

From Medical Healing to Emotional Discourse: Semantic Shift of “Chữa Lành” in Contemporary Vietnamese

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the semantic evolution of the Vietnamese term “chữa lành” (healing) within contemporary discourse. Originally confined to medical contexts denoting physical treatment and recuperation, the term has increasingly permeated broader spheres pertaining to mental well-being, self-care, and lifestyle practices, particularly within digital media environments. Grounded in theoretical frameworks of semantic change, cognitive linguistics, and socio-cultural discourse analysis, this study explores how “chữa lành” has transcended its clinical origins to become a cultural keyword in modern Vietnamese communication.

Employing a qualitative approach, the analysis integrates semantic examination with cognitive linguistics, specifically drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the model of radial categories. The findings reveal that the semantic broadening of “chữa lành” embodies a conceptual reconfiguration, wherein emotional and psychological experiences are structured and understood through metaphors derived from physical healing processes. Concurrently, the pervasive influence of therapeutic discourse in digital culture has been instrumental in normalizing “chữa lành” as a lifestyle paradigm centered on self-care, emotional management, and aesthetically-driven personal experiences.

The study posits that the semantic expansion of “chữa lành” serves as a compelling illustration of the dynamic interplay between language, cognition, and socio-cultural transformation in contemporary Vietnam. These insights contribute to broader scholarly conversations regarding lexical innovation, the discursive construction of emotion, and the globalization of therapeutic culture.

Keywords: Semantic shift, cognitive linguistics, therapeutic culture, Vietnamese discourse, “chữa lành” (healing).

INTRODUCTION

In the context of a modern society characterized by an accelerated pace of life, work-related pressures, and the widespread influence of digital media, the need for mental health care has increasingly become a prominent concern. Parallel to this trend, numerous terms originally within the domain of medicine have been repurposed in everyday life with expanded connotations, among which “chữa lành” (healing) is a typical example. According to the Vietnamese Dictionary edited by Hoang Phe, “chữa lành” is a compound word formed from two elements: “chữa”¹ meaning to treat an illness or to remedy a state of disrepair, and “lành”² denoting a state of being intact, unblemished, or free from damage or injury.

From its original reference to the process of treating and recovering from physical injury, “chữa lành” is now commonly used to denote experiences that help individuals relieve emotions, achieve inner balance, or regenerate mental energy. Phrases such as “healing the soul”, “healing travel”, and “healing music” appear

¹ Based on Hoang Phe (Ed.) (2018). *Vietnamese Dictionary*. Hong Duc Publishing House, p. 240.

² Based on Hoang Phe (Ed.) (2003). *Vietnamese Dictionary*. Hong Duc Publishing House, p. 687.

extensively on social media, particularly in content related to self-care, meditation, yoga and psychological therapy.

This phenomenon raises several issues in linguistics: What mechanism drives the semantic change of “chữa lành”? Is this a conventional case of semantic broadening, or is it a process of conceptual category restructuring under the influence of digital culture? Furthermore, comparing it with analogous phenomena in Chinese (“治愈系” – zhìyù xì) and English (“healing content”, “therapeutic discourse”) reveals that this trend of semantic expansion is cross-cultural. Therefore, studying “chữa lành” not only contributes to identifying the evolution of contemporary Vietnamese vocabulary but also clarifies the relationship between language, media discourse and the emotional structure of society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In traditional linguistics, the phenomenon of semantic change has been discussed from an early stage, with mechanisms such as broadening, narrowing, metaphorical transfer, and metonymy (Ullmann, 1962). In Vietnam, Nguyen Thien Giap (2001) systematized the types of semantic change in Vietnamese, emphasizing the role of socio-cultural factors in the process of lexical development. From this perspective, “chữa lành” can be seen as a case of semantic broadening from a specialized domain (medicine) to the sphere of everyday life.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, George Lakoff (1987)³ argued that semantic categories are not rigid sets of definitions but are organized around a prototypical center, with peripheral meanings extending in a radial network, where meanings are governed by cognitive and experiential relationships rather than by internal logical rules.

Furthermore, Lakoff and Johnson⁴ explain many abstract concepts based on embodiment, according to which language and thought are structured by concrete experiences of the body, space and emotion. Conceptual metaphors are precisely “mappings” between the domain of bodily experience and abstract domains, for instance, “Happiness is up” or “Sadness is down.”

In this context, the semantic extension of “chữa lành” from physical injury to mental distress can be accounted for by the mechanism of conceptual metaphor, wherein the mind is understood in terms of physical experiences associated with the body (e.g., “emotional wounds”), reflecting the cognitive structures described by Lakoff and Johnson.

From a cultural-sociological perspective, the prevalence of the term “chữa lành” can be situated within the broader context of the so-called “therapeutic turn” in modern society. As early as the 1960s, Rieff (1966)⁵ pointed out that Western society was shifting from a moral-religious paradigm to a therapeutic one, in which the goal of life no longer emphasizes moral norms but aims for psychological balance and satisfaction. Extending this approach, Illouz (2008)⁶ argued that psychological discourse has deeply permeated everyday life, restructuring the ways in which people understand emotions, relationships and the self; emotions have become objects of analysis, management and optimization. Within this context, “chữa lành” is not merely an act of treatment but becomes a project of self-construction through practices of emotional governance.

The development of digital media has further accelerated this process. Studies on self-care and recovery discourse in neoliberal societies show that self-care is constructed as a moral and socially symbolic individual responsibility (Gill & Orgad, 2021)⁷. At the same time, digital technology and self-tracking culture contribute to the personalization and datafication of both physical and mental health, making “caring for oneself” a widespread

³ Lakoff, G. (1987). *Women, fire, and dangerous things: What categories reveal about the mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁴ Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.

⁵ Rieff, P. (1966). *The triumph of the therapeutic: Uses of faith after Freud*. Harper & Row.

⁶ Illouz, E. (2008). *Saving the modern soul: Therapy, emotions, and the culture of self-help*. University of California Press.

⁷ Gill, R., & Orgad, S. (2018). The amazing bounce-backable woman: Resilience and the psychological turn in neoliberalism. *Sociological Research Online*.

norm in online life (Lupton, 2016)⁸. In this environment, hashtags such as #healing or #selfcare not only reflect emotional needs but also serve as forms of self-identification and self-presentation in the digital public sphere.

In China, the phenomenon of “治愈系” (zhìyù xì) has been studied as an expression of emotional regulation needs among urban youth, associated with gentle aesthetics, music, images, and media content with comforting qualities (Li Shanshan, 2023; Yang Lijuan & Ding Jinjin, 2025)⁹. These studies indicate that “治愈” has expanded from its medical meaning of treatment to a cultural symbol of emotional comfort and solace in mass media. However, in Vietnam, research on the semantic transformation of “chữa lành” in the online environment remains limited, mainly confined to social commentary. Therefore, an approach to this phenomenon from the perspective of linguistics, combined with discourse analysis and cross-linguistic comparison, is necessary to clarify the mechanisms of semantic change as well as the socio-cultural context that has propelled this shift.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze the semantic shift of the term “chữa lành” in contemporary Vietnamese. The analytical framework is constructed upon three primary theoretical foundations: theories of semantic change in traditional linguistics (Ullmann, 1962), cognitive linguistics with a focus on radial category theory and conceptual metaphor (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and socio-cultural approaches to therapeutic discourse in modern society (Rieff, 1966; Illouz, 2008).

The research data primarily consist of linguistic examples drawn from dictionaries, media articles, and common usages of the word “chữa lành” in contemporary life. These examples are selected to illustrate the term's semantic shift from the medical domain to the realms of emotion, lifestyle, and popular culture. The criteria for data selection were primarily based on materials curated from YouTube, Tik Tok, widely accessible online newspapers, the articles across digital media platforms and some dictionaries. On the basis of compiling instances of expressions containing the term “chữa lành,” we conducted classification and selection to trace its semantic shift across the domains of emotion, lifestyle and popular culture basing on statistical and comparative methods. In addition, we adopted a contrastive linguistic approach to discover the semantic transformation of the term “chữa lành” in light of the aforementioned theoretical frameworks.

The analysis focuses on identifying the original meaning of “chữa lành” and its extended meanings in current contexts of use. On this basis, the study explains the mechanisms by which new meanings are formed through the lens of cognitive categorization models and conceptual metaphor, while also situating this transformation within the broader context of “healing” discourse and the growing emphasis on mental health in contemporary society.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Core meaning of “Chữa lành” in medical context

In the traditional understanding of Vietnamese, “chữa lành” was primarily associated with the medical field and referred to the process of restoring health after illness or physical injury. In its literal sense, the term describes the state of the body returning to normal following treatment or after damaged tissues and biological functions have been regenerated. In medical contexts, “chữa lành” frequently appears in expressions such as “chữa lành vết thương” (healing wounds), “quá trình chữa lành sau phẫu thuật” (the healing process after surgery), or “khả năng tự chữa lành của cơ thể” (the body's self-healing ability), reflecting the physiological recovery mechanisms and tissue regeneration of the human body. This usage is clearly reflected in media discourse. For instance, an article in Báo Thanh Niên (Thanh Nien Newspaper) on medical support activities for children employs the expression “healing wounds” to refer to the treatment and recovery of physical injuries within a medical

⁸ Lupton, D. (2016). *The quantified self*. Polity Press. Lupton, D. (2016). *The diverse domains of quantified selves: self-tracking modes and dataveillance*. *Economy and Society*.

⁹ Li, S. S. (2023). *An analysis of the popularity of healing culture among Chinese youth groups*. *Modern Business Trade Industry*. Yang, L. J., & Ding, J. J. (2025). *A comparative study of Chinese and Japanese healing culture from the perspective of popular culture*. *Comparative Study of Cultural Innovation*.

context¹⁰. Similarly, an article in *Báo Sức khỏe & Đời sống* (Health & Life Newspaper) discusses products that support “wound healing,” emphasizing processes of tissue regeneration and the restoration of biological functions in the human body¹¹. These usages indicate that the core meaning of “chữa lành” is fundamentally physical and biological in nature, closely associated with bodily recovery in medical contexts.

Examining its lexical structure, “chữa lành” can be elucidated through its corresponding Sino-Vietnamese elements: “治” (trị) and “癒” (dũ). According to Sino-Vietnamese dictionaries, “治 /zhì/” conveys the meaning of treating, curing an illness, or remedying a state of damage, while “癒 /yù/” denotes a state of recovery or being cured. When combined, “治癒 /zhìyù/” signifies the process of treatment aimed at restoring health and returning the body to a normal state. Furthermore, within the Chinese lexical system, related terms such as “療癒 /liáoyù/” exist, often used to mean care and recuperation intended to support the recovery process. These expressions illustrate that the concept of “chữa lành” was initially tied to therapeutic activities and restoration within the medical domain.

Similarly, modern English dictionaries define the concept of “healing” in a comparable manner. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines “healing” as “the process of becoming or making somebody/something healthy again”.¹² These definitions indicate that the fundamental meaning of the concept “chữa lành” across multiple languages pertains to the process of restoring health and re-establishing the body's state of equilibrium.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, this medical meaning can be regarded as the prototypical meaning of the term “chữa lành”. Within the structure of a semantic category, the prototypical meaning serves as the starting point for subsequent processes of semantic extension. In other words, the novel uses of “chữa lành” in the domains of emotion, psychology, or lifestyle all develop from this initial conceptual foundation related to bodily restoration. Identifying the medical meaning as the prototypical meaning is therefore a crucial step in understanding the process of semantic shift of this term in contemporary Vietnamese.

Semantic extension to emotional and psychological domains

In addition to its prototypical meaning within the medical domain, “chữa lành” in contemporary Vietnamese has undergone a significant process of semantic extension into conceptual domains related to emotion and psychology. In many current communicative contexts, this term no longer refers solely to the process of recovering from physical injury but is used to express overcoming negative mental experiences, such as stress, loss, or personal crisis. Expressions like “chữa lành tâm hồn” (healing the soul), “hành trình chữa lành” (healing journey), or “tự chữa lành” (self-healing) are increasingly prevalent in discourses related to self-development, popular psychology, and mental health care.

Media discourse clearly reflects this trend of semantic expansion. For instance, an article published in *Thanh Nien* describes the act of “sitting under the shade of an ancient tree to heal the soul¹³”, in which “healing” is used to denote a state of relaxation and emotional recovery (Thanh Nien, 2025). Similarly, an article in *VnExpress* on the artistic activities of Tung Duong employs the expression “healing the soul¹⁴” to emphasize the positive impact of music on mental well-being (VnExpress, 2024).

¹⁰ Thanh Nien. (2026). Chữa lành sẹo miễn phí cho trẻ em. <https://thanhnien.vn/chua-lanh-seo-mien-phi-cho-tre-em-18526012016525213.htm>

¹¹ Health & Life. (2016). Kem bôi giúp giảm nếp nhăn và chữa lành vết thương. <https://suckhoedoisong.vn/kem-boi-giup-giam-nep-nhan-va-chua-lanh-vet-thuong-169116446.htm>

¹² Healing. (2026). In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. Oxford University Press. Retrieved March 16, 2026, from <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/healing>

¹³ Thanh Nien. (2025). Nếp vào bóng râm của cây cổ thụ để chữa lành tâm hồn. <https://thanhnien.vn/nep-va-bong-ram-cua-cay-co-de-chua-lanh-tam-hon-va-tiet-kiem-dien-185250714100047463.htm>

¹⁴ VnExpress. (2024). Tùng Dương hát về việc chữa lành tâm hồn. <https://vnexpress.net/tung-duong-hat-ve-viec-chua-lanh-tam-hon-4883107.html>

In addition, this concept also appears in discourses related to tourism and leisure. For example, an article in Tuoi Tre refers to a “healing and retreat journey¹⁵” (Tuoi Tre, 2025), while personal narratives of coping with loss likewise adopt this terminology, as seen in an article in Thanh Niên describing a “healing journey after the shock of losing one’s father to COVID-19¹⁶” (Thanh Nien, 2023).

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, this shift can be explained through the mechanism of conceptual metaphor, whereby emotional experiences are conceptualized based on concrete bodily experiences. More specifically, emotional hurt is often conceptualized as a type of “wound”, while the process of overcoming and restoring one’s psychological state is understood as a process of “healing”. Through this mapping mechanism between the two domains of experience, concepts related to medicine are extended to express abstract states of mental life (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

This semantic extension can also be analyzed through the model of radial categories in cognitive linguistics. According to this model, the prototypical meaning of a word serves as a starting point, from which related meanings develop through cognitive and experiential links (Lakoff, 1987). In the case of “chữa lành,” the medical meaning pertaining to physical recovery acts as the center of the semantic network. From this central meaning, extended meanings emerge as the concept of “chữa lành” is applied to human emotional and psychological experiences.

Table 1. Examples of “chữa lành” in Vietnamese discourse

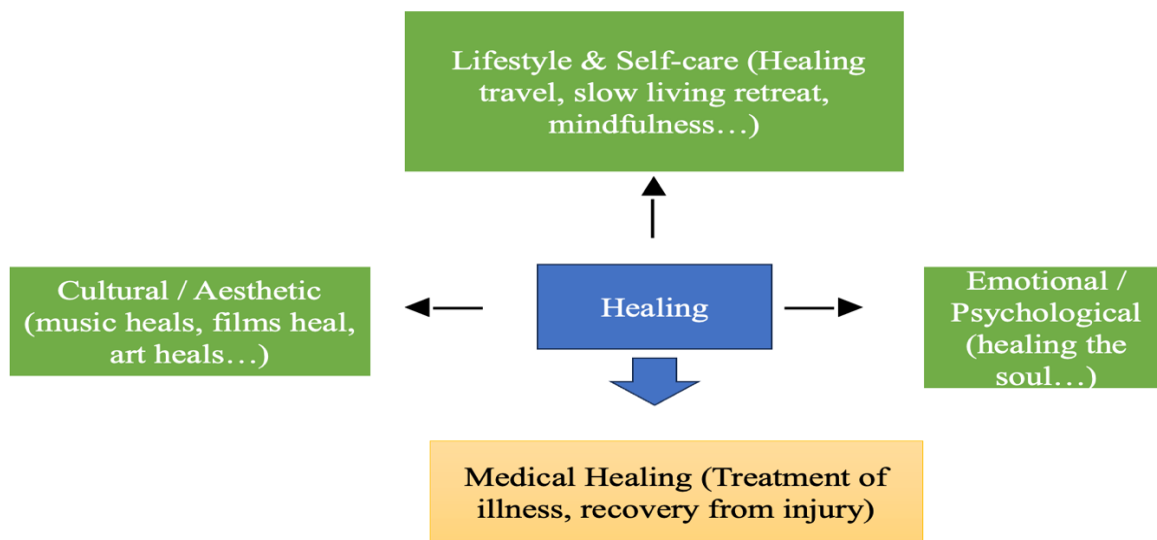
No.	Expression	Semantic Domain	Meaning Interpretation	Discourse Source
1.	Healing wounds	Medical	Recovery from physical injuries or bodily damage caused by illness or trauma	Health articles, medical materials
2.	Healing after surgery	Medical	Biological recovery process of the body after medical treatment	Medical materials, health communication
3.	Healing the soul	Emotional	Restoration of emotional and mental well-being after psychological distress	Media discourse, psychological communication
4.	Healing journey	Psychological	Process of overcoming crisis and personal development	Self-help articles, personal development discourse
5.	Healing through nature	Lifestyle	Emotional balance and mental well-being achieved through nature-based activities	Travel media, lifestyle and wellness communication
6.	Self-healing	Self-care	Emotional balance and mental well-being achieved through nature-based activities	Social media, blogs, self-care discourse
7.	Healing music / Healing films	Cultural/Aesthetic	Artistic and cultural practices that provide emotional comfort and psychological relief	Cultural media, film and music reviews

¹⁵ Tuoi Tre. (2025). Hành trình nghỉ dưỡng và chữa lành cùng Crystal Bay Hospitality. <https://tuoitre.vn/hanh-trinh-nghi-duong-va-chua-lanh-cung-crystal-bay-hospitality-20250704162653608.htm>

¹⁶ Thanh Nien. (2023). Hành trình chữa lành sau cú sốc mất cha vì COVID-19 của nữ sinh nghèo. <https://thanhnien.vn/hanh-trinh-chua-lanh-sau-cu-soc-mat-cha-vi-covid-19-cua-nu-sinh-ngheo-185231208165135466.htm>

As illustrated in Figure 1, new semantic domains such as “chữa lành cảm xúc” (healing emotions) or “chữa lành tâm hồn” (healing the soul) can be seen as branches developing from the prototypical meaning through mechanisms of metaphor and cognitive association.

Figure 1. Semantic expansion of “chữa lành”



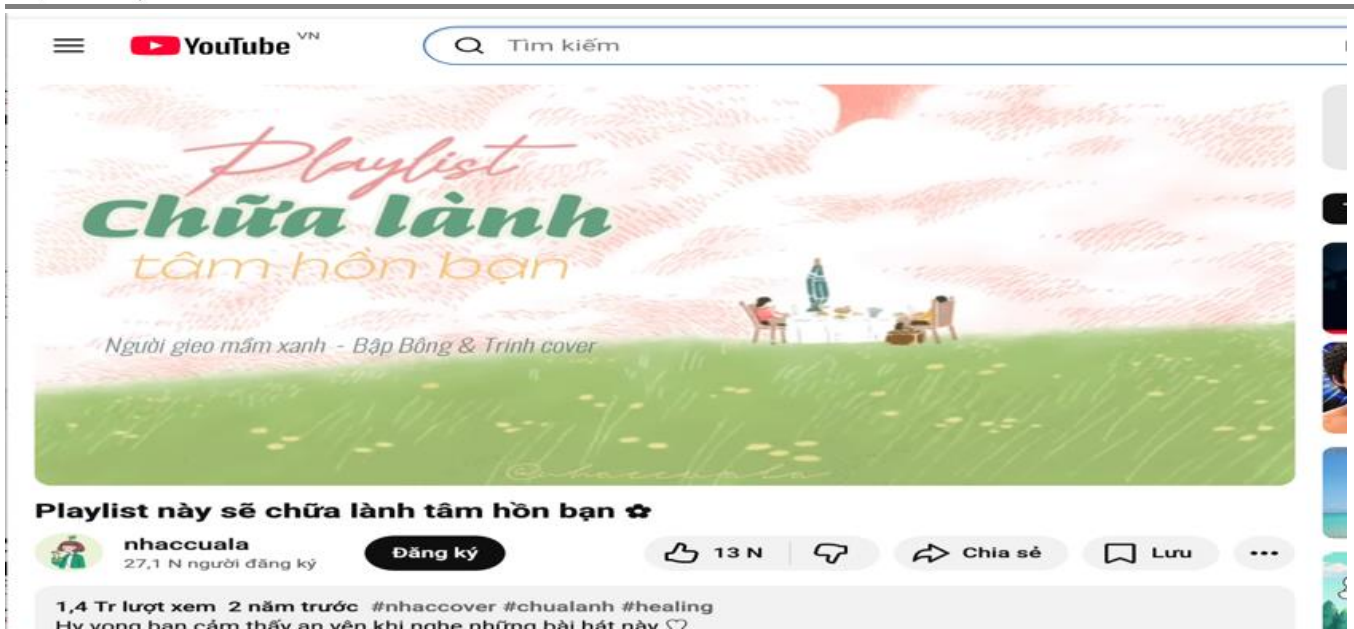
Notably, in contemporary media discourse, “chữa lành” is used not only to describe a state of psychological recovery but also carries the meaning of an active process in which individuals engage in activities aimed at improving their mental well-being. For example, an article in Thanh Nien newspaper discusses the trend of “du lịch chữa lành” (healing travel) as a way for many young people to seek emotional balance after the pressures of work and urban life (Thanh Nien, 2024)¹⁷. In this article, “chữa lành” is used to refer to experiences such as taking a restorative break, connecting with nature, or participating in relaxing activities designed to rejuvenate mental energy.

Similarly, several articles in Doi song & Phap luat¹⁸ newspaper have noted the proliferation of the concept “chữa lành” in content related to lifestyle and mental health, where the term is often associated with activities such as reading, listening to music, or meditating to help individuals reduce stress and stabilize their emotions. In these instances, “chữa lành” no longer carries its medical meaning of treatment but has become a common expression for mental health care in everyday life.

Beyond traditional media, the prevalence of this concept is also evident on digital platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, where content associated with the keyword “chữa lành” attracts millions of views. Numerous videos use titles such as “hành trình chữa lành bản thân” (my self-healing journey), “âm nhạc chữa lành tâm hồn” (music to heal the soul), or “một ngày sống chậm để chữa lành” (a slow day to heal), often combining imagery of nature, soothing music, and positive messages about mental well-being. This content illustrates how the term “chữa lành” is employed as a discursive label to describe experiences of comfort and emotional restoration within the digital media environment.

¹⁷ Link: <https://thanhvien.vn/tour-ca-phe-thien-trai-nghiem-du-lich-chua-lanh-than-tam-tri-185240402102402636.htm>

¹⁸ Link: <https://doisongphapluat.com.vn/tim-kiem?q=ch%E1%BB%AFa%201%C3%A0nh>



Playlist
Chữa lành
tâm hồn bạn

Người gieo mầm xanh - Bập Bông & Trinh cover

Playlist này sẽ chữa lành tâm hồn bạn ☆

nhaccuala
27,1 N người đăng ký **Đăng ký** 13 N Chia sẻ Lưu

1,4 Tr lượt xem 2 năm trước #nhaccover #chualanh #healing
Hy vọng bạn cảm thấy an yên khi nghe những bài hát này ♡



Sống chậm để chữa lành trong cuộc sống đời thường



YouTube ^{VN} Tìm kiếm



Nhạc Chữa Lành Tâm Hồn, Nhạc Không Lời Nhẹ Nhàng | KLCS



Figure 2. Examples of “chữa lành” in YouTube and TikTok digital media discourse

Source: Compiled by the author from YouTube and TikTok (2024–2025)

In summary, the semantic extension of “chữa lành” from its medical meaning to an emotional-psychological one demonstrates how linguistic concepts can evolve through the interaction between bodily experience and social experience. This process not only enriches the semantic system of the lexicon but also reflects shifts in how modern society understands and articulates human emotional life. In this context, "chữa lành" has become a multidimensional concept, connecting different domains of meaning ranging from medicine and psychology to culture and lifestyle.

Figure 3 illustrates the conceptual model of the semantic shift of “chữa lành”, from the medical/physical domain to the psychological/emotional domain, and finally to cultural and lifestyle practices. In the diagram, each semantic domain is illustrated with specific examples, such as wound recovery in medicine, meditation and self-care in psychology, or healing music and slow living in culture/lifestyle, demonstrating how this term has become a multidimensional concept that connects different domains of meaning in modern life.

Figure 3. Conceptual model of the semantic shift of “Chữa Lành”



Expansion in Media & Society / Digital Discourse



From the medical/physical domain (inner core) expanding to psychological/emotional (middle ring) and cultural/lifestyle domains (outer ring), driven by media and digital discourse.

Cultural and lifestyle expansion of “Chữa lành”

In addition to its extension into the emotional and psychological domains, the term “chữa lành” in contemporary Vietnamese has also undergone a significant process of recontextualization within cultural and lifestyle discourses. In recent years, this concept has become increasingly associated with self-care and wellness practices, reflecting a shift in how modern society understands and manages mental health. Phrases such as “du lịch chữa lành” (healing travel), “âm nhạc chữa lành” (healing music), “không gian chữa lành” (healing space), or “đọc sách chữa lành” (healing through reading) have become increasingly common on media platforms and in articles pertaining to lifestyle.

Table 2: Examples of “Chữa lành” in Vietnamese media discourse

No.	Expression	Context	Source
1	Chữa lành vết thương	biological recovery after injury	Health & Life newspaper
2	Quá trình chữa lành sau phẫu thuật	physical recovery after treatment	Health & Life newspaper
3	Chữa lành tâm hồn	emotional recovery after psychological trauma	Thanh Nien Newspaper
4	Hành trình chữa lành bản thân	personal development, self-help	Lifestyle article
5	Tự chữa lành	personal development, self-help	Health & Life newspaper
6	Âm nhạc chữa lành	music aiding relaxation and stress reduction	YouTube playlist
7	Không gian chữa lành	cafés / quiet spaces for relaxation	Health & Life newspaper
8	Du lịch chữa lành	wellness tourism for mental restoration	Thanh Nien Newspaper

9	Độc sách chữa lành	activity promoting emotional balance	Thanh Nien Newspaper
10	Một ngày sống chậm để chữa lành	inspirational content	TikTok / YouTube vlog

In many instances, “chữa lành” is no longer understood as a process of treating injury in the medical sense, but has become a cultural symbol associated with experiences that bring about a sense of relaxation and psychological balance. For example, several articles in the Vietnamese press use the phrase “du lịch chữa lành” (healing travel) to describe wellness trips or nature experiences aimed at helping individuals reduce stress and rejuvenate mental energy. For instance, an article in Thanh Nien newspaper mentioned that the trend of “đi chữa lành”¹⁹ (going on a healing trip) is becoming popular among young people as a way to seek balance after the pressures of work and urban life (Thanh Nien, 2023). Similarly, an article in VnExpress described trips to mountainous areas or beaches as “du lịch chữa lành”²⁰ (healing travel) experiences that help young people temporarily escape the fast space of city life (VnExpress, 2025).

From the perspective of cultural sociology, the prevalence of this term can be situated within the broader context of what is called “self-care culture”. In contemporary society, the practice of caring for one's mental health is increasingly viewed as an individual responsibility and a component of a modern lifestyle. According to research by Crawford (2006), self-care practices in modern society are often linked to activities that help individuals maintain a state of physical and mental balance. In this context, activities such as meditation, yoga, wellness tourism, or listening to relaxing music are frequently promoted as means for individuals to restore their emotional state and improve their quality of life. Consequently, “chữa lành” has gradually become a key term in the discourse on mental health and balanced living.

Furthermore, digital media plays a significant role in disseminating and reinforcing these extended meanings. On social media platforms such as TikTok or YouTube, the keyword “chữa lành” is frequently used to describe content that is comforting or evokes a pleasant feeling, such as nature videos, relaxing music, or vlogs sharing personal experiences. Video titles like “Âm nhạc chữa lành tâm hồn” (Music to heal the soul), “Một ngày sống chậm để chữa lành” (A slow day to heal), “Du lịch chữa lành ở Đà Lạt” (Healing travel in Da Lat) are common and attract millions of views. This phenomenon indicates that “chữa lành” is not merely a term describing a psychological state but has also become a linguistic label for media content oriented towards feelings of peace and positivity.

From a linguistic perspective, this phenomenon illustrates the semantic shift of “chữa lành” from a specialized term to a broader cultural concept. Within the semantic network illustrated in Figure 1, usages related to lifestyle and wellness can be seen as further extended branches from the prototypical meaning, reflecting the interaction between language, media, and cultural values in modern society.

Cross-linguistic comparison: Vietnamese “Chữa lành”, Chinese “治愈系” and English “healing”

Table 3. Cross-linguistic comparison of “chữa lành”, “治愈系”, and “healing”

Language	Core term	Original meaning (medical)	Extended meanings	Typical discourse contexts	Example expressions
Vietnamese	Chữa lành	Recovery from illness or physical injury;	Emotional recovery, self-care, lifestyle balance,	Media discourse, lifestyle journalism, social media, personal development	Chữa lành tâm hồn (healing the soul), hành trình chữa lành (healing Journey), du lịch chữa lành (healing travel), âm

¹⁹ Link: <https://thanhvien.vn/di-chua-lanh-o-khu-rung-green-list-dau-tien-cua-viet-nam-185240703095558766.htm>

²⁰ Link: <https://vnexpress.net/du-lich-chua-lanh-cua-nu-khach-u50-4833569.html>

		restoration of bodily health	relaxation experience		nhạc chữa lành (healing music)
Chinese	治愈 (zhìyù); 治愈系 (zhìyù xì)	Medical treatment leading to recovery	Emotional comfort, soothing aesthetic experiences	Popular culture, entertainment media, online communities	治愈系电影 (zhìyù xì diànyǐng- Healing movies), 治愈系音乐 (zhìyù xì yīnyuè -healing music), 治愈系风景 (zhìyù xì yīnyuè - healing scenery)
English	Healing	Process of becoming healthy again after injury or illness	Emotional recovery, therapeutic practices, personal growth	Psychology discourse, self-help literature, wellness culture	emotional healing, healing journey, healing spaces

The phenomenon of semantic extension of “chữa lành” in Vietnamese is not an isolated case but can be observed in various languages and cultural contexts. A comparison with similar concepts in Chinese and English reveals that the tendency to expand from a medical meaning to emotional and cultural meanings is a cross-cultural phenomenon.

In Chinese, the term “治愈” (zhìyù) originally carried the meaning of treatment or curing illness in a medical context. However, in recent years, the concept of “治愈系” (zhìyù xì) has become popular in mass culture. It used to describe media content that is comforting and evokes pleasant feelings, such as light-hearted films, relaxing music or nature imagery. According to Yao (2022)²¹, “治愈系” (zhìyù xì) culture refers to products and services labeled with the promise of providing comfort to consumers, and this media genre has gradually come to be seen as a way to cope with the stress and anxiety prevalent in modern life. Research by Shu (2024)²² also indicates that in the post-pandemic context, people are increasingly concerned with physical and mental health; “治愈” (zhìyù) culture, with its unique emotional transmission and warm life philosophy, has provided the public with comfort and relaxation. The prevalence of “治愈系” (zhìyù xì) content is closely linked to the increasing academic and work pressures in contemporary Chinese society. Wang's (2025)²³ analysis shows that urban youth are facing issues such as online dependence and offline alienation, narcissism and lack of empathy, communication sensitivity, and emotional disorders. In this context, “治愈系” (zhìyù xì) culture has emerged as a means of emotional release, reflecting the need to seek emotional stability in modern urban society.

Similarly, in English, the word “healing” has also significantly expanded its range of usage in recent decades. Beyond its traditional meaning related to treating illness, “healing” is increasingly used in discourses on psychology, personal development, and self-care. Phrases such as “healing journey”, “emotional healing”, or “healing spaces” frequently appear in content related to mental health and emotional therapy. According to Illouz (2008), the development of the so-called “therapeutic culture” in Western society has contributed to expanding the way people talk about emotions and personal experiences through terms related to therapy and healing.

When placed within a cross-linguistic comparative context, it can be observed that “chữa lành”, “治愈系” (zhìyù xì), and “healing” all undergo a similar process of semantic expansion: from a medical term referring to the process of treating illness to a cultural concept related to emotional recovery and self-care. However, each

²¹ Yao, N. (2022). Beyond an illusion of comfort: Two examples of Chinese healing style media [Master's thesis, University of Victoria]. UVicSpace.

²² Shu, L. (2024). An analysis of the communication media and communication influences behind the rise of terrier culture in the context of affective structures: The example of the “healing” culture. In Proceedings of the 2024 6th International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2024).

²³ Wang, J. (2025). The popularity of healing culture: The myth of modernity in contemporary youth's emotional life. *Medicine & Philosophy*.

language also exhibits distinct characteristics in how this phenomenon is conceptualized. In Chinese, “治愈系” (zhìyù xì) is often associated with cultural aesthetics and media content that provides comfort; meanwhile, in English, “healing” is more frequently linked to therapeutic discourse and personal development. In Vietnamese, “chữa lành” appears to combine both of these trends, being associated with lifestyle experiences such as travel or music, while also being connected to discourses on mental health and self-care.

These observations suggest that the semantic shift of “chữa lành” not only reflects the internal development of the Vietnamese lexical system but is also influenced by global cultural and media trends. Therefore, analyzing this phenomenon within a cross-linguistic comparative framework helps to further clarify how concepts related to mental health are being restructured in the context of contemporary society and culture.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study suggest that the semantic development of the Vietnamese expression “chữa lành” reflects broader cultural and communicative transformations in contemporary society. Rather than remaining confined to its traditional medical meaning, the term has gradually evolved into a multifaceted concept that encompasses emotional recovery, personal well-being, and lifestyle practices. This semantic expansion illustrates how language adapts to new social experiences and cultural values.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the observed changes can be interpreted as a typical process of semantic extension from a prototypical meaning to peripheral meanings. As discussed earlier, the medical sense of “chữa lành”, referring to the recovery of the body after illness or injury, represents the central or prototypical meaning of the concept. Through metaphorical mapping, this meaning has been extended to the emotional domain, where psychological distress is conceptualized as a form of “wound” and emotional recovery is understood as a process of “healing”. Such metaphorical structures are consistent with the theory of conceptual metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), which argues that abstract experiences are often understood through concrete bodily experiences.

In the case of “chữa lành”, the metaphor emotional suffering is physical injury allows speakers to interpret emotional distress in terms of bodily harm. Consequently, expressions such as “chữa lành tâm hồn” or “tự chữa lành” become cognitively meaningful because they rely on familiar experiences of physical recovery. This cognitive mechanism explains why medical terminology can easily migrate into emotional and psychological discourse.

However, the semantic development of “chữa lành” cannot be explained solely through cognitive mechanisms. Social and cultural factors also play a crucial role in shaping how the term is used in contemporary discourse. The increasing emphasis on mental health in modern societies has created new communicative needs for discussing emotional well-being. As a result, expressions associated with recovery and healing have gained prominence in everyday language.

The growing influence of digital media has further accelerated this process. On social media platforms, the term “chữa lành” often appears as a keyword associated with relaxing experiences, inspirational narratives, or aesthetically pleasing content. These uses illustrate how language can become intertwined with digital culture, where certain expressions function not only as linguistic units but also as cultural symbols or hashtags. In this context, “chữa lành” operates as a discursive label for content that promises emotional comfort or psychological relief.

The lifestyle-oriented uses of “chữa lành” also reveal the influence of global wellness culture. In many societies, practices such as meditation, travel, yoga, and mindfulness are increasingly framed as methods of self-care and emotional regulation. Within this cultural framework, healing is no longer restricted to medical treatment but is understood as a broader process of restoring balance in one’s life. Vietnamese media discourse appears to have incorporated this global trend, adopting the vocabulary of healing to describe experiences related to leisure, relaxation, and personal growth.

The cross-linguistic comparison conducted in this study further supports the idea that the semantic expansion of healing-related expressions is not unique to Vietnamese. Similar developments can be observed in Chinese and English. The Chinese term “治愈系” (zhìyù xì), for example, has become widely used in popular culture to describe media content that provides emotional comfort. Meanwhile, the English word “healing” frequently appears in discourses related to therapy, personal development, and wellness practices. These parallels suggest that the semantic evolution of “chữa lành” is partly shaped by transnational cultural flows and the global circulation of psychological and wellness discourse.

Nevertheless, despite these similarities, each language demonstrates distinct patterns in how the concept of healing is integrated into cultural discourse. In Chinese media culture, “治愈系” (zhìyù xì) tends to emphasize aesthetic experiences and comforting imagery, particularly in film, music, and visual media. In English-speaking contexts, healing discourse often appears in therapeutic and psychological frameworks, emphasizing personal transformation and emotional growth. Vietnamese usage appears to combine elements of both patterns, incorporating the aesthetic dimension of relaxation experiences while also adopting the therapeutic language of emotional recovery.

Overall, the semantic evolution of “chữa lành” illustrates the dynamic interaction between language, culture, and social change. As societies increasingly recognize the importance of mental well-being, linguistic expressions associated with healing are likely to continue expanding in meaning and usage. Future research may further explore how these expressions circulate across different media platforms and how they shape public understandings of mental health and emotional care.

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