional world through narrative techniques. One such participant noted that they presented a jovial personality but contradicted the narratives used to express themselves.

Interestingly, one participant did not share the same sentiment. The ability to change his appearance and his acting for a play by employing narrative techniques enabled him to chase his ideal image of what he wished to be in high school. He detailed the ease and fluidity of assuming different roles that helped him discover himself.

Based on Subtheme 2 (Setting Personal Boundaries), this subtheme detailed the existing struggle between wanting to share deeply personal feelings through their narrative techniques and maintaining boundaries to protect themselves from overexposure. This overexposure caused a sensation of overwhelming and threatened non-personalisation of their narratives.

Most participants discussed taboos of broaching topics that would seem sensitive to others needing increased research and preparation. One participant echoed this sentiment. They mentioned about the importance of being educated on the topic and the difficulty of walking the fine line for sensitive topics such as rape.

Personal boundaries of not presenting too much started to become important, especially when the topics concerned themselves personally. One participant explored their personal experience with

Table 3
Interview findings on challenges of vulnerability and boundaries in expressing mental health

Theme	Sub-Themes	Quotes
The Challenges of Vulnerability and Boundaries in Expressing Mental Health	Navigating the Fear of Misunderstanding	<p><i>"I feel like me talking about my mental health when my personality I would say is very bubbly...I think that is...a big hole for people."</i> (Rekha, 21, 2nd Year Student).</p> <p><i>"I would use appearances...it really showed me how I felt of my high school self...it just helped you realise more of myself."</i> (Tommy, 21, 2nd Year Student).</p>
	Setting Personal Boundaries	<p><i>You have to be educated in those topics...it's a very fine line cause I feel like there's a way to do it respectfully. for example like, rape."</i> (Angela, 23, Post-Graduate).</p> <p><i>"talking about a personal experience...showing depression and anxiety...depends which part of my life story...I am actually trying to relate that to. I am a bit personal in that sense."</i> (Arasha, 21, 2nd Year Student).</p> <p><i>"I'm fine with showing what's racism like. In many narratives...I have been through that and I still go through that. I think they all are fair game for me to tackle."</i> (Alex, 22, 3rd Year Student).</p>
	Self-Protective Distance in Narratives	<p><i>"it's sort of a balancing act...there always has to be the separation of the character and yourself...because if not...where does the character end and where do you begin?"</i> (Spencer, 20, 3rd Year Student).</p> <p><i>"We have a safe space into telling our stories and being protected. Our feelings are being protected."</i> (Alex, 22, 3rd Year Student).</p> <p><i>"suddenly you're sat at the corner of your bed, staring at the wall, like, oh my God, that's heavy."</i> (Erin, 23, Post-Graduate).</p>

depression and anxiety in which they are diagnosed for, feeling that it is increasingly difficult to be open on stage as these struggles are personal to them.

Interestingly, this sentiment was not shared by one participant who experienced

racism and prejudice. Approaching these taboo topics allowed him to express himself. He mentioned that experiencing it daily made it fair for him to tackle in his narratives.

Subtheme 3 (Self-Protective Distance in Narratives) explores the need of the

participants to protect their emotional well-being by creating a degree of separation between their real experiences and what they portray in their writing or performance.

One participant stressed the importance of separation as getting into a specific character's headspace in their performance or narratives can be damaging to self-identity. The participant felt that not distancing himself from a role invited a blending of self-identity issues and relatability that could be dangerous for one's mental health.

Another participant discussed how the distance also comes from a professional setting. Feelings being protected meant that he can fully embody his narratives. He felt that the safe space that the crew enabled through their professionalism on set or on the stage protected his feelings when he performed.

Conversely, one participant finds it difficult to distance themselves from their character as their narratives consist of their personal mental health struggles and this can affect them deeply after performing. They mentioned isolating themselves and ruminating that the role weighed on them.

In conclusion, the participants' narratives demonstrate their difficulty disclosing themselves while striking a balance between openness and fear of judgement. They are reluctant to completely disclose because they fear that their mental health struggles will be misunderstood. They uphold boundaries and keep their actual experiences apart from their public image in order to protect themselves. They

can manage their mental health and safely communicate their struggles with this method.

Table 4 indicates the third theme of the findings, Narrative Techniques as a platform to Raise Awareness and Foster Empathy. This theme examined how the participants aimed to raise awareness about mental health struggles. This manifested through developing empathy through sharing of experiences, challenging social stigmas and empowerment by being vulnerable.

Based on Subtheme 1 (Building Empathy Through Shared Experiences), the participants believe that their narratives create an opportunity for others to connect with their own struggles, allowing for greater empathy and understanding of mental health issues. Many participants believed that by showcasing their mental health struggles on stage, they would be able to help others who were going through the same difficulties thereby creating relatability and encouraging discussion.

One participant detailed her experience writing her rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*. Audience members looked for the actors after the performance and she found this touching. The sight of seeing audience members younger than her crying and approaching them in relatability was significant.

Another participant echoed this sentiment as the narratives of their mental health struggles invited discussion of surface presentation of emotions. They felt that their narrative helped their audience realise that mental health is not only outwardly shown but internally as well.

Table 4
Interview findings on raise awareness and foster empathy

Theme	Sub-Themes	Quotes
Narrative Techniques as a platform to Raise Awareness and Foster Empathy	Building Empathy Through Shared Experiences	<i>“And I remember seeing little girls crying feeling touched and then they wanted to come and say hi to my friend that acted as Romeo and to the girl that played my Juliet.” (Angela, 23, Post-Graduate).</i> <i>“It helps people understand... mental health, because it’s not just about what they see on the outside.” (Rekha, 21, 2nd Year Student).</i> <i>“it can be quite painful for the audience to watch. So I think it's a very flexible line. It's like you're trying to give your audience entertainment, but they end up being traumatised.” (Erica, 22, 2nd Year Student).</i>
	Challenging Societal Stigmas Around Mental Health	<i>“...I find easier to express through narratives is all the internal thoughts going in my head...what I want to say to my past self... what I'm feeling right now.” (Tommy, 21, 2nd Year Student.)</i> <i>“...obviously the LGBTQ presence in this country is not the best. I was hoping maybe it could be something that could inspire discussion.” (Erin, 23, Post-Graduate).</i>
	Empowering Others Through Vulnerability	<i>“Telling my own story and it kind of affects me...makes me embarrassed, because... public audience won't know that it's my story. I myself know I'm telling my story and some of my friends.” (Courtney, 25, 3rd Year Student).</i> <i>I'm not as confident in my narratives...it's more linked to myself. I can definitely see some people...seeing the bigger picture...I don't really have a message to give to the audience. I just want to show them a good time. (Tommy, 21, 2nd Year Student).</i>

One participant did not share this sentiment. She found it difficult to balance building empathy through shared experiences out of fear of making her narratives too relatable and therefore too realistic. The fear stems from trying to entertain her audience but in turn, traumatising them instead.

Subtheme 2 (Challenging Societal Stigmas Around Mental Health), explores the participants seeking to challenge the stigma that surrounds mental health struggles being only visible through extreme behaviours or outward signs through their narratives. They want to show that internal struggles are just as valid and significant.

A participant explained how creative narratives of how he sees himself allowed him to be more honest with his feelings. He found it easier to express his mental health through internal thoughts in his head. He related it to what he wanted to say to his past self and to what he is feeling at the moment.

There were parallels in another participant who spoke passionately about their experiences of being part of the LGBTQIA+ community and using that experience to challenge societal stigmas of mental health challenges. They felt that the LGBTQ presence in the country is rocky and that their narratives could inspire discussion about the topic.

Based on Subtheme 3 (Empowering Others Through Vulnerability), this subtheme sees the participants detailing their ability to share their mental health struggles through narratives by acting as a form of empowerment.

One participant discussed the difficulty of being vulnerable and the challenge of being overwhelmed at the same time. She believes that being open and accepting the self-consciousness that comes from subjecting oneself to an audience helps others do the same. The telling of a personal story through narrative techniques affected her as it caused feelings of embarrassment that the general audience would not understand where she was coming from and only her friends and family would.

Conversely, one participant does not believe in passing on a message in his narratives. He felt he was not as confident in his narratives as the others in his cohort and

found his narratives to be deeply personal. As such, while he acknowledges that some audiences will see the bigger picture, he only wanted to entertain his audience instead of inspiring any sort of discussion.

In conclusion, the participants raise awareness and manage mental health issues by using narrative techniques. They tell their stories and hope to dispel social stereotypes, promote empathy, and show that internal conflicts are real. The hope of empowering others to open out and seek assistance encourages most participants to see their narrative as fostering more understanding and to formulate a more compassionate attitude toward mental health concerns.

The findings reported in the results show that narrative techniques used in performing arts are highly effective for performing art students to express themselves and inspire others to do the same. It is an important tool in understanding one's mental health.

DISCUSSION

The discussion parts emphasised the performing arts students' perception of their narrative practices in relation to mental health perspectives.

Narrative Techniques as Coping Mechanisms for Mental Health Struggles

The participants acknowledged that narrative techniques were cathartic. Through writing and performing, emotions are compartmentalised, providing a form of relief and clarity. As Shukla et al., (2022) states, "Art therapy, including narrative

techniques, provides a structured avenue for emotional regulation and psychological relief.” The repetitive nature of the exercise of sharing the narrative normalised the experience, creating a sense of control over the struggles. This is evident in the sharing of Shane and Amanda who shared that the narrative technique allowed them to process and structure their experience, helping them to release. In his seminal article, psychologist Pennebaker (1997) explains that when individuals confront and express deeply personal issues, the process, though often emotionally painful, can initiate healing by fostering physical health, enhancing subjective well-being, and encouraging adaptive behaviours.

Performance forms like theatre and dance, which are considered embodied forms of narrative technique, allowed participants who were more comfortable expressing in nonverbal mediums. Erin and Spencer for example explained how physical movement allowed them to externalize internal conflicts. It allowed them to express and release pent up emotions and provided an avenue to create meaningful works. Externalising emotions and memories render them more tangible, enabling individuals to examine their experiences from a new perspective. As Kearney (2007) observes, “One of the most enduring functions of narrative is catharsis. By telling our stories of suffering, we give shape to pain, we make it intelligible, and in doing so, we often find a measure of relief.” Rekha reflects on how audience perceptions of mental health shift when they witness performers externalizing

their internal struggles: “It helps people understand... mental health, because it’s not just about what they see on the outside” (Rekha, 21, 2nd-year student).

Golden et al., (2024) reiterates this statement while supporting youth mental health with arts-based strategies regarding art’s ability to support mental health, and calls for action to undertake critical research and its translation into accessible community practices.

Symbolic narratives helped participants deal with stress by allowing them to express their struggles through creative storytelling. This process enabled them to face and manage their emotions indirectly. Anthony described creating narratives to escape, showing how these methods can offer temporary relief and a new way of looking at real-life challenges. Courtney’s experience, however, showed that the results can vary. Her difficulty matching her narrative goals with her performance goals increased her stress, suggesting that the success of these methods may depend on personal factors and specific situations. White and Epston (1990) argue that “Narratives are most effective when aligned with individual circumstances and emotional readiness.”

Participants highlighted that their narratives allowed audiences to connect emotionally with their struggles, fostering empathy and awareness of mental health issues. Sharing personal experiences encouraged audiences to reflect on their own challenges, creating a sense of relatability. For example, Angela’s reinterpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* moved young audience

members to tears and prompted them to engage with the performers, demonstrating how narratives can forge meaningful emotional connections. Rekha emphasised the importance of addressing the gap between external appearances and internal struggles, showing that mental health issues are not always visible and encouraging audiences to think beyond surface-level judgments. This is congruent with the CBT framework as expressive storytelling allowed the participant to reflect on their life stories and the impact it had on their mental health on a deeper level. These shared experiences not only promote empathy but also spark discussions that can lead to greater understanding and reduced stigma. Balancing relatability with audience comfort remains a challenge.

Challenges of Vulnerability and Boundaries in Expressing Mental Health

Although narrative techniques provide therapeutic benefits, they can pose challenges connected to vulnerability and boundaries. When sharing personal experiences, participants expressed that they fear being misunderstood or judged. Rekha's concern about the discrepancy between her outwardly bubbly personality and the depth of her internal struggles illustrates how societal perceptions can inhibit open expression. Laukkanen et al., (2021) explain that "The ethical considerations in narrative practices require environments that support authenticity without compromising personal boundaries." This fear highlights the need

for creating supportive environments where individuals feel safe to disclose their emotions without fear of stigma.

This research also revealed the fine balance participants must strike between authenticity and self-protection. Setting personal boundaries emerged as a critical strategy for maintaining emotional well-being. Angela's emphasis on the importance of respecting sensitive topics like rape reflects the ethical and emotional considerations involved in narrative creation. Similarly, Arasha's hesitancy to fully share personal experiences related to depression and anxiety demonstrates the tension between the desire for openness and the need for privacy. This highlights the affinity for negative thought patterns and cognitive dissonance to develop causing conflicting emotions as well as behaviour.

Her reluctance to fully express herself reflects a cultural norm that discourages the open verbalisation of personal struggles. This poses a significant challenge to narrative writing efforts, highlighting the need to first address underlying cultural factors (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011).

Some participants found empowerment in addressing challenging topics, with Alex demonstrating how experiences of injustice can inspire purpose and advocacy through narratives, suggesting that storytelling can foster personal healing and social change. However, the concept of self-protective distance reveals the emotional challenges of narrative engagement; while Spencer emphasised the need to separate oneself from characters to prevent identity

conflicts and exhaustion, Erin's struggles with detachment from personal narratives highlight the psychological risks of merging lived experiences with performative storytelling. Lysaker et al. (2003) note that "Narrative transformation can lead to increased coherence in self-identity, which is crucial for individuals with mental health challenges."

Narrative Techniques to Raise Awareness and Foster Empathy

The participants' experience underscore how narrative techniques raise strong emotional responses, and promote a deeper sense of empathy. Angela shared how she felt touched during the narrative practice, indicating a personal connection to the narrative exercise. In addition, Rekha noted that narrative techniques enable a better comprehension of mental health. From the perspective of the audience, Erica discovered the narrative exercise could be painful, reflecting how witnessing vulnerability in a narrative can establish empathy. These observations support Shukla et al. (2022), who argue that "creative arts provide a lens for better comprehending others' emotional landscapes," confirming that engaging with personal stories helps individuals step into others' experiences and feel a stronger emotional connection. Similarly, Wood et al., (2019) reported that drama-based narrative interventions significantly enhanced empathy levels in participants by immersing them in emotional experiences, particularly when those experiences reflected vulnerability and

authenticity. This supports the Malaysian participants' observations, indicating a universal function of narrative arts in fostering emotional connection.

The narrative techniques also emphasised challenging societal stigma on mental health. Through narrative techniques, participants were able to express their internal thoughts, which can be useful in highlighting societal stigma. The sharing of stories allowed participants to express thoughts and feelings often hidden under social expectations. For instance, Tommy acknowledged that the storytelling process allowed him to articulate internal struggles that usually remain unspoken in Malaysian society. Erin expressed a desire to discuss sensitive topics, such as LGBTQ+ issues. She hoped narrative practice could be a medium for raising awareness and promoting acceptance. These responses align with Nurser et al. (2018), who note that "personal storytelling in mental health recovery can be a highly meaningful experience and an important part of the individual's recovery journey." However, as Ng et al., (2020) highlight in a Southeast Asian context, cultural norms often discourage open emotional disclosure due to shame and family honour. Despite this, the Malaysian participants in this study embraced narrative practice to subvert these norms, using storytelling as a tool for social dialogue and visibility. Together, the findings suggest that narrative exercises provide space for self-expression and facilitate open discussion of stigmatised issues in the Malaysian context.

Another important theme was empowerment through vulnerability.

Courtney reported being deeply affected by expressing her story, which underscores the cathartic effect of narrative techniques. Meanwhile, Tommy expressed a lack of confidence in his narrative. He just intended to perform an engaging experience for the audiences to reflect a meaningful experience to connect and inspire others. This contrast illustrates how vulnerability can both empower the storyteller and connect with others. In sum, these storytelling experiences appeared to reinforce transformative processes within the creative arts setting. This mirrors McLeod's (2015) argument that storytelling functions as both a therapeutic and communal process, allowing individuals not only to process trauma but also to build relational empathy and solidarity. The participants' dual experiences of self-doubt and transformation echo this layered dynamic. The study's findings point to practical implications for the Malaysian performing arts community: incorporating narrative storytelling into arts education could promote emotional growth, empathy, and healing among students.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to explore the adaptability of narrative techniques on mental health. A total of 12 performing arts students participated through semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated three primary themes emerged, categorised as narrative techniques as a coping mechanism for mental health struggles, the challenges of vulnerability and boundaries in expressing mental health, and narrative

techniques as a platform to raise awareness and foster empathy. The findings were aligned with the principles of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) which support the notion that cognitive perspectives influenced reflective storytelling. Therefore, narrative techniques can be applied for emotional expression. In conclusion, this study provides valuable contributions on how narrative techniques can be applied within mental health support, particularly in the performing arts context. Future research could further assess the effectiveness of narrative techniques in diverse settings, providing a broader insight of mental health interventions. Such research would not only enhance the principles understanding of narrative techniques but also offer practical interventions to align the unique needs of various settings.

Implications of the Study

The findings suggested that combining narrative techniques into performing arts can be an effective approach to addressing mental health concerns. These techniques give a unique and efficient way of raising awareness and creating empathy by improving coping mechanisms and recognising the difficulties associated with expressing mental health. This promotes emotional resilience among individuals. Students can explore and explain their own experiences and feelings in a supportive and creative atmosphere by engaging in narrative activities.

This process helps students understand and manage their mental health and also

fosters a sense of community and mutual understanding among peers. According to Agres and Chen (2024), "Integrating narrative practices into educational frameworks can profoundly impact emotional and psychological resilience", emphasising the methods' enormous potential to improve students' well-being and mental health.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

It is important to highlight that the study was limited to performing arts students and did not include veteran actors or persons who were already established in the profession. The conclusions are based on each participant's individual expressions and experiences, rendering them inapplicable to a larger group. This means that, while the findings are enlightening, they cannot be generalised uniformly to diverse groups in the performing arts or elsewhere.

To improve and expand on this research, future studies should investigate the long-term effects of narrative techniques with a more diverse set of participants, including individuals with substantial performing arts experience. Furthermore, incorporating training modules for trainers may enhance the therapeutic impacts of these practices by ensuring that facilitators are well-equipped to guide participants effectively. White and Epston (1990) state that "narrative practices applied within the performing arts represent a compelling avenue for emotional expression and social change," emphasising the importance of expanding this research to understand its broader impact and potential

for fostering emotional and psychological resilience across various contexts.

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