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Research Paper

Media Priming Effect and Boycott Culture: Analysing Comments on Media Posts about the Malaysian Israel Boycott Movement

Lim Shiang Shiang* & Lim Jia Xuan**

Abstract: This research investigates the tone and themes of public comments on social media regarding the boycott movement against Israel in Malaysia, using qualitative thematic analysis of *Harian Metro* posts. The findings indicate a predominantly critical tone, with 55.6% of comments opposing brands linked to Israel, reflecting strong solidarity within the Muslim community. Key themes identified among the critical comments include “religious duty and solidarity,” concerns over royalty payments to McDonald’s as indirect support for Israel, and a preference for local food options. Supportive comments, although less frequent, express scepticism about the boycott’s effectiveness and its economic impact on Malaysian workers. Media priming theory underscores the influence of dominant narratives on public opinion, illustrating how critical comments encourage similar sentiments while marginalising dissent. This study contributes to an improved understanding of public sentiment surrounding the boycott movement against Israel in Malaysia.

Keywords: Boycott Movement, Israel, Media Priming, Social Media

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INTRODUCTION

The war between Israel and Palestine has ignited heated debates across social media, shaping public perception and influencing real-world actions. This ongoing conflict, rooted in complex territorial, political, and religious disputes, has once again captured global attention (BBC, 2024, April 5), with Malaysia firmly standing in support of Palestine. In response to Israel's military actions in Gaza, Malaysia has taken strong diplomatic stances, including banning Israeli-flagged cargo ships and reinforcing its commitment to the Palestinian cause (Ng, 2023; Redlich, 2024).

This support extends beyond government policies—Malaysians have actively engaged in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, using social media as a powerful tool for advocacy. Hashtags such as #boikotisrael and #boycottisrael have gained significant traction, with thousands of posts amplifying calls for economic pressure on companies linked to Israel (Yiau, 2024). While the movement aims to promote justice for Palestinians, it has also raised concerns about its economic impact, particularly on Malaysian businesses and employees working in multinational companies. Song (2023) notes that 21,000 Muslim employees of Gerbang Alaf Restaurants Sdn Bhd., the Malaysia franchise holder of McDonald's, have been affected by the boycott. Similarly, Chan (2024) highlights that McDonald's, KFC, and Pizza Hut, all of which have Muslim shareholders and contribute to Malaysia's tax revenue, have experienced significant financial repercussions.

With 28.68 million Malaysians actively using social media (Howe, 2024), platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok play a crucial role in shaping public opinion. Lee and Jang (2010) argue that social media comments can be more influential than news articles themselves, underscoring the power of user-generated content in steering narratives. However, the extent to which this influence shapes public discourse and engagement remains a topic worth exploring, particularly as this issue has profoundly affected Malaysians, especially Muslims, throughout the country's history.

This study therefore aims to examine public responses to the boycott movement by analysing the most popular *Harian Metro* Facebook post on the topic.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Research Objective 1: To analyse the tone of public comments on the most popular *Harian Metro* Facebook post regarding the boycott movement against Israel.

Research Objective 2: To explore the themes in public comments on the boycott movement against Israel,” and their connection to broader cultural and religious practices in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SOCIAL MEDIA & BOYCOTT CULTURE

The term “boycott culture” has gained significant popularity with the rise of social media. More individuals are using these platforms to assert their rights as citizens and participate in activism (Shaheer et al., 2018). This term is sometimes used interchangeably with “cancel culture” and has also been referred to as “call-out culture” (Ramadhani et al., 2024). However, it is important to understand the history and context of “boycott culture.” The term “boycott” was first coined in 1880 to describe the actions of Irish peasants who successfully isolated Charles Boycott, a landlord’s agent, by severing all social, economic, and communication ties with him (Minda, 1999).

With the rise of consumerism, people began to advocate for their rights more easily with the advent of social media and the internet in the late 1990s. Scholars have since examined consumer boycotts, often in relation to consumer rights. For example, Friedman (1999) highlighted the importance of understanding movements that encourage consumers to avoid purchasing certain products. Yunus et al. (2020) also noted that boycotts can take many forms, including campaigns urging people not to buy certain products, strikes, rallies, abstaining from interfering with other workers’ pickets, and refusal to work with particular companies or products. Such actions can severely damage a brand’s reputation. This is supported by Mangold and Faulds (2009), who stress the effectiveness of social media marketing, which has a significant impact on a company’s branding. Social media influences can affect various aspects such as

awareness, information gathering, opinions, attitudes, purchasing behaviour, and post-purchase communication.

From a consumer perspective, boycotts can be driven by political, social, or ethical motivations. They often arise in response to a company's immoral or inappropriate actions that conflict with societal values, which can harm the company's reputation (Pandey et al., 2021). While the reasons for boycotts may vary, research shows that those rooted in religious beliefs tend to strengthen relationships among participants due to their shared values (Abdul-Talib & Abdul-Latif, 2015).

In this study, the Muslim population in Malaysia, which constitutes the majority and follows the Islamic faith, shares a strong bond with Palestinians, who also practice Islam. This connection has led to a significant boycott of American products, such as McDonald's. Given the country's diverse political ideologies and social contexts, it is important to explore how Malaysian Malay Muslims perceive this issue. Henceforth, this paper examines public comments on consumer boycotts by focusing on posts with the highest engagement on *Harian Metro's* Facebook platform, which is the leading Malay-language news media in Malaysia.

MALAYSIAN'S BOYCOTT CULTURE AGAINST ISRAEL

In Malaysia, where Muslims constitute the majority of the population, the pro-Palestinian stance in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has always been clearly stated. Malaysia's support for the Palestinian cause is rooted not only in religious beliefs but also in humanitarian concerns (Chong, 2023). The country's unwavering support for Palestine can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, Malaysia has expressed strong concern over the ongoing conflicts, wars, and violence in the Middle East, particularly in Palestine, which has consistently motivated Malaysian leaders to advocate for peace in the region (Mohd Faizal, 2024). Secondly, Malaysia's position is shaped by the indecisiveness and inaction of major global powers in addressing the Palestinian conflict, prompting the country to take a more proactive role. Notably, some political leaders leverage this issue to appeal to the Muslim Malay majority, who hold significant political influence (Mohd Faizal, 2024).

Lau and Hutchinson (2023) have noted that supporting Palestine is politically advantageous in Malaysia today. Surveys indicate that younger Malaysians are becoming more religiously conservative, and the opposition coalition, Perikatan Nasional, has made significant gains, securing a third of Parliament and control over four state governments. Prominent figures, such as Mahathir Mohamad, have long been outspoken about the Palestinian cause, leaving Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim with little room to appear indecisive on the matter. Consequently, it is clear that under Anwar's leadership, Malaysia is expected to maintain steadfast support for Palestine, refuse to recognise Israel, and endorse boycott movements against Israel.

The boycott movement against Israel in Malaysia has been a prominent issue in the public consciousness. During the height of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2008, a boycott was initiated due to claims that American and Western companies were directly or indirectly supporting Israel's actions against Palestine. Over 50 Malaysian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) joined forces to support this movement, forming the "Coalition of Malaysian NGOs against the Persecution of Palestinians" (Abdul-Talib et al., 2016). Since then, the boycott movement against Israel in Malaysia has continued intermittently, coinciding with ongoing developments in the Israel-Palestine conflict. For instance, the 2008-2009 boycott in response to the Israeli-Gaza conflict, led by groups such as the Muslim Consumers Association of Malaysia, resulted in over 2,000 Muslim restaurants removing Coca-Cola from their menus and targeting over 100 products in what was described as an 'economic jihad' (Mohamed Nasir, 2016). Similarly, Aman Palestin's 2014 "Bulan Kemarahan Ummah" campaign mobilised the Malaysian Muslim community through events and protests, calling for a boycott of companies such as McDonald's, Starbucks, and HSBC for their alleged support of Zionism. Both movements had a significant impact on public sentiment, exerting economic pressure on major international brands (Mohamed Nasir, 2016).

On 7 October 7 2023, following the humanitarian crisis in Palestine, particularly in Gaza, many Malaysians joined the boycott movement against Israel. Individuals began refusing to purchase Israeli products or foreign brands suspected of supporting Israel (Rahim, 2024). Brands affected by the boycott include McDonald's, Nescafé, Burger King, Grab,

and others (Song, 2023). While some individuals resorted to vandalising brand outlets to show their support for Palestine and denounce the brand's alleged support for Israel, BDS Malaysia condemned such behaviour. As the main force behind the movement, BDS Malaysia has advocated a non-violent approach to support Palestine and has continually supervised the boycott to ensure its progress. Additionally, BDS Malaysia has urged the government to sever all agreements with companies that supply military equipment to Israel, prevent further acquisitions, and halt complicity in the oppression of Palestinians in Gaza (Malaysiakini, 2024, May 7). BDS Malaysia has also organised and supported numerous rallies across Malaysia to pressure Israel and any organisations or companies that support Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Muiz, 2024; Zurairi, 2014).

Despite efforts to clarify that local franchises, like McDonald's Malaysia, are independent from McDonald's Israel, these brands have experienced significant consequences due to the boycott. McDonald's Malaysia, for example, faced a drop in share prices and lower-than-expected sales growth (Gruet, 2024). As the boycott intensified, several outlets, including KFC, were forced to close, and many local employees were dismissed (Teoh, 2024). Due to the rise in unemployment, experts have called on the public to consider the economic implications of the boycott rationally (Shahabudin & Augustin, 2024; Chan, 2024). The boycott has sparked intense debate, with both supporters and opponents discussing its economic, political, and ethical impacts.

MEDIA PRIMING THEORY

Media priming has been widely used in previous research to explore how media influences and shapes people's perceptions (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2009). Hoewe (2020) argues that media priming often occurs without the consumer's awareness, referring to it as "cognitive processes." Fiske and Taylor (1984, p.257) define priming as "*the effects of prior context on the interpretation of new information...specifically [it] provides a name for the fact that recently and frequently activated ideas come to mind more easily than ideas that have not been activated*". This aligns with Roskos-Ewoldsen et al. (2009), who describe it as the effect of a preceding stimulus on how individuals respond to subsequent stimuli. Fiske and Taylor (1984) also suggest that news stories have the

potential to indirectly influence judgements. Priming relies on the idea that a stimulus can activate previously learned cognitive processes, thereby affecting the judgment-making process. Most past studies have linked priming to stereotypes or biases in the mind (Tsamadi et al., 2020; Dixon & Maddox, 2005).

In this study, when people encounter news stories, such as reports of McDonald's donating free meals to Israeli soldiers (Magid, 2023) or experts highlighting the negative impact of the boycott movement on local workers and companies in the supply chain (Shahabudin & Augustin, 2024), their subsequent judgements about the boycott movement are shaped by the information and themes presented in these stories. For example, when they encounter posts with keywords like "McDonald's," "Israel," and "Palestine," their evaluations are influenced by the prior information they have been exposed to. According to Roskos-Ewoldsen et al. (2009), there are two key takeaways from media priming theory: stronger and more recent primes have a larger effect, and the impact of priming diminishes over time—rapidly in word tasks but persisting longer in judgement tasks. This suggests that recent news coverage will have a more significant influence on people's judgements about the boycott issue, as reflected in the topics covered and how they are discussed on social media.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research utilises a content analysis approach to examine public comments on *Harian Metro* news reporting on issues related to the Israel boycott, focusing on the posts with the highest number of Facebook comments during the period from mid-October 2023 to mid-November 2023. This time frame was selected because the boycott movement began in October 2023, with public discussion peaking during the period mentioned. *Harian Metro* was chosen due to its highest circulation and its status as the first Bahasa Malaysia tabloid. According to Rowe (2011), tabloids represent a media form that resonates with the everyday concerns of non-elite readers who may feel alienated by traditional, serious press. This makes tabloids particularly relevant for analysing public opinion and engagement, as they provide insights into how non-elite audiences—often the majority—consume and react to news related to significant issues

such as the Malaysian Israel boycott movement. Additionally, the discussion post chosen was the most commented on at the time when reports surfaced that McDonald’s Israel had donated food to Israeli soldiers, coinciding with the peak of the boycott frenzy against McDonald’s Malaysia.

A total of 20 posts related to “Israel War” and the “Boycott Movement” were identified from *Harian Metro* Facebook posts. The post with the highest number of comments was published on 6 November 2023, titled “McDonald’s Malaysia tidak beri sumbangan kepada Israel, usah boikot – Mufti,” which received 18,000 comments. However, this study focuses on analysing the first 5,000 comments of all selected posts as many comments were repeated. Analysing these 5,000 comments is sufficient to identify the patterns in public responses.

A breakdown of the posts is presented below:

| Date | Type | Headline | Number of Comments | Number of Likes | Number of Shares |
|-------------|-------------|--|---------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 15/10/23 | News | Boikot syarikat, produk menyumbang kepada Israel | 46 | 69 | 1 |
| 15/10/23 | News | Tindakan francais McDonald’s di Israel pendirian persendirian | 44 | 61 | 6 |
| 15/10/23 | News | McDonald’s Israel sumbang makanan kepada rejim Zionis bukan keputusan global | 18 | 38 | 4 |
| 15/10/23 | Discussion | McDonald’s Israel sumbang makanan kepada rejim Zionis bukan keputusan global - McDonald’s Malaysia | 3193 | 7578 | 337 |

| | | | | | |
|----------|--------------|---|----|-----|---|
| 17/10/23 | BERNAMA | McDonald's Malaysia sumbang RM1 juta kepada Dana Kemanusiaan Palestin | 32 | 125 | 7 |
| 17/10/23 | News | McDonald's Malaysia santuni komuniti melalui pembayaran zakat | 61 | 114 | 5 |
| 20/10/24 | News & video | Program Komuniti McDonald's dan Persatuan Kebajikan Ronald McDonald (RMHC) Malaysia ingin menyumbang kembali kepada masyarakat. Sempena bulan komuniti baru-baru ini, McDonald's meraikan hari jadi anak yatim di seluruh negara. Sambutan hari jadi kali ini dibuat bukan sahaja di rumah-rumah kebajikan tetapi turut diraikan di restoran McDonald's berhampiran. Bukan itu sahaja, rakan artis dan juga pemengaruh media sosial juga hadir bagi memeriahkan lagi acara tersebut. McDonald's Malaysia berharap | 24 | 62 | 0 |

| | | | | | |
|----------|------------|---|------|------|------|
| | | inisiatif ini dapat dapat menceriakan dan mencipta kenangan manis untuk anak-anak ini, sekaligus memberikan impak positif dalam kalangan masyarakat di sekitar lokasi operasi McDonald's. | | | |
| 21/10/23 | Discussion | Anak teringin nak makan hidangan KFC, aiskrim | 252 | 2507 | 15 |
| 26/10/23 | News | Elak beli, boikot produk usaha kecil bantu Palestin | 34 | 81 | 3 |
| 27/10/23 | Column | Boikot produk Israel usaha kecil yang berterusan | 15 | 86 | 2 |
| 27/10/23 | News | Majoriti setuju boikot produk Israel | 8 | 76 | 2 |
| 31/10/23 | Discussion | Kali ini orang boikot sungguh-sungguh' | 4782 | 33k | 876 |
| 31/10/23 | News | Kali ini orang boikot sungguh-sungguh' | 17 | 85 | 3 |
| 2/11/23 | News | Sukar dibayangkan jika berada dalam situasi negara berperang dan dibom' | 2 | 12 | 0 |
| 6/11/23 | Discussion | McDonald's Malaysia tidak beri sumbangan | 18k | 29k | 1688 |

| | | | | | |
|-----------|------------|--|------|------|-----|
| | | kepada Israel, usah boikot - Mufti | | | |
| 6/11/23 | News | McDonald's Malaysia tidak beri sumbangan kepada Israel, usah boikot - Mufti | 637 | 569 | 105 |
| 6/11/23 | News | Boleh kerja syarikat produk Israel berdasarkan hukum darurat, tapi di Malaysia ada pekerjaan lain - Mufti | 25 | 74 | 9 |
| 6/11/2023 | Discussion | Boleh kerja syarikat produk Israel berdasarkan hukum darurat, tapi di Malaysia ada pekerjaan lain - Mufti | 289 | 703 | 52 |
| 7/11/23 | Column | #minda Mengambil kira kaedah fiqh, maka pemboikotan terhadap syarikat francais boleh mendatangkan mafsadah yang jelas berbanding masalah | 5 | 20 | 1 |
| 10/11/23 | Discussion | Boikot beri lebih Kesan buruk kepada Starbuck | 1115 | 3813 | 79 |

CODING SHEET

In order to transform the text of public comments into data suitable for analysis, coding is an essential process. Coding is the systematic examination of qualitative text data, in which the material is deconstructed to uncover its underlying meaning and then reconstructed in a meaningful manner (Creswell, 2015). Since qualitative coding is

interpretive, it requires continuously reading and engaging with the data to identify patterns, generate explanations, and develop theories. This approach provides a more detailed and nuanced understanding than quantitative methods can offer (Baralt, 2012).

In this research, the items included in the coding sheet are tone of comment and type of comment, which collect data related to the themes present in the comments. The data collected at this stage were used in the subsequent stage of data analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

Research Objective 1: To analyse the tone of public comments on the most popular *Harian Metro* Facebook post regarding the “boycott movement against Israel.”

Table 1.0: Tone of User’s Comments

| Tone | Supportive | Critical | Neutral |
|-------------|-------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Frequency | 169 | 2780 | 2051 |
| Percentages | 3.38% | 55.6% | 41.02% |

The tone of the comments in response to the *Harian Metro* post titled “McDonald’s Malaysia didn’t donate to Israel, don’t boycott – Mufti” is shown in Table 1.0. (figure 2). Of the total 5,000 comments, 169 (3.38%) were supportive, while a significant portion of 2,780 comments (55.6%) were critical. This indicates that the majority of commenters disagreed with the Mufti’s assertion. The high proportion of critical comments demonstrates the Muslim community’s strong sentiment towards the boycott movement, reflecting their solidarity with Palestinians. It also suggests that many Muslims were frustrated with the Mufti’s statement, perceiving it as contradictory to their religious and moral convictions. The remaining comments were neutral or not directly relevant to the discussion.

Overall, the data indicate that most commenters were critical of the Mufti’s statement that “McDonald Malaysia did not contribute to Israel” and continued to support the boycott movement against Israel.

Research Objective 2: To explore the themes in public comments on the “boycott movement against Israel,” and their connection to broader cultural and religious practices in Malaysia.

CRITICAL TONE

(1) RELIGIOUS DUTY AND SOLIDARITY IN THE BOYCOTT AGAINST ISRAEL

Religion and belief have been the primary forces behind the boycott movement against Israel. A large proportion of the persecuted Muslims in Palestine are, of course, Muslims, and Malaysia, which has a Muslim majority and Islam as its state religion, consistently supports Palestine. Beyond this religious affinity, the concept of *Ukhuwah Islamiyyah* (brotherhood by faith) further motivates Malaysians. *Ukhuwah* refers to the binding of hearts and souls through the bond of faith (*aqidah*), defining it as the brotherhood of faith.

Maaf, kami tetap teruskan boikot. Dan lebih mementingkan darah saudara kami disana berbanding makan di MCD.

Translation: Sorry, we will continue the boycott. We prioritize the blood of our brothers and sisters there over eating at McDonald’s.

Palastine tiap hari bermandian darah dibunuh dgn kejam... kita Masih bangga hisap rokok Dunhill, makan mekdi, kfc, Dan Lain lainmanusia jenis apa kita nii.

Translation: Palestine is drenched in blood every day, killed brutally... yet we are still proud to smoke Dunhill, eat McDonald’s, KFC, and others... what kind of people are we?

These comments demonstrate that Malaysian Muslims strongly identify with the concept of *Ukhuwah Islamiyyah* (brotherhood by lineage). They affectionately refer to Palestinian Muslims as *saudara* (brothers and sisters), expressing deep sympathy for the Palestinian people and concern that the money they spend could indirectly fund violence against their “brothers and sisters.” In Some commenters even describe the boycott as a form of small “jihad,” viewing it as a religious duty to participate.

...Allah dah bagi nampak jalan mana yg benar, yg boikot tu Alhamdulillah semoga Allah swt nmpk jihad kecil kita yg xnak boikot terpulang itu urusan anda dengan DIA. Cukup2lah untung selama ni, tiba masa untuk kami salurkan ke jalan yg lebih baik, jalan yg lebih membantu saudara2 kami disana.

Translation: ...Allah has shown us the true path. For those who boycott, Alhamdulillah; may Allah SWT see our small jihad. For those who choose not to boycott, that is between you and Him. Enough profit has been made so far; it's time for us to channel our resources toward a better path, one that helps our brothers and sisters there.

One of the comments stated that their personal sacrifices were worth nothing compared to the efforts of Palestinian Muslims defending Al Aqsa, a site regarded as sacred and holy in Islam, located in Jerusalem. According to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (n.d.), *jihad* refers to legitimate conflict or resistance against evil, which can be mental, physical, intellectual, or material, with the ultimate goal of pleasing God. Based on these comments, it is evident that some Malaysian Muslims view the boycott movement as a form of *jihad* and Israel as the embodiment of "evil" that all Muslims must unite to resist, spiritually or materially. Some commenters even refer to Israel as "Israhell," reflecting their perception of the country as malevolent. While they cannot physically participate on the battlefield, they see boycotts as a way to exert pressure and oppose what they perceive as Israel's persecution of Palestinians. Since Malaysian Muslims regard Palestinian Muslims as *saudara* (brothers and sisters) under the concept of *Ukhuwah Islamiyyah* (brotherhood by faith), they believe, according to Islamic teachings, that choosing not to support the boycott may lead to accountability before God on the Day of Judgement. As a result, many fear that they will be unable to answer for their inaction, which constitutes a sinful act.

Sya tidak mampu nak menjawab dengan Allah dihari kiamat kelak.

Translation: I will not be able to answer to Allah on the Day of Judgment.

... Kalau Kita Diam..Tak lawan... Tak tegur...Nanti Allah jgk akantanye... kamu tahu... Kenapa Tak tegur... Tak lawan...?? Nak jawab apa?? ...

Translation: ... If we remain silent, don't fight back, and don't speak up... Allah will also ask, 'You knew... why didn't you speak up or fight back?' What will you answer?

(2) U.S. ROYALTY FEES AS INDIRECT SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL

When reading the comments, the term “royalties” stands out, as it appeared frequently and became a focal point of discussion. Many commenters questioned how these fees are managed and where they ultimately go.

Habis royalti tu dia sumbang pergi mana?

Translation: Where does the royalty fee go then?

Such a comment, and others expressing similar concerns, argued that, although McDonald's Malaysia may not be directly contributing to Israel, the royalties paid could still constitute an indirect contribution.

Mmg la McDonald's Malaysia tak bg sumbngan direct pd Isreal... Tapi duit royalti tetap WAJIB bg kat McDonald USA... Dan skrg org USA tgh b0ik0t McDonald USA yg sah2 link dgn Isreal dan Yhudi... matematik simple mcmni pun hang tak blh nak pikiaq ka mufti oiii... Sorry la kurang ajar sikit...đj. Dividen2 utk shareholder bagai tu tetap geng2 yhudi tu dpt.

Translation: Of course, McDonald's Malaysia doesn't directly contribute to Israel... But royalty payments must still be given to McDonald's USA... And right now, people in the USA are boycotting McDonald's USA, which is clearly linked to Israel and the Jews... Such simple math, and you still can't figure it out, mufti? Sorry for being a bit rude.... The dividends for shareholders and all that still go to those Jewish groups.

This underscores the belief that, although McDonald's Malaysia may not directly fund Israel, the royalty payments made to the U.S.

headquarters could ultimately flow into the Jewish United Fund, which is perceived to support harmful actions against Palestine. Some commenters also questioned how McDonald's could guarantee that the royalty fee paid by McDonald's Malaysia would not constitute indirect support for Israel.

Tetapi McD Malaysia tetap byr royalti kpd McD Amerika... apa jaminan McD Malaysia yg wang royalti tersebut tidak digunakan oleh McD Amerika utk menjaga Israel? Spt kenyataan McD Malaysia baru2 ni... royalti tersebut digunakan utk kos2 operasi. Betul ke? Yakin ke?

Translation: But McDonald's Malaysia still pays royalties to McDonald's America... What guarantee is there from McDonald's Malaysia that the royalty money is not being used by McDonald's America to support Israel? As per McDonald's Malaysia's recent statement, the royalties are used for operational costs. Is that true? Are you sure?

(3) LOCAL FOOD – THE BETTER CHOICE

Since the outbreak of the boycott movement against Israel in Malaysia, local franchises of foreign brands such as Starbucks, KFC, and McDonald's have been targeted, which is the focus of this paper. This is because many Malaysians believe that the royalty fees paid by these brands to their parent companies could be used to support Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Consequently, it has been suggested that it would be preferable to stop purchasing from these brands and instead support local food and products, as reflected in the comments below.

Dah sampai masanya kita support local product 100%.

Translation: It's time for us to support local products 100%.

Support local food.... Fast food itu kehendak je.

Translation: Support local food... fast food is just a desire.

The comments above suggest that now is the time to begin supporting local products. Others concurred and explained their

reasoning, arguing that supporting local products would not only reduce the likelihood of the money they spend being diverted to fund weapons used against the Palestinians, but would also help to boost the country's economy.

Support local produk je. Bagus, ekonomi kita pon naik

Translation: Just support local products. It's good; our economy will improve too.

Rumah sendiri ada barang yg sama jenis dan lebih baik kualiti... kenapa nak" "minta sedekah" "dgn pihak luar... dah la tu kena bayar royalti bagai... sumber ke mana xkan xtau... faham2 la..."

Translation: "When you have better quality items of the same kind at home, why seek 'charity' from outsiders? On top of that, you have to pay royalties—who knows where those resources really go? Just understand this."

The comments suggest that many believe fast food is unhealthy, and that McDonald's burgers are overpriced and lack flavour. Commenters argue that it is better to enjoy a local burger, encouraging others to support local products, which offer better value and taste. As a result, some began recommending local chain brands, or even their own businesses, as alternatives to foreign brands such as McDonald's.

xkisahla ramly burger, otai burger, marrybrown ke... janji support lokal ðâi.

Translation: It doesn't matter if it's Ramly burger, Otai burger, or Marrybrown... as long as we support local!

Jom support Burger keluaran Orang Melayu kita spt RAMLY burger dll. sedap juga.

Translation: Let's support burgers made by our Malay people, like RAMLYburgers and others. They're delicious too!

SUPPORTIVE TONE

(1) NOT A SOLUTION: US BAN IMPOSSIBLE

It is well known that pro-Israel brands are pervasive in daily life, leading many to question the effectiveness of the boycott. For example, some commenters even compiled and shared lists of brands they believe are aligned with pro-Israeli interests, challenging boycott supporters' commitment to completely eliminate these brands from their consumption. This has sparked an important discussion about the feasibility of maintaining a boycott in a world so closely tied to these ubiquitous brands.

nk fikir sumbangan, banyak barang dalam melaysia menyumbang pada amarica, tapi kenapa mekdi saja kena tempias, sbb benda tu ampa perlu gunatu yg sebetulnya

Translation: If we think about contributions, many products in Malaysia contribute to America, but why is McDonald's the only one facing backlash? It's because that's what you actually need to use.

... nganlah kita jadi golongan terpalang acah boikot ðªð» sebab golongan terpalang acah ni x jauh beza dengan golongan munafiqð° pung pang boikot mcD tapi dia jugak pakai iphone, android, google, facebook, isi minyak shell, minum nestle ðð

Translation: ... let's not be the self-righteous ones pretending to boycott, because those who act like that aren't much different from hypocrites. They complain about boycotting McDonald's but still use iPhones, Androids, Google, Facebook, fill up at Shell, and drink Nestlé.

The comments above underscore the public's varying concerns regarding the issue, with some commenters listing pro-Israel companies to highlight how deeply these brands are intertwined with everyday life. The discussion also extended to Facebook, the platform where the post was originally shared and all interactions took place. Ironically, Facebook

itself is widely perceived as a pro-Israel brand, adding another layer to the conversation.

ko fhm x apa mksud boikot? maksud boikot ialah bhnti apa2 activity yg boleh nyalurkan dana kpd org tu kan?? ko tau x stiap mnit ko online fb, ko komenitu ini, ko post n share itu ini, company fb dpt profit brp bnyak dari accko??

Translation: Do you understand what boycott means? Boycott means to stop many activities that could channel funds to that entity, right? Do you know that every minute you're online on Facebook, commenting and posting, the company makes a profit from your account?

The comments explain that, although Facebook is free to use, it still generates significant profits and pays substantial royalties to the U.S. They highlight that Facebook and WhatsApp, rather than McDonald's, provide the most support to Israel, suggesting that simply boycotting a single brand like McDonald's may not be the most effective or logical approach.

(2) IMPACT ON WORK OPPORTUNITIES

It has also been argued that boycotting pro-Israeli brands such as McDonald's not only raises questions about the boycott's effectiveness and feasibility but may also have unintended negative consequences for the companies' employees. One of the most frequently criticised impacts of the boycott movement against Israel in Malaysia has been its effect on local workers, many of whom have lost their jobs as a result of working for the boycotted brands. Similarly, many commenters on this post expressed concern for the struggles faced by these local workers.

ya, nak cari kerja skrg bukan mudah... Ekonomi tak berapa baik Dan lepas attack covid 19 Pikir juga org2 islam kerja Di situ bukan org jahat, Bahkan mereka islamDan solat bersama2 Ada jalan terbaik utk bantu Palestine ni...

Translation: Yes, finding a job now is not easy... the economy isn't doing well, and after the COVID-19 attack, we also need to think

about the Muslims working there; they are not bad people. In fact, they are Muslims and pray together. There are better ways to help Palestine...

Thus, by analysing all these comments thus far, it is evident that Malaysians face a dilemma. On the one hand, there is a strong desire to support Palestine and take a stand against businesses deemed likely to endorse injustice. On the other hand, there is a clear awareness of the economic realities faced by many Malaysians, especially those employed in boycotted restaurants. This view is further complicated by those who argue that, although the desire to partake in the boycott is valid, the current challenging job market makes it more difficult for affected individuals to find alternative or employment opportunities.

bang rezeki org Lain2... Saya kasihan org melayu kerja Di situ, merekatak salah pun kenapa disalahkan?? Mereka nak kerja, kita buat camtu merekaboleh hilang kerja... Saya yakin ada cara lain lebih baik utk isu Palestine ni, tanpa rosak kanekonomi umat islam dalam Negara... Ni pandangan saya

Translation: Brother, this is someone else's livelihood... I feel sorry for the Malays working there; they haven't done anything wrong, so why blame them?? They just want to work, and if we do this, they could lose their jobs... I'm sure there are better ways to address the Palestine issue without harming the economy of Muslims in this country... This is my opinion.

(3) NOT ENOUGH EVIDENCE LINKING MCDONALD'S TO ISRAEL

As mentioned earlier, the royalty fees that major brands pay to their parent companies in the U.S. have been cited as a key reason for supporting a boycott of these brands. However, some commenters argue that this claim is not supported by evidence. As a result, such views have been expressed in the discussion within the comments section.

...selama ini pihak yang suruh boikot tu pun tak pernah tunjukkan sebarang bukti. Mereka hanya menyangka² saja.

Translation: ...all this time, those calling for the boycott have never shown any evidence. They just assume things.

...ulamak mana lah yang kata royalti 5% bagi kat Isra-hell tu??
Sembang

Translation: ...which scholar said that the 5% royalty goes to Israel??
That's just talk.

The comment above reflects frustration that some individuals advocate a boycott of McDonald's on the basis of royalties without providing concrete evidence to substantiate their claims. One commenter even stated that he would consider joining a boycott of McDonald's only if there were evidence that the royalty fees were actually being directed to Israel.

... tiada dana yg menyumbang terus kepada isra-hell... sekiranya ada, boleh lampirkan bukti... sama-sama kita boikot... saya sendiri sudah berbulan tidak makan mcd... namun saya tidak setuju dengan boikot ini...

Translation: ... tiada dana yg menyumbang terus kepada isra- hell... sekiranya ada, boleh lampirkan bukti... sama-sama kita boikot... saya sendiri sudah berbulan tidak makan mcd... namun saya tidak setuju dengan boikot ini...

DISCUSSION

CRITICAL TONE

The critical responses to the Mufti's statement ("McDonald's Malaysia does not donate to Israel, don't boycott") revolve around three main themes: religious duty and solidarity in the boycott, U.S. royalty fees as indirect support for Israel, and the promotion of local products as a preferable alternative. These discussions demonstrate how media priming significantly shapes public perception and reinforces the boycott movement.

Media priming theory suggests that repeated exposure to particular themes in media content can influence how individuals interpret new

information (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2009). In this context, news reports and social media discussions surrounding the Israel-Palestine conflict have consistently framed the boycott as both a religious and moral responsibility. The concept of *Ukhuwah Islamiyyah* (Brotherhood by Faith) reinforces this sentiment, encouraging Muslims to support their fellow believers in Palestine. Media coverage that frequently emphasises the suffering of Palestinians strengthens this priming effect, presenting the boycott not merely as a political act but as a form of small *jihad* (striving in the way of God) in which all Muslims are urged to participate in. Many commenters also link their participation in the boycott to avoiding accountability on the Day of Judgement, demonstrating how repeated media narratives shape emotions and reinforce perceived duties. Havrylets and Bielinska (2025) note that media often operates by activating pre-existing mental associations rather than directly altering beliefs. This is reflected in the findings of this study, which indicate that boycotting behaviour is strongly associated with religious beliefs; when the media creates an echo chamber, it evokes emotional responses among Muslim users, as the issue challenges deeply held cultural and religious values.

Another key discussion concerns McDonald's royalty fees and their potential indirect funding of Israel. Media priming theory suggests that recurrent exposure to narratives linking Western corporations to Israel's military actions—such as reports about U.S. financial aid to Israel (Bilmes et al., 2024)—creates automatic association between these companies and the conflict. As a result, even in the absence of concrete evidence, many assume that franchise fees paid by McDonald's Malaysia contribute to Israel's war efforts. Boycott supporters' arguments are reinforced by media narratives highlighting the U.S. government's historical support for Israel, leading to the widespread belief that any money flowing to U.S.-based corporations ultimately benefits Israel. Muhammad Amirul (2024) notes that journal articles covering the Israel-Palestine conflict from 2014 to 2023 show that such boycotts are driven primarily by strong religious sensitivities, concerns for justice, and the desire to avoid social disapproval. Thus, when the media continuously echoes these issues, sensitivity among Muslim users on social media is heightened, prompting calls for boycotts.

Similarly, the preference for local products as an alternative to McDonald's exemplifies media priming in action. Social media discussions and past boycott campaigns have frequently linked support for local businesses to national pride and economic empowerment. Susanti et al. (2024), in their study, reveal that consumer perceptions are heavily shaped by external narratives, and when boycotts are framed as a patriotic or ethical duty, engagement increases. The repetition of these narratives in media spaces reinforces the belief that choosing local products is not solely an economic decision but also a moral one. This aligns with media priming studies indicating that repeated exposure to specific messages shapes long-term attitudes and decision-making processes (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

SUPPORTIVE TONE

Supportive comments towards the Mufti's statement emphasise three main themes: the impracticality of entirely avoiding U.S. products, the economic impact of boycotts on employees, and the lack of concrete evidence linking McDonald's to Israel. Here, media priming operates differently, shaping skepticism about the boycott's effectiveness and foregrounding economic concerns.

Many commenters argue that boycotting all U.S. brands is unrealistic, as they are deeply embedded in daily life. Media priming theory explains that exposure to counter-narratives, such as reports highlighting the ubiquity of U.S. brands, can weaken the effects of boycott-related priming. Shadi (2024) found that although boycotts may prompt temporary financial setbacks for targeted companies, their long-term market impact is minimal. Media reports emphasising the difficulty of avoiding U.S. brands function as a cognitive counterweight, prompting individuals to question the practicality of the boycott movement.

Concerns about job losses follow a similar pattern. News coverage and economic reports highlighting the effects of the boycott on Malaysian workers (Song, 2023) reinforce a different type of priming that frames boycotts as economically detrimental rather than politically effective. This shifts public discourse from moral responsibility to financial consequences, resulting in widespread concern over rising unemployment and broader economic impacts. *Malaysia Today* (2024, March 14) reports that Malaysia's unemployment rate is currently 3.3%, close to pre-

pandemic levels, but a prolonged boycott could disrupt supply chains and exacerbate economic challenges. Consequently, individuals primed with economic concerns are more likely to resist boycott narratives and support the Mufti's statements

Finally, the lack of concrete evidence linking McDonald's royalty payments to Israel illustrates media priming in shaping trust. While boycott supporters focus on the broader U.S.-Israel financial relationship, some commenters emphasise the lack of proof that McDonald's funds Israeli military actions. This aligns with Utama et al. (2023), who argue that while boycotts may not significantly affect Israel's economy, they do influence brand loyalty and consumer perceptions. Media emphasis on corporate financial transparency creates a counter-narrative that diminishes the effectiveness of priming effects supporting the boycott.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the tone and thematic content of public comments on social media regarding the Malaysian boycott movement against Israel. Using qualitative content analysis, it explored how public sentiment is influenced by religious, economic, and social factors. The study also reviewed literature on boycott culture, media influence on boycotts, the BDS movement, and the specific Malaysian context. Media priming theory provided a foundation for understanding how repeated exposure to particular narratives shapes public opinion.

The findings reveal that public sentiment in the most engaged *Harian Metro* post about the boycott movement is overwhelmingly critical. Critical comments constitute the majority, underscoring the strong commitment within the Malaysian Muslim community to supporting the Palestinian cause through economic resistance.

Overall, this study demonstrates that public sentiment surrounding the Malaysian boycott of Israel is primarily driven by religious solidarity, economic concerns, and nationalistic consumer preferences. While the boycott movement enjoys strong support, dissenting voices raise valid questions about its feasibility and potential unintended consequences. The role of media priming in shaping and reinforcing public sentiment is evident, highlighting the power of social media in influencing socio-political movements. These findings offer valuable insights for

businesses, policymakers, and scholars seeking to understand how digital discourse translates into real-world activism and consumer behaviour.

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How Instagram Reels Shape Youth Behaviour in Malaysia: A TPB-Guided Qualitative Study

Mohd Hanafi Jumrah* & Goh Hui Suan**

Abstract: With the rapid advancement of digital technology, modern video formats are increasingly replacing traditional media. Among these, short-form videos, particularly reels, have gained substantial popularity and influence on social media platforms. In Malaysia, this trend is especially pronounced among young people, who constitute a highly active audience. This study examines how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control shape Malaysian youths' intentions and behaviours when engaging with reel videos. A qualitative research design was employed, involving in-depth, one-on-one interviews with 28 informants across different regions of Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews, guided by six core questions and supplemented with additional probes, enabled the collection of rich insights. The findings indicate that reel video content exerts a strong influence on youth behaviour, with key themes emerging around rapid information absorption, dualistic effects (both positive and negative), and behavioural adaptation. These results highlight how reels function as a pervasive force in shaping youth culture and digital practices, offering valuable implications for businesses, policymakers, educators, and researchers concerned with youth digital engagement.

Keywords: youth behaviour, reel video, influence behaviour, youth culture

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INTRODUCTION

The internet has become an essential part of daily life, particularly for adolescents and young people, who use it extensively for education, information-seeking, communication, and entertainment. The accessibility and reliability of online platforms have made them central to young people's everyday routines. With the evolution of Web 2.0 technologies, users are no longer limited to consuming content but are also actively creating it, driving the growth of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook (Setiawan et al., 2022). Within these platforms, short-form video content, commonly referred to as reels or short videos, has emerged as a dominant media format, especially on mobile devices, due to its highly engaging and attention-grabbing nature.

Short videos are now reshaping patterns of online interaction by sustaining user engagement and enhancing platform stickiness. TikTok, developed by a Chinese technology company, pioneered this trend and quickly became one of the most widely used platforms worldwide (Liang & Wolfe, 2022). Its success as “the leading destination for short-form mobile video” (Shu-Chuan et al., 2022) prompted competitors such as Instagram and YouTube to introduce similar features, Reels and Shorts, respectively (Menon, 2022). Instagram Reels, in particular, has rapidly positioned itself as a strong competitor to TikTok by offering a comparable user interface and a wide range of content creation tools (Rachel, 2020).

Reels allow users to create, edit, and share short videos ranging from 15 to 60 seconds, enabling diverse forms of creative expression, entertainment, and social connectivity (Menon, 2022). Their fast-paced, mobile-friendly design aligns well with contemporary lifestyles and has proven effective in capturing the attention of young people (Setiawan et al., 2022). Empirical evidence reflects this shift: Instagram reported a 3.5% increase in average user engagement time and an 11.4% rise in downloads following the launch of Reels (Santora, 2024). Globally, Instagram is projected to reach 1.44 billion users in 2024, equivalent to 31.2% of all internet users (Dixon, 2024). In Malaysia, Instagram reached approximately 15.1 million users in October 2022, representing 43.3% of the population, with the majority falling within the youth category of 18–34 years old (Napoleon, 2022).

These developments underscore the growing influence of Instagram Reels on youth behaviour. Malaysian youth, in particular, demonstrate high levels of social media engagement and devote substantial time to consuming short-form video content (Nadeem et al., 2024). Prior studies show that such content not only attracts attention but also shapes consumer preferences, digital habits, and behavioural patterns (Rico Kuntag & Sijabat, 2023). Since the outcomes of social media use vary according to platform-specific features and user motivations (Kim et al., 2014), it is crucial to understand how Reels influence youth attitudes, norms, and behaviours. This study, therefore, examines the behavioural impact of Instagram Reels on Malaysian youth, highlighting their role as a driving force in digital engagement and cultural shifts.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study examines how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control shape Malaysian youths' intentions and behaviours in relation to engaging with reel videos.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Recent studies highlight the persuasive influence of short video platforms, particularly reels, on user behaviour. Nong et al. (2023) observe that reels are not only addictive but also evoke a sense of serendipity, a combination that enhances their persuasive power and shapes users' perspectives and behaviours. Similarly, McKay et al. (2020) note that the content delivered through reels tends to be impactful, instructive, and relatable, thereby amplifying its emotional appeal.

The quality of reel platforms also plays a crucial role in behavioural outcomes. Qin et al. (2022) report that high system quality fosters addictive tendencies, while the provision of high-quality information improves user experience and encourages content sharing. Supporting this, Rico Kuntag and Sijabat (2023) argue that engaging information reduces decision fatigue and fosters satisfaction, thereby sustaining user dependence. Such dynamics particularly affect youth, who remain vulnerable to digital dependency and continue to exhibit contemporary

behavioural patterns such as narcissism and oversharing (Wulandari & Baskara Wijaya, 2021).

In this context, serendipity emerges as a key element influencing youth behaviour. Chiang et al. (2021) explain that, amid economic and social pressures, young people increasingly turn to the spontaneous, small moments of joy offered by reels as an accessible source of happiness. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok strengthen this appeal by enabling users to create highly personalised short-form content. A survey by Kannan and Anuradha (2024) reveals that 93% of users utilise built-in editing tools before sharing reels, demonstrating strong engagement and creative participation. While these affordances encourage creativity, they also amplify behavioural and social implications, particularly among youth audiences.

The Malaysian context further underscores the behavioural impact of reels. With social media penetration at 83%, university students constitute a large proportion of active users (Zulkifli & Zainal Abidin, 2023). Reels and other short videos have become the preferred format due to their brevity, ease of consumption, and alignment with reduced attention spans. Nong et al. (2023) report that short videos under 60 seconds yield the highest return on investment, both in engagement and impact. Correspondingly, Babu et al. (2024) find that short-form content generates more likes, shares, and comments than long-form alternatives, demonstrating its stronger capacity to influence online behaviour. These trends highlight the significant role of reels in shaping youth engagement and underscore the need to examine their behavioural consequences within the Malaysian digital landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reels videos represent a form of user-generated content (UGC), typically comprising short clips ranging from 15 to 60 seconds that are widely shared across social media platforms (Menon, 2022). Their brevity makes them highly compatible with mobile devices and easily distributable across multiple networks (Qin et al., 2022). Initially popularised by TikTok (or Douyin in China), reels rapidly spread across demographics and became one of the most frequently used tools among Chinese millennials (Jung & Zhou, 2019). While reels offer entertainment

value, they are also linked to a new form of social media addiction, characterised by compulsive usage, reduced self-regulation, and behavioural patterns resembling other addictions (Casale et al., 2018; Klobas et al., 2018; Tarafdar et al., 2020; Smith & Short, 2022).

The efficiency of reels in disseminating content further amplifies their behavioural influence. Liu et al. (2019) indicate that reels cater to time-constrained users seeking quick and accessible information. Their increasing popularity, particularly on Instagram, has prompted marketers to adopt reels as a strategy to engage audiences more effectively (Liang & Wolfe, 2022). The format aligns with user preferences for fragmented, easily digestible content (Sharma et al., 2023), while positioning users as active “agents” or “disseminators,” from casual users to influencers, who continuously circulate content. Through strong visual emphasis, reels simplify complex messages and heighten youth engagement. As Sumadevi (2023) argues, such engagement significantly shapes youths’ lifestyles while also introducing societal challenges associated with social media overuse.

Most notably, reels influence youth behaviour through their impact on decision-making processes. Tian et al. (2022) demonstrate that algorithm-driven reel advertisements enhance user experience by tailoring content to individual needs, thereby stimulating purchase intentions and consumption behaviour. Similarly, perceptions of reel-based advertising have been shown to influence attitudes and behavioural responses (Madlberger & Kraemmer, 2019). Consequently, short-form video formats such as reels function not only as entertainment but also as powerful behavioural drivers that shape consumer decisions, social interactions, and everyday practices among youth.

THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOUR (TPB)

This study adopts the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), developed as an extension of the earlier Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). The TPB posits that behaviour is shaped by an individual’s intention to perform the behaviour, as well as their perceived behavioural control over it (Povey et al., 2010). According to Hasbullah et al. (2014) and Conner and Armitage (2006), the TPB is regarded as one of the most straightforward and widely applied theoretical frameworks for predicting human behaviour. Ajzen (1991), the originator of the theory, emphasises

that the TPB provides researchers with a robust framework for understanding and predicting behavioural intentions across a variety of contexts.

In applying the TPB, this study examines three key constructs: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, that contribute to youths' intentions to engage with reel video content. The first construct, attitude, reflects an individual's evaluation of the behaviour in question. In this study, youth attitudes towards reel videos may be shaped by the degree of trust placed in content creators, as well as by the perceived value, usefulness, or enjoyment of the content. Favourable evaluations of reel videos, particularly in terms of perceived authenticity or entertainment value, can lead to positive dispositions towards the behaviours promoted by such content. The present study thus investigates youths' perceptions, affective responses, and evaluations of reel content to understand how attitudes influence their behavioural intentions.

The second construct, subjective norms, refers to the perceived social pressure to perform or not perform a particular behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). These norms are shaped by the expectations and judgements of significant others, including peers, family members, and wider social networks. In the context of reel videos, if youths perceive that their peers or social groups endorse or expect engagement with such content, they may be more inclined to participate. This study, therefore, explores the extent to which peer influence and perceived approval shape youths' decisions to engage with reels.

The third construct, perceived behavioural control, pertains to an individual's perception of the ease or difficulty of performing a given behaviour, which is often informed by past experiences and anticipated obstacles (Ajzen, 1991; Hogg & Vaughan, 2008). In the context of reel video consumption, perceived behavioural control refers to the degree to which youths feel capable of managing their engagement, whether due to time constraints, access to content, or self-regulation. A higher level of perceived behavioural control is typically associated with stronger intentions to act. Accordingly, this study investigates how youths perceive their ability to control their interactions with reels, providing insight into how these perceptions shape behavioural outcomes.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study investigates the influence of reel videos on youth behaviour in Malaysia using a qualitative research methodology involving in-depth, one-to-one interviews. Qualitative methods prioritise descriptive data over numerical measures, focusing on participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and behaviours related to a particular phenomenon (Gelati & Verplancke, 2022). This approach is appropriate as it enables the collection of rich, detailed data from informants, offering deeper insights into the underlying motivations, perceptions, and social contexts that shape youth engagement with reel content. Qualitative methods are particularly effective in uncovering the cultural and social dimensions influencing behavioural patterns, allowing for a nuanced understanding not only of what behaviours are exhibited but also why they occur (Stuckey, 2018).

To achieve this, the study was conducted online via Google Meet and involved in-depth interviews guided by six semi-structured questions prepared in advance, along with two additional questions posed during the sessions. This method was crucial in eliciting detailed personal narratives and subjective interpretations. A total of 28 informants were purposively selected from all states in Malaysia, which include Penang, Perlis, Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Johor, Pahang, Terengganu, Kelantan, Sabah, Sarawak, and Wilayah Persekutuan (see Table 1), based on predetermined criteria. This sampling strategy employed was designed to include individuals who could provide rich and relevant data aligned with the study's objectives. The selection criteria were as follows:

- i. Informants must be highly active social media users, defined as individuals who spend more than five hours per day on social media platforms.
- ii. Informants must fall within the youth age category, defined in this study as individuals aged between 15 and 40 years.

The sample size in purposive sampling is typically small compared to probability sampling techniques; thus, the quality of the data depends heavily on the reliability and competence of the informants (Campbell et al., 2020; Tongco, 2007). The sample size was categorised into several

age groups, namely 18–24 years, 25–34 years, and 35–40 years. This study reached saturation, and the researcher ceased interviewing once no new findings, themes, or concepts emerged. This is supported by Ahmed (2025), who notes that data saturation represents a critical stage in qualitative research when additional data collection no longer yields new insights, themes, or patterns. Also, according to Hennink & Kaiser (2022), the sample size necessary for saturation typically ranges between 5 and 24 interviews.

Interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times to ensure informants' comfort and engagement. All informants who agreed to participate signed a consent form before the interview commenced. Each session lasted approximately one to one and a half hours, providing sufficient opportunity for open discussion without imposing time pressure.

During the interviews, researchers employed both audio recording and field note-taking to ensure the accuracy and reliability of data collection. Field notes served as a supplementary measure to safeguard against potential technical issues with the recording device, thereby preserving the integrity of the informants' responses. In addition, the researcher transcribed the recordings after each interview. The transcripts provided a clear and comprehensive account of the verbal data, allowing the researchers to review and uncover deeper meanings that might have been overlooked when relying solely on the audio recordings (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2023).

Thematic analysis was employed as the primary qualitative method to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning (themes) within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach enabled the identification and reporting of patterns within the interpreted data (Naeem et al., 2023). The process began with the transcription of semi-structured interviews, followed by repeated readings of the transcripts to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated using ATLAS.ti and subsequently organised into meaningful categories aligned with the research objectives. These categories were then refined and reorganised in Microsoft Word to facilitate the systematic identification, review, and refinement of themes. Rather than merely summarising the data, thematic analysis allowed for a deeper exploration of the key features most pertinent to the research questions. As Clarke and Braun (2016) note, this method does not aim to

capture every detail within the data but instead focuses on the most salient and meaningful elements that emerge during analysis. Moreover, thematic analysis provides a systematic yet flexible framework for organising and managing qualitative data, thereby supporting the development of a clear, coherent, and well-structured final report (Cassell & Symon, 2013).

Table 1: Informants Characteristics (n=28)

| No. | Informant Code | Gender | Age (years) | State |
|-----|----------------|--------|-------------|-----------------|
| 1 | I1 | Female | 18 | Penang |
| 2 | I15 | Male | 21 | |
| 3 | I2 | Male | 24 | Perlis |
| 4 | I16 | Female | 28 | |
| 5 | I3 | Female | 20 | Kedah |
| 6 | I17 | Male | 36 | |
| 7 | I4 | Male | 33 | Perak |
| 8 | I18 | Female | 27 | |
| 9 | I5 | Female | 22 | Selangor |
| 10 | I19 | Male | 39 | |
| 11 | I6 | Male | 35 | Melaka |
| 12 | I20 | Male | 28 | |
| 13 | I7 | Female | 21 | Negeri Sembilan |
| 14 | I21 | Female | 40 | |
| 15 | I8 | Male | 19 | Johor |
| 16 | I22 | Female | 40 | |
| 17 | I9 | Female | 26 | Pahang |
| 18 | I23 | Male | 38 | |

| | | | | |
|----|-----|--------|----|---------------------|
| 19 | I10 | Male | 30 | Terengganu |
| 20 | I24 | Female | 25 | |
| 21 | I11 | Female | 29 | Kelantan |
| 22 | I25 | Male | 37 | |
| 23 | I12 | Male | 22 | Sabah |
| 24 | I26 | Female | 36 | |
| 25 | I13 | Female | 20 | Sarawak |
| 26 | I27 | Male | 39 | |
| 27 | I14 | Male | 31 | Wilayah Persekutuan |
| 28 | I28 | Female | 25 | |

Source: Field Data (2025)

DATA ANALYSIS

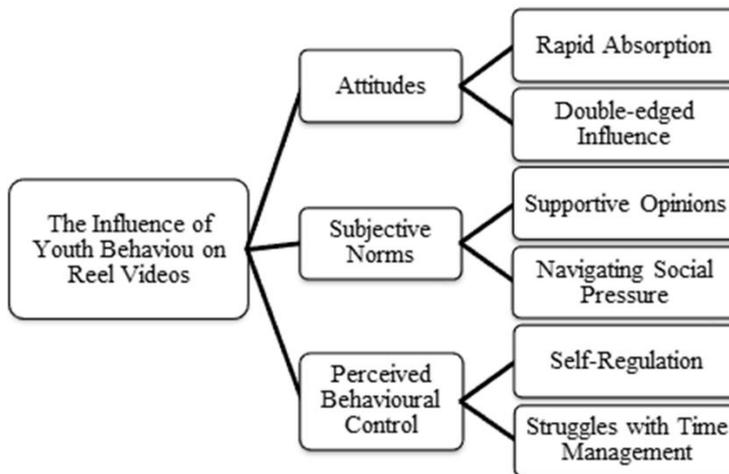


Figure 1: Thematic Map of TPB-Guided Themes and Sub-Themes on the Influence of Instagram Reels on Youth Behaviour

ATTITUDES

The findings of this study indicate that Instagram Reels significantly shape youth behaviour through attitudes, which were categorised into two sub-themes: (i) *Rapid Absorption* and (ii) *Double-Edged Influence*.

The sub-theme *Rapid Absorption* reflects how the short-form format of reel videos encourages youths to quickly acquire new skills or knowledge, often in less than a minute. This efficiency in delivering concise and applicable information increases the likelihood of continuous engagement with such content. Informants emphasised that the immediacy and clarity of reels not only facilitate understanding but also make it easier to apply the acquired knowledge in real-life situations. As one informant explained:

These videos I have watched really help me think critically and work fast, as what the content creator is trying to do, because reels are very short in only 30 seconds to a minute. I have found this helpful a lot when I deal with patients, (I15, Penang).

Sometimes, I also watch videos with excellent editing techniques, which I find useful to learn from. On platforms like TikTok, I could learn from some content creators, especially those studying film or talented creators whose videos they share have great content, editing styles, and other background music. As a student in media production, I find these examples very valuable for learning, (I3, Kedah).

The second sub-theme, *Double-Edged Influence*, illustrates the ambivalent ways in which reel videos shape youth behaviour. Positively, informants described reels as valuable tools for acquiring new skills, managing emotions, and shaping perspectives applicable to both academic and workplace contexts. However, reels were also reported to induce negative behavioural outcomes. Several informants acknowledged developing a reliance on reels, which manifested in procrastination, diminished motivation, and negative self-perceptions such as feelings of laziness. Furthermore, many admitted difficulty in regulating the time spent engaging with reels, even when aware of the potential risks. These

insights underscore how the same platform simultaneously fosters constructive learning while also reinforcing problematic behavioural tendencies among youth. The following excerpts reflect the informants' perspectives:

...I think these videos give me positive influences, no matter in my attitude or in my behaviour. As in the context of this video, it is giving me a summarization of all the topics that I need to study, so it makes it easier to study. However, if I want to say something negative, it's because they give us too many summaries, and it makes us a little bit lazy to find our summaries on our own, so we just rely on reel videos. This makes it harder for me to remember things in the long term, and I need to go on and on and again and watch the videos to revise my knowledge, (I14, Wilayah Persekutuan).

On the positive influence, the reason I watch reel videos is because it could be able to learn new things, like filming techniques, camera angles, and editing skills. Some reels explain these topics very clearly, and I learn useful things from them. I only focus on learning what is helpful and ignore what is not beneficial to me. However, on the negative side, reels can be addictive, and I end up wasting a lot of time, (I8, Johor).

Within the attitude dimension, the findings reveal that reel videos exert both positive and negative influences on youth behaviour. On the positive side, informants described being motivated to engage with reels due to their perceived usefulness, particularly the ability to acquire knowledge quickly and efficiently within a short timeframe. This perceived value drives active consumption, as youths deliberately seek out reel content for learning and self-improvement. Conversely, the same informants highlighted the behavioural drawbacks of reel engagement. Many reported difficulty disengaging once viewing begins, leading to prolonged scrolling, unproductive time use, and challenges in managing tasks. While some youths attempt to regulate their consumption to avoid these effects, others persist despite recognising the negative impact on their time management and productivity. Overall, these findings suggest

that youth attitudes towards reels are shaped by a dynamic tension between perceived benefits and behavioural risks.

SUBJECTIVE NORMS

The second key element influencing youth behaviour is subjective norms, which in this study is divided into two sub-themes: (i) *Supportive Opinions* and (ii) *Navigating Social Pressure*.

Under *Supportive Opinions*, the findings show that family and peers play a reinforcing role in shaping youth engagement with reels. Rather than discouraging consumption, most informants reported receiving implicit or explicit support, as these social groups trust youths to differentiate between useful and potentially harmful content. In several cases, parents and friends actively shared reel videos with them, reinforcing the idea that such content provides valuable knowledge and insights. This social reinforcement strengthens positive perceptions of reels and encourages continued engagement, thereby shaping youth behaviour.

My family and friends don't really have any views on my reel videos. Especially my family, they actually do not interfere with what I watch, even if they see it, they would think that it is normal for me to watch because of my studies. However, most of my friends watch the same reel videos because we follow the same Instagram account, and we watch together, their opinion obviously influences my behaviour, (I7, Negeri Sembilan).

My family and friends generally think it's fine for me to keep watching my videos. They know I am not watching anything unhealthy, and I am watching content that helps me improve myself, (I13, Sarawak).

Despite occasional concerns expressed by parents or peers about the potential negative effects of reel videos, such views had minimal influence on youth behaviour. Informants explained that these comments were interpreted more as gentle reminders to be cautious rather than as restrictions. As a result, their engagement with reels remained largely

unchanged. Many emphasised that humorous or entertaining reels were a legitimate form of relaxation and stress relief, reflecting how youths prioritise personal enjoyment while selectively integrating external advice. This suggests that youth behaviour is shaped more strongly by their own preferences and self-regulation than by social caution.

Sometimes my parents see me watching those memes and say it's bad because it can be addictive and does not have any value to learn. But I think I still don't change my behaviour because the content is quite funny and it helps me relax, (I5, Selangor).

...except for my sister, who sometimes watches with me. If she tells me not to watch certain things, I still listen to her. For my friends, it depends on what the video is like. If it is something bad, I take their advice and do not watch it anymore, (I9, Pahang).

The second sub-theme of subjective norms, *Navigating Social Pressure*, reflects how external expectations shape youth behaviour in relation to reel consumption. Most informants reported that their engagement with reels was self-directed, with minimal influence from family or peers. They explained that their viewing habits were largely a matter of personal choice rather than compliance with external demands. Nonetheless, a minority acknowledged experiencing some degree of social pressure when concerns were raised about the negative effects of excessive screen time. These concerns, however, had only a limited impact on actual viewing behaviour, as most youths continued to prioritise their own preferences in consuming reel content. Those who did not perceive any pressure further elaborated:

I think I wouldn't feel very sad or discouraged, and I just feel like I have to stop playing on my phone, and sometimes they just help me to take off of my sort of addiction towards social media. I think it is good if they help me to stop because I cannot stop myself, (I1, Penang).

I don't feel any pressure from my family or friends to stop watching reel videos. I think this is the digital age, and almost everyone uses

social media to get information for entertainment. So, I do not feel forced to reduce the time I spend watching reel videos, (I2, Perlis).

I would not feel any pressure because I see it as a sign that people care about me. When I am out with my friends or family, I focus more on being present with them and less on my phone. I prefer to enjoy the time with them and engage in conversations, so I do not feel the need to keep watching reel videos or checking my phone constantly, (I7, Negeri Sembilan).

In contrast, some informants reported experiencing explicit pressure from family and peers to limit or stop watching reels. They noted that these interventions were generally well-intentioned, aimed at preventing exposure to unproductive or potentially harmful content. While acknowledging the rationale behind such advice, these youths admitted that the expressed concerns created a sense of external pressure that influenced how they reflected on their own reel consumption habits. They mentioned:

My parents have also mentioned that I use my phone for too long, so I'm trying to reduce my time by using this tracking app, so that is the pressure. Actually, my parents won't scold me but talk to me and explain not to spend too much time on my phone, (I14, Wilayah Persekutuan).

If really talking about pressure from my family, I think when we are gathering and we need to have a bonding period, but we are still like surfing the internet watching reels videos, so I think the pressure is there to stop me from watching it because I need to have the times to bond with my families, so I will stop watching all reels videos and continue to bond with them, and after the gathering or like the time beside gathering, I only watch it and not the time with my family or the time when I was supposed to be bonding, (I11, Kelantan).

Analysis of the responses from the 28 informants reveals that, under the element of subjective norms, most youths did not experience strong external pressure from family or peers to reduce their reel viewing, even

when the content could influence their behaviour. Instead, the majority described receiving encouragement or acceptance from their social circles, reflecting a belief that they possessed sufficient maturity to differentiate between beneficial and less appropriate content. In many cases, family members and friends actively reinforced this behaviour by sharing or recommending reels considered informative or meaningful, thereby further normalising and legitimising reel consumption among youth.

PERCEIVED BEHAVIOURAL CONTROL

The third key element examined in this study is perceived behavioural control, which generated two sub-themes: (i) *Self-Regulation* and (ii) *Struggles with Time Management*. The first sub-theme, *Self-Regulation*, reflects how youths perceive their ability to manage reel video consumption. Findings suggest that this ability varies across individuals and is shaped by personal behavioural tendencies. While some informants reported exercising conscious control, the majority expressed difficulty in limiting their screen time. They described a recurring pattern in which watching one reel often led to continuous scrolling, with little awareness of the time spent until disrupted by external demands, such as academic responsibilities. These accounts highlight the challenges many youths face in exercising control over their reel-viewing behaviour. The following excerpts illustrate this sentiment:

I am very confident that I cannot control the amount of time I spend watching reel videos. I usually watch reels in the morning after I wake up or night before I sleep. During that time, I'm just lying in bed with nothing else to do, so I start watching reels. I think a few reels will make me to sleep, but apparently if I don't stop it voluntarily, I can end up watching reels for one hour or two hours, which affects my sleep and gives me less time to sleep, (I4, Perak).

I think controlling the time I spend watching reel videos is actually very difficult for me, especially for young people. Factors like exams or work can make us limit our time spent on these videos. However, the problem is that reel videos easily show us the content

we want to see. They provide entertainment or small tips related to our lives, which makes them very addictive, (I12, Sabah)

In contrast, some informants displayed strong self-regulation, expressing confidence in their ability to control their reel video consumption. These youths reported consciously redirecting their attention to alternative activities, such as exercising, socialising, or engaging in offline hobbies. Such strategies were described as effective mechanisms to disengage from reels, reinforcing self-discipline and reducing unproductive screen time. This suggests that, for certain individuals, reel consumption does not undermine behavioural control but can coexist with deliberate efforts to maintain balance in daily routines. The following responses illustrate this perspective:

I think I am confident enough as I came into control by going out, like spending more time outside. The factors that make it easier for me to reduce screen time include spending time with people, talking with them, and exercising by doing physical workouts, (I3, Kedah).

I think I feel confident in controlling the amount of time, as I will finish my tasks before I start to watch the reels video. One factor that helps me is that I set reminders for myself about the due dates of my tasks, which prevents me from ignoring them. This way, I can enjoy watching videos without feeling guilty or anxious about unfinished work, (I5, Selangor).

The second sub-theme under perceived behavioural control, *Struggles with Time Management*, emphasises the challenges youths encounter in balancing reel consumption with essential daily activities, such as rest and productivity. Many informants acknowledged that reels often disrupted their routines, particularly by reducing sleep and impending task completion. They described reel videos as highly addictive, with prolonged viewing sessions stemming from difficulties in exercising self-control. Although reels are frequently perceived as harmless entertainment, excessive consumption was reported to negatively affect behaviour by fostering procrastination, diminishing

productivity, and disrupting overall time management. The following statements illustrate these concerns:

If I'm searching for medical content, after watching one reel, I might find myself swiping down to see what's next. It will be very hard to control myself in terms of this stuff, so I think watching one reel has negatively affected my ability to manage my time and focus, (I11, Kelantan)

Initially, they can seem harmless and just a way to relax, but I have noticed that they are quite addictive. The short format encourages continuous scrolling, and it's easy to lose track of time. Sometimes reels can be entertaining and provide valuable information, but at the same time they could also easily disrupt my ability to manage my time effectively, (I13, Sarawak)

The findings of this study demonstrate that reel video consumption exerts a multifaceted influence on youth behaviour, particularly in relation to self-regulation and time management. Most informants reported difficulties in controlling their viewing habits, often losing track of time and engaging in prolonged sessions. Such poor self-regulation was commonly associated with disrupted sleep, delayed task completion, and broader negative impacts on daily routines. In contrast, a smaller group of informants exhibited stronger self-control, attributing their ability to limit screen time to a sense of personal responsibility, which enabled them to maintain a more balanced lifestyle. This contrast illustrates how reels can amplify behavioural challenges for some youths while fostering disciplined engagement for others.

When examined across the three TPB elements, the results underscore the ways in which reels shape youth behaviour in Malaysia. With respect to attitudes, reel videos were perceived as highly effective in enabling rapid absorption of information and skill development. Informants valued this format for enhancing creativity and critical thinking. At the same time, they acknowledged adverse effects, including the risk of addiction, procrastination, and the development of negative self-perceptions, which often undermined time management.

In terms of subjective norms, most informants reported that families and peers generally supported their reel consumption, trusting them to differentiate between beneficial and potentially harmful content. Some even received educational or meaningful reels from these social circles, reinforcing positive attitudes towards the medium. Nevertheless, a minority reported experiencing social pressure, interpreting concerns from parents or peers as constraints on their autonomy, even while recognising the protective intent behind such advice.

Finally, perceived behavioural control emerged as a key determinant of behavioural outcomes. Many informants admitted struggling to regulate their viewing duration due to the addictive design of short-form content. Although a few reported successfully prioritising responsibilities over leisure viewing, the majority experienced difficulty in managing screen time, highlighting reels' capacity to disrupt self-regulation and productivity.

In conclusion, this study reveals that while reels offer notable educational benefits and foster creative engagement, they simultaneously contribute to behavioural challenges, particularly in the areas of self-regulation and time management. Youth behaviour is therefore shaped by a complex interplay of positive and negative influences, emphasising the importance of fostering digital discipline and awareness to ensure that the advantages of reel consumption are maximised while its detrimental effects are minimised.

DISCUSSION

This study examines how reel videos influence youth behaviour in Malaysia, focusing on three key elements of the TPB: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. A total of 28 informants, one from each state in Malaysia, were purposively selected to meet the research criteria. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically, producing sub-themes aligned with the theoretical framework.

Attitudes towards reels were strongly shaped by the perceived efficiency of rapid information absorption. Informants emphasised that reel videos facilitate quick learning and skill acquisition, often within less than a minute, making them both time-efficient and engaging. This

perception aligns with Farrau and Ezekiel (2024), noting that short-form videos are particularly appealing to youth due to their brevity and shareability compared with longer, monotonous content. The second attitudinal sub-theme, Double-Edged Influence, captures the dual nature of reels: while youth appreciate the ability to simplify and condense information, many report difficulties in regulating their viewing time, leading to addictive behaviours. These findings are consistent with Vigil and Koenig (2023), who identified distorted time perception as a hallmark of media addiction. Thus, attitudes towards reels reflect both their educational and entertainment value, as well as their potential risks.

Subjective norms further shape reel consumption patterns. Most informants reported support from family and peers, who often share meaningful or entertaining content, reinforcing positive engagement. This is consistent with Kannan and Anuradha's (2024) findings that individuals are inclined to share content they perceive as valuable. However, a minority of informants experienced pressure from family or friends to limit screen time. While some attempt to regulate their usage through tracking applications or selective content filtering, others interpret these reminders as non-coercive guidance. Landesman et al. (2024) similarly found that youth often balance external input with personal agency, consciously seeking constructive content to enhance their online experience. Overall, social influence is present but moderated by individual discernment.

Perceived behavioural control emerged as the most critical challenge. Informants frequently describe difficulties in exercising self-regulation, admitting that once they begin watching reels, they struggle to stop, sometimes at the expense of meals or academic responsibilities. These findings align with Cheng et al. (2023), who link compulsive media use to anxiety, procrastination, and impaired self-control. While a few informants adopt coping strategies, such as time-tracking apps or engaging in offline activities, the majority continue to face challenges. The second sub-theme, Struggles with Time Management, highlights how prolonged screen time disrupts productivity, sleep, and daily routines. This resonates with Chen et al. (2022) and Dong et al. (2016), who identify short videos as a primary contributor to poor time management due to their highly engaging structure.

In sum, reels significantly influence youth behaviour by fostering rapid learning, creativity, and entertainment, while simultaneously contributing to addictive tendencies and weakened time management. Attitudes towards reels are largely positive, shaped by their efficiency and accessibility, whereas subjective norms reflect a supportive social environment with limited external restrictions. Nonetheless, perceived behavioural control remains a concern, as many youths struggle to maintain discipline in their media consumption. These findings underscore the importance of targeted media literacy interventions that encourage responsible engagement with reels, while recognising their cultural and educational value in youths' life.

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The Application of Artificial Intelligence in Education: Examining Malaysian University Students' Behavioural Intention Using the Technology Acceptance Model

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Abstract: This study examines Malaysian university students' behavioural intention to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education, focusing on three Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) factors: perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use and perceived compatibility. A quantitative design was applied using an online questionnaire distributed to 384 students via snowball and purposive sampling. The survey included demographic items and Likert-scale questions adapted from TAM literature. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability tests, Pearson correlation and hypothesis testing. All three independent variables showed significant positive relationships with behavioural intention. Perceived usefulness recorded the strongest correlation ($r = 0.696$), followed by perceived compatibility ($r = 0.641$) and perceived ease of use ($r = 0.573$). All hypotheses were supported. The findings indicate that students are more likely to adopt AI-based tools when these are seen as useful, easy to use and compatible with

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learning needs. The results provide guidance for AI developers, educators and policymakers to improve AI integration in higher education.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Education, Behavioural Intention, Technology Acceptance Model, University Students

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as one of the most influential technologies of the 21st century, transforming industries and reshaping how individuals learn and work. First introduced by John McCarthy in 1956 as “the science and technology of creating intelligent machines” (Borges et al., 2021), AI has evolved from a niche field into a mainstream tool due to advances in big data, machine learning and affordable computing power (Suhaimi et al., 2022). In education, AI is increasingly used to enhance learning efficiency, provide personalised feedback and support interactive learning experiences (Russell & Norvig, 2016).

Malaysia has actively promoted AI in education, with initiatives such as the “AI Untuk Rakyat” program launched in January 2024, which were completed by over 225,000 participants (MyDIGITAL Corporation, 2024). Surveys indicate that 60% of Malaysians were aware of AI by the end of 2022 (Statista, 2023), suggesting a readiness to adopt AI in academic contexts. AI tools such as ChatGPT, QuillBot and educational chatbots are already in use among students to generate ideas, translate texts and enhance productivity (Fitria, 2021; Southgate, 2020).

However, alongside these benefits come challenges. Overreliance on AI may reduce critical thinking and problem-solving skills, while improper use can lead to plagiarism and academic integrity issues (Hutson et al., 2022; Rimbar, 2017). These risks highlight the importance of understanding not only how AI is applied in education, but also how students perceive its usefulness, ease of use and compatibility with their learning needs.

This study applies the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to investigate the behavioural intention of Malaysian university students to use AI in education. Specifically, it examines the relationships between perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use and perceived compatibility

with students' intention to adopt AI tools. While previous studies have widely explored teachers' readiness for AI integration and general technology acceptance in education, relatively few have focused on students' perspectives—particularly in the Malaysian higher education context. Most existing research also emphasises e-learning systems or digital platforms rather than AI-specific tools such as ChatGPT or QuillBot that directly support learning processes. By addressing this conceptual and contextual gap, this study provides new insights for educators, AI developers, and policymakers seeking to integrate AI into higher education in ways that are effective, ethical, and student-centred.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate the relationship between perceived usefulness of AI and behavioural intentions of students using AI in education.
2. To investigate the relationship between perceived ease of use on AI and behavioural intentions of students using AI in education.
3. To investigate the relationship between perceived compatibility of use on AI and behavioural intentions of students using AI in education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is a critical summary and analysis of existing research related to a specific topic. It establishes the theoretical background, identifies gaps in knowledge and justifies the need for a new study. This section discusses the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) as the guiding framework and reviews prior studies on AI adoption in education.

TECHNOLOGY ACCEPTANCE MODEL

The primary aim of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) was to elucidate the processes underlying technology acceptance, thereby predicting user behaviour and providing a theoretical basis for the successful implementation of technology. Practically, TAM aimed to

guide practitioners on the measures to take before system implementation. To achieve these goals, several steps were undertaken (Davis, 1989; Davis, 1993). Davis initiated the development of TAM by outlining the processes mediating the relationship between information system (IS) characteristics (external factors) and actual system use. This model was grounded in the Theory of Reasoned Action, offering a psychological perspective on human behaviour that was previously lacking in the IS literature (Davis, 1989; Davis, 1993).

The next step involved identifying and defining variables and validating measures that strongly correlated with system use. Drawing from prior empirical research on human behaviour and information systems management, multi-item scales for perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness were developed, pre-tested and validated in multiple studies. It was hypothesised that these two constructs were key determinants of user acceptance, supported by evidence from earlier research (e.g., Johnson & Payne, 1985; Payne, 1982; Robey, 1979). This research suggested that an individual's decision to engage in a behaviour results from weighing the expected benefits against the effort or costs involved (Johnson & Payne, 1985; Payne, 1982). Thus, the use of an information system is determined by evaluating the trade-off between its perceived usefulness and the perceived difficulty of using it (Davis, 1989).

Perceived usefulness was defined as the extent to which an individual believes that using a particular technology enhances their performance. This concept was derived from Bandura's idea of outcome judgment, which refers to the expectation of a positive outcome triggering behaviour (Bandura, 1982). Perceived usefulness was operationalised based on evidence linking system performance expectancy to system usage (Robey, 1979). Perceived ease of use was defined as the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system is effortless (Davis, 1989). This construct was based on the concept of self-efficacy, which relates to the belief in one's ability to perform specific actions for a prospective task (Davis, 1989; Bandura, 1982). It was proposed that self-efficacy plays a predictive role in decision-making regarding technology use (Hill et al., 1987). Additionally, perceived ease of use is similar to the complexity factor in innovation diffusion literature, which acts as a barrier to innovation

adoption and is defined as the degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use (Mahajan, 2010).

The validity and reliability of these constructs were evaluated by testing how self-reported IS usage depended on the two proposed factors within an organizational context. The developed scales demonstrated excellent psychometric properties. The model was further validated by confirming significant relationships between perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, intention to use and actual usage behaviour (Davis, 1989).

PERCEIVED USEFULNESS

According to the Technology Acceptance Model, technology acceptance included a three phase process, in which the external variables (characteristics of system design) transform the cognitive reactions (perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use) from psychological reaction (behaviour towards applying technology or intention) to influence the behaviour of usage (David, 1989; Davis, 1993). Therefore, the perceived usefulness has a direct impact on actual use, which indicates the significance of the variable in anticipating the behaviour.

Simply said, perceived usefulness refers to the belief of individuals that utilising a particular technology which would be beneficial to us to increase their job performance and productivity of the company (Worthington, 2021). It reflects the subjective evaluation of the individual of the technology's utility and advantages in handling their tasks effectively (Worthington, 2021). When the perceived usefulness of technology increases, the intention to utilize the technology would also increase. The perceived usefulness mostly would be applied by assessing with questionnaires (Worthington, 2021).

Perceived usefulness indicates the evaluation of the user on how they are applying a particular IT application to help and improve the execution of the work activities within a specific organizational acceptance setting (Davis, 1989). In Western cultures, perceived usefulness seems to be more vital in evaluating the intentions and actual use, whereas non-Western cultures would prefer to prioritize the perceived ease of use (Kollmann, 1998; Lucke, 1995). According to Davis's (1986) from the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), perceived usefulness represents the most significant variables for user

acceptance of technology. It is due to the fact the perceived usefulness of the system is reliable with its efficacy and productivity and also the overall advantages to improve the performance for the user.

For example, a university student who struggles to fully comprehend mathematical principles may turn to an online tutoring platform for expert guidance and personalized support. Such platforms provide features like video lessons, one-on-one instruction, and interactive practice problems that enhance conceptual understanding and engagement. Students often perceive these AI-supported systems as useful because they help save time and effort compared to traditional learning methods such as textbooks or in-person consultations during office hours. Additionally, the flexibility to schedule sessions and access materials anytime reinforces students' belief in the usefulness of AI tools for improving learning performance (Worthington, 2021).

PERCEIVED EASE OF USE

Perceived ease of use is described as a belief of an individual that applying a specific technology without any effort. Therefore, this aligns with the meaning of "ease" which means freedom from hardship or great effort. When the individual's perceived ease of use of the certain technology increases, their intention of applying the technology will also increase. Therefore, a questionnaire would be widely used to assess perceived ease of use (Worthington, 2021). Simply said perceived ease of use is reliable to how simple the system is to navigate a technological system and its display. In other words, the more the users are more likely to access the easy to use, the higher they believe and interest in applying this system.

According to Davis's (1986) from the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), perceived ease of use represents the most significant variable for users acceptance of a system. Perceived ease of use refers to the person who believes that applying a specific system is free of effort. (Davis, 1989). The perceived ease of use has derived from the concept of self-efficacy, which refers to the belief of specific occasion about how someone executes the actions for a prospective task. (Davis, 1989; Bandura, 1982). It was proposed that self-efficacy had a predictive role in decision-making about the use of technology (Hill et al., 1987).

Furthermore, perceived ease of use had shared the similarities with the complexity factor which was theorized in the creation diffusion literature as an obstacle to adopting the innovation. The theory described the extent to which the individual has sought the challenge of innovation to comprehend and apply (Mahajan, 2010). This kind of construct's validity and reliability were evaluated by examining the impact of self-reported IS usage on the two proposed variables in the organizational settings (Mahajan, 2010). According to Radner and Rothschild (1975), the effort of individuals is a limited resource that can be allocated based on their responsibilities. Users are more inclined to adopt the application which is considered easier to use, even if other variables remain constant.

For example, a student who wishes to improve their foreign language proficiency may find AI-driven learning applications particularly helpful. Such applications are often perceived as effortless to use due to their user-friendly interfaces and straightforward functionalities. Features like speech recognition allow learners to practice pronunciation, receive instant feedback, and progress at their own pace. These characteristics enhance perceived ease of use, encouraging students to engage with AI tools for language learning (Hill, Smith, & Mann, 1987; Davis, 1989).

They acknowledge that the application offers interactive activities, quizzes and lessons specifically designed to match their proficiency level and learning speed, which facilitate their advancement at their preferred rate. Additionally, the student believes that the AI-powered application provides personalized suggestions or instruction for study materials and practice exercises based on their learning record and areas of growth. Therefore, the users acknowledge that the software adjusts to their specific requirements and offers focused assistance to efficiently meet their language learning objectives.

PERCEIVED COMPATIBILITY

According to the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), perceived compatibility plays a major role in determining behavioural intention. The degree to which people feel a new technology aligns with their needs, values and experiences from the past is known as perceived compatibility (Rogers, 1962) The degree to which people will accept and adopt new technologies depends on how well they fit in.

Perceived compatibility is measured by researchers looking at how well the new technology aligns with people's existing needs and values. It is also stated that it entails determining how well the technology conforms to the preexisting practices and beliefs of the users (Abubakari et al., 2024).

Parents, friends, housemates and coworkers are examples of significant individuals in an individual's social circle who can have an impact on their perception of compatibility. These notable people or organizations have the power to influence people's perceptions of how compatible new technologies are (Marija et al., 2015).

By being aware of and taking action against these variables, AI technologies can be adopted more successfully, which will ultimately improve student learning results. Research indicates that students are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of engagement, happiness and academic success when they consider educational technologies to be compatible (Marija et al., 2015). Additionally, adopting AI tools that are compatible with the educational setting can support customized learning experiences, meeting the needs of specific students and promoting a more productive and inclusive learning environment (Abubakari et al., 2024).

For example, a university may implement AI tools to enhance student learning experiences. A student might view this initiative positively if they believe the technology can improve academic performance. However, if institutional leaders express concerns that AI may make learning less personal, this could negatively influence students' perceptions. When students value these external opinions, they may be less willing to use the technology. Conversely, if they prioritize the perceived benefits of AI—such as improved understanding or efficiency, they are more likely to adopt it regardless of others' opinions. This aligns with Rogers' (2010) diffusion of innovations theory, which explains that adoption decisions are shaped by perceived compatibility between a new technology and the user's existing values, beliefs, and social context.

BEHAVIOURAL INTENTION OF STUDENTS USING AI IN LEARNING

Behavioural intention refers to the extent to which a person has formed conscious intentions to perform or not perform some specified future behaviour (Warshaw & Davis, 1985). Therefore, with regard to AI-

based systems, Behavioural intention entails the intention of students to use AI-based systems and involves persistent use from the present into the future (Kuleto et al., 2021; Salloum et al., 2019; Liao, et al., 2008).

Behavioural Intention is derived from the Theory of Reasoned Action. Developed by Fishbein and Ajzen in the late 1960s. TRA posits a person's behaviour to result from his or her intention to perform such behaviour which, in turn, is a function of his attitude toward the behaviour and subjective norms (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The more positive attitude and subjective norms, the higher perceived control is and the greater the person will have an intention to perform the behaviour (Silverman et al., 2015).

Students' intention towards AI is positively influenced by their level of ease in learning, understanding and using artificial intelligence. Therefore, students who are more skilful and easier in interaction with AI technology are expected to be more intent on using it for educational purposes (Milicevic et al., 2024). Moreover, social norms, instructor influence and peer influence toward AI incorporation in teaching and learning environments all play a critical role in shaping students' intention to adopt AI technologies (Huang et al., 2019).

Understanding the factors influencing student intention to use AI in education will be critical in the development of appropriate strategies that promote the adoption of AI and bring effective learning to students. Therefore, the current study seeks to determine the determinants of university students' intention to use AI tools in educational contexts.

REVIEW ON EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON THE ADOPTION OF AI IN EDUCATION

Previous research on Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education has explored diverse perspectives, ranging from technological development to pedagogical implications. For instance, Zhai et al. (2021) reviewed AI in education from 2010 to 2020 and examined how complex systems theory can explain the spread of information across social networks. Their findings emphasised the growing interconnectivity between learners, educators, and digital platforms. While this study highlighted AI's potential to create adaptive learning environments, it focused mainly on system-level applications rather than user acceptance or behavioural intentions.

Guilherme (2017) explored the changing teacher–student relationship in technologically mediated classrooms. The study found that as education becomes increasingly technologized, personal interactions tend to shift from meaningful engagement to transactional exchanges, making teachers more like facilitators than mentors. Although this research contributed valuable ethical and social insights, it did not examine students’ behavioural responses to AI tools or how these perceptions influence learning outcomes.

Similarly, Vazhayil et al. (2019) investigated teacher education for AI integration in Indian schools, identifying challenges such as policy communication, infrastructure limitations, and pedagogical adaptation. This study underscored the importance of teacher preparedness but did not address students’ readiness or acceptance of AI technologies.

In higher education, Liu, Subbareddy and Raghavendra (2022) developed the AI-Based Inquiry Evaluation Student Learning System (AI-ISLES) to improve interactivity and student engagement. Their results demonstrated AI’s potential to enhance critical thinking skills in non-linear learning environments. However, while the study provided evidence of AI’s effectiveness, it did not explore *why* students choose to engage with such technologies. Similarly, Ismail et al. (2024) examined chatbot-based learning tools and noted usability and motivation challenges but offered limited insight into behavioural intention factors that drive adoption.

Collectively, these studies show that AI in education has been examined largely from technological and teacher-centered perspectives, with minimal focus on students’ behavioural intention and acceptance frameworks. Few studies have applied the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to specifically measure how perceived usefulness, ease of use, and compatibility influence students’ willingness to use AI tools in learning. Thus, the present study extends existing literature by empirically investigating these factors within the Malaysian higher education context, addressing both the conceptual and contextual gaps identified in prior research.

RESEARCH METHOD

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a quantitative research design to investigate Malaysian university students' behavioural intention to use AI in education. Quantitative research involves collecting and analysing numerical data to identify patterns and test hypotheses. Its structured nature allows for consistent measurement, minimizes researcher bias and enables statistical analysis for generalizable results (Fleetwood, 2024).

Quantitative research was chosen over qualitative approaches due to its ability to measure relationships among variables—specifically perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use and perceived compatibility—within the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) framework. This method supports hypothesis testing and the identification of statistically significant relationships (Md Shidur Rahman, 2016).

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The survey instrument consisted of two sections:

- Section A: Demographics (gender, age, frequency of AI usage, AI tools used)
- Section B: Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) measuring the three independent variables—perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use and perceived compatibility—and the dependent variable, behavioural intention. Items were adapted from established TAM studies (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003).

SAMPLING AND RESPONDENTS

The target population was Malaysian university students who actively use AI tools in their learning. Using snowball and purposive sampling methods, 384 respondents were recruited. Snowball sampling allowed initial participants to invite others meeting the criteria, while purposive sampling ensured respondents had relevant experience with AI in education.

DATA COLLECTION

The survey was distributed online via Google Forms for ease of access and cost efficiency. Respondents were informed about the study's purpose and assured of confidentiality.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analysed using SPSS software. The analysis included:

- Descriptive statistics for demographic variables
- Reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha
- Pearson correlation to examine relationships among variables
- Hypothesis testing to determine statistical significance

This structured and standardized approach ensured objectivity, accuracy and reliability in measuring students' attitudes and intentions toward AI adoption in education.

DATA ANALYSIS

This section presents the analysis of survey data, including descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, correlation results and hypothesis testing. All analyses were conducted using SPSS software.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 summarises the demographic characteristics of the 384 respondents. The majority were female (63.3%) and aged between 19–24 years (88.3%). Most respondents reported frequent (42.7%) or very frequent (28.7%) use of AI applications in daily life.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

| Variable | Category | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Gender | Male | 36.7 |
| | Female | 63.3 |

| | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|------|
| Age | 13–18 | 9.6 |
| | 19–24 | 88.3 |
| | 25 and above | 2.1 |
| Frequency of AI Use | Very Frequent | 28.7 |
| | Frequent | 42.7 |
| | Neutral | 22.9 |
| | Less Frequent | 5.7 |
| AI Tools Used | ChatGPT | 38.8 |
| | ChatGPT + QuillBot | 33.6 |
| | Other | 12.5 |
| | ChatGPT + Google Bard | 5.7 |
| | ChatGPT + QuillBot + Perplexity AI | 5.0 |
| | ChatGPT + Google Bard + QuillBot | 4.4 |

RELIABILITY ANALYSIS

Cronbach’s alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales. All variables achieved alpha values above 0.80, indicating good reliability.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis Results

| Variable | Cronbach’s Alpha (α) |
|-----------------------|---|
| Perceived Usefulness | 0.913 |
| Perceived Ease of Use | 0.839 |

| | |
|-------------------------|-------|
| Perceived Compatibility | 0.857 |
| Behavioural Intention | 0.893 |

CORRELATION ANALYSIS

Pearson correlation was conducted to examine the relationships between the independent variables and behavioural intention. All correlations were positive and statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

Table 3: Correlation Results

| Variable | Correlation with Behavioural Intention |
|-------------------------|--|
| Perceived Usefulness | 0.696** |
| Perceived Ease of Use | 0.573** |
| Perceived Compatibility | 0.641** |

Note: $p < 0.001$

HYPOTHESIS TESTING

H1: Perceived usefulness has a significant positive relationship with behavioural intention ($r = 0.696$, $p < 0.001$) → Accepted.

H2: Perceived ease of use has a significant positive relationship with behavioural intention ($r = 0.573$, $p < 0.001$) → Accepted.

H3: Perceived compatibility has a significant positive relationship with behavioural intention ($r = 0.641$, $p < 0.001$) → Accepted.

The results indicate that all three independent variables are significant predictors of students' behavioural intention to adopt AI tools in education.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine Malaysian university students' behavioural intention to adopt AI in education using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) framework. Specifically, the study tested the relationships between perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use and perceived compatibility with behavioural intention. The results confirmed that all three variables were positively and significantly related to students' intention to use AI tools in learning contexts.

PERCEIVED USEFULNESS

The strongest relationship was observed between perceived usefulness and behavioural intention ($r = 0.696, p < 0.001$). This suggests that when students believe AI tools enhance their academic performance, they are more likely to use them. This finding aligns with Davis (1989) and Venkatesh et al., (2003), who identified perceived usefulness as the most influential factor in technology adoption. It also supports previous studies where AI-driven tools improved learning efficiency and provided immediate access to resources (Worthington, 2021).

PERCEIVED EASE OF USE

Perceived ease of use was also positively associated with behavioural intention ($r = 0.573, p < 0.001$). This indicates that user-friendly design, intuitive navigation and minimal effort in operating AI applications encourage adoption among students. These results are consistent with past research (Bandura, 1982; Hill et al., 1987) emphasizing the importance of usability in educational technologies. If AI platforms require extensive training or are difficult to navigate, students may be discouraged from using them, regardless of their potential benefits.

PERCEIVED COMPATIBILITY

Perceived compatibility had a significant positive relationship with behavioural intention ($r = 0.641, p < 0.001$). This reflects the extent to which AI tools align with students' learning styles, academic needs and personal values. The finding is in line with Rogers (2010) and Marija et

al., (2015), who noted that technology adoption increases when users feel it fits naturally into their existing habits and routines. Compatibility is also influenced by peer recommendations and lecturer endorsements, suggesting a social dimension in AI adoption.

IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

These findings highlight the importance of designing AI tools that are practical, easy to use and adaptable to different learning environments. Educational institutions should focus on providing training and support to maximize the usefulness and ease of use of AI tools. Additionally, AI developers should consider integrating features that match students' preferred learning methods to improve compatibility.

From a policy perspective, these results suggest that AI integration in higher education should go beyond simply providing access to technology. There should be a focus on student-centred design and user experience optimisation, as these directly affect adoption rates.

COMPARISON WITH PAST STUDIES

The results are consistent with international findings on TAM applications in educational contexts (Zhai et al., 2021; Vazhayil & Shetty, 2019). However, this study adds value by offering insights specific to Malaysian university students, a group that has been underrepresented in AI adoption research. The high correlation values observed also indicate a strong readiness for AI integration in Malaysia's higher education sector, supported by national initiatives such as the "AI Untuk Rakyat" program.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined Malaysian university students' behavioural intention to adopt AI in education using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). The findings revealed that perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use and perceived compatibility all have significant positive relationships with behavioural intention, with perceived usefulness emerging as the strongest predictor.

The results suggest that when AI tools are seen as valuable for improving academic performance, easy to use and compatible with students' learning styles, adoption rates are likely to increase. This aligns with prior research on TAM and reinforces the importance of designing technology that meets user needs while minimizing barriers to use.

The study contributes to existing literature by focusing on the Malaysian higher education context, offering insights into how Malaysian university students perceive AI integration in their learning processes. Given Malaysia's growing emphasis on digital transformation in education, these findings provide a timely reference for educators, policymakers and AI developers.

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Employment Challenges and Employer Perceptions of Individuals with Down Syndrome in Penang

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Abstract: Among the many challenges that people with Down syndrome must overcome in the job are discrimination and insufficient inclusive policies. Thus, this research plans to investigate the biggest barriers to finding employment for people with Down syndrome in Penang. Educators, parents, and related advocacy organizations for people with Down syndrome were interviewed for this study, which used a qualitative research technique to examine the main determinants of hiring people with Down syndrome. According to this research, improving their job opportunities requires the employer to understand, provide vocational training programs, and create an inclusive workplace. The findings show that communication difficulties still pose a major barrier. Many employers do not know how to interact effectively with people with Down syndrome. Negative societal attitudes and stereotypes also restrict their access to job opportunities. This research further suggests that awareness campaigns and cooperation among the government, companies, and families are necessary to create equal employment opportunities for people with Down syndrome in Malaysia.

Keywords: Down syndrome, Employment challenges, Penang

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INTRODUCTION

People with Down syndrome often encounter many difficulties in securing employment due to their congenital physiological conditions (Adenan et al., 2024). They have limited job opportunities and often face misunderstandings and prejudices, underestimation of abilities, stereotypes, and negative perceptions (Adenan et al., 2024). This study aimed to identify the employment challenges faced by people with Down syndrome in finding employment in Penang and to investigate employers' perceptions of employing people with Down syndrome. Additionally, this study provides recommendations to government and non-governmental organisations to increase employment opportunities for people with Down syndrome.

Down syndrome (DS) is the most common chromosomal condition with intellectual disability, and it occurs in about 1 in 800 births worldwide (Bull, 2020). Down syndrome happens because of an extra copy of chromosome 21 (Bull, 2020). The clinical features of DS include intellectual disability, which is usually moderate but can range from mild to severe. According to Bull (2020), their physical characteristics often include low muscle tone, a flat nasal bridge, upslanted eyes, and a single palmar crease. In addition, they are also prone to various medical conditions such as congenital heart disease, thyroid problems, hearing deficits, sleep apnoea, and leukaemia risk (Bull, 2020). Research conducted between 2008 and 2019 found that Down syndrome was the most common chromosomal abnormality among live births in Northeast Malaysia (Ankathil et al., 2022). There were 857 cases identified, and this made up about 21.1% of all referred cases (Ankathil et al., 2022).

Malaysia has about 637,537 registered persons with disabilities (PWD), around half of whom are of working age (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). As of 2022, only 0.3% of people with disabilities are employed in the public sector. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2024), the government has provided support, but the current situation shows that its employment rate is still low. Furthermore, this reflects the situation that many PWD have limited access to social protection programs like PERKESO (United Nations Development Programme, 2024).

They often have communication barriers, making it hard to express ideas, follow instructions, or work with others (Adenan et al.,2024). This makes it harder for them to interact with colleagues and grow in their careers. Employment misconceptions limit their work opportunities and skill development (Adenan et al., 2024). Besides, skill asynchrony, where abilities do not match the job's demands, also limits their employment. Therefore, they also face high unemployment rates. Many of them work part-time or do unpaid jobs (Adenan et al., 2024). Limited training opportunities further reduce their employability. Even when they get a job, discrimination and employer bias hinder their support and growth. Limited career progression is also common (Adenan et al., 2024).

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

In recent decades, inclusive employment has been a global priority, particularly for individuals with disabilities. Malaysia has introduced various legal and policy frameworks—such as the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 and the Employment Regulations 2010—to improve access to employment for marginalised communities (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2016). Down syndrome, a genetic condition associated with intellectual disability, presents unique challenges in workplace inclusion. With proper training and support, individuals with Down syndrome are capable of contributing meaningfully to the labour force (Bush & Tassé, 2016).

Given these policies and rising public awareness, it is expected that people with Down syndrome, especially in economically developed states such as Penang, would benefit from improved job opportunities, skills training, and workplace acceptance. Penang's strong economic infrastructure and industrial diversity further support the assumption that inclusive employment practices could thrive in the state (Lim, 2020).

However, despite these developments, individuals with Down syndrome continue to face low labour market participation and systemic barriers to employment. In Penang, the absence of targeted data, employer reluctance, and limited vocational training contribute to the exclusion of this group from mainstream employment. Most available job opportunities are low-skilled, with minimal career progression or fair compensation. Social stigma and misconceptions about the capabilities of

people with Down syndrome further compound the problem. Ramely et al. (2016) found that people with Down syndrome often earn less than their peers with other intellectual disabilities and are concentrated in sheltered or institutional work environments with limited decision-making responsibilities.

As a result, many individuals with Down syndrome in Penang remain underemployed or unemployed, limiting their social inclusion and economic independence. This also means that the Penang workforce misses out on a valuable pool of human capital, and the vision of inclusive development remains unfulfilled, reinforcing inequality and social exclusion.

The low labour market participation rate among individuals with Down syndrome is still a major problem and reflects larger problems with discrimination and limited chances for marginalised groups (Bush & Tassé, 2016). For example, the elderly population and people with Down syndrome encounter obstacles such as social preconceptions that cast doubt on their abilities and productivity, thereby limiting their ability to participate in the job market (Bush & Tassé, 2016). More inclusive policies and practices are required to encourage participation and address current inequalities because underutilisation of potential talent not only compromises the economic independence of individuals with Down syndrome but also denies the workforce individuals with diverse perspectives and skills

According to Ramely et al. (2016), people with Down syndrome who work in institutions usually earn less per hour than other people with intellectual disabilities. This is the result of policies and programs that have been implemented to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities (Ramely et al., 2016). This wage gap is reflected in systemic barriers, including limited access to higher-paying job options in the neighbourhood and a lack of focus on skills such as decision-making skills, which are linked to better employment outcomes (Ramely et al., 2016).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To identify the difficulties of people with Down syndrome in securing a job.

2. To investigate the perception of employers in hiring people with Down syndrome.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Down syndrome is a genetic disease that results from an additional copy of chromosome 21 in individuals across the globe. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024), newborns who have Down syndrome are estimated to be approximately 1 in every 700 births that occur in the US. In the United States, the incidence of this condition is greater than 6,000 kids born with Down syndrome annually.

Studies by de Graaf et al. (2017) synthesise data concerning population, birth rates, and prevalence of Down syndrome in all countries. They find the variation in incidences is fairly dramatic on a regional level, which is influenced by details such as maternal age and prenatal tests. For instance, prenatal screening percentages are more often higher in countries with advanced health care—this can affect decisions that affect the birth rates of children with Down syndrome. The study shows that at present, there are about 5.4 million people with Down syndrome worldwide, and many of them reside in countries that have higher birth rates but lower coverage of screening. This demographic dispersion highlights the need to consider health care, cultural, and socioeconomic differences when addressing their needs.

Out of these, communication disorders causing speech difficulties are a major challenge for people with Down syndrome. A methodical investigation of speech intelligibility and verbal apraxia in children with Down syndrome is presented by Kumin (2006). Her research found that about 95% of children with Down syndrome have unclear speech. These issues stem from motor planning impairments, dyspraxia, and oral structural abnormalities.

To promote the lifelong well-being of children with Down syndrome, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024) insists on improving people's health care and knowledge. Luckily, as a result of advancements in medical science, many people with Down syndrome are now living past their sixties and even into their seventies. However, longevity brings challenges like Alzheimer's disease.

De Graaf et al. (2017) emphasise that societal views and practices greatly impact people with Down syndrome. For instance, in some regions, inclusive schooling and workplace accommodations create opportunities. However, supportive services remain limited, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMCs).

In conclusion, it is possible to note that the view of Down syndrome in a global context speaks about progress and challenge. Other sources, such as Kumin (2006), de Graaf et al. (2017), and the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2024), postulate that it is imperative to adopt several models to locate the needs of people with Down syndrome and meet them. Continued commitment is vital to improve their quality of life and social participation.

DOWN SYNDROME IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, Down syndrome (DS) affects 1 in 950 live births, with prevalence rates varying among the three major ethnic groups, which are 1 in 981 live births among Malays, 1 in 940 live births among Chinese, and 1 in 860 live births among Indians (Opara, 2020). Although prevalence is lower than in Western countries, public and healthcare awareness remains low (Opara, 2020). In addition, within the cultural and social context of Malaysia, individuals with DS and their families often face challenges such as discrimination, limited educational resources, and a lack of employment opportunities (Opara, 2020). These issues require public education, public support, and social inclusion to ensure equal opportunities (Opara, 2020). In this regard, the Malaysian government introduced the *Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Act 685)* alongside the *National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2007*, both intended to ensure equal access to education, healthcare, and employment for persons with disabilities, including those with Down syndrome. However, scholars have pointed out that the Act is largely promotional in nature and lacks strong enforcement mechanisms, which limits its effectiveness in protecting the rights of this community (Abdullah, Hanafi, & Hamdi, 2017).

Down syndrome is Malaysia's most common chromosomal condition, causing developmental disabilities and health issues like heart defects, muscular dystrophy, and epilepsy (Isa et al., 2016). The

Malaysian Department of Social Welfare classifies children with DS under “learning disabilities” (LD), which includes autism, intellectual disability, and ADHD (Isa et al., 2016). Many children with DS are diagnosed shortly after birth due to distinctive physical traits and chromosomal testing, enabling early intervention (Isa et al., 2016). The condition significantly impacts families, requiring them to navigate medical, educational, and social support systems (Isa et al., 2016). DS causes intellectual disability, and Malaysian families face financial challenges, limited care access, and stigma (Isa et al., 2016). Thus, robust support structures and public awareness are vital to improve their lives (Isa et al., 2016). In line with these needs, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 introduced the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP), aiming to integrate students with learning disabilities such as DS into mainstream classrooms. However, implementation has faced barriers, including inadequate facilities, limited staff training, and low awareness of disability rights, reflecting broader challenges in inclusive education (Muhamad Zaki & Ismail, 2021).

Medical support systems for individuals with DS involve government and NGOs providing resources, therapies, and family support (Abdul Wahab & Md Monoto, 2018). NGOs such as the Kiwanis Down Syndrome Foundation National Centre (KDSF NC) offer Early Intervention Programs (EIP) for motor skills, self-help, and social integration in children up to six years of age (Abdul Wahab & Md Monoto, 2018). These programs include multidisciplinary healthcare with paediatricians, audiologists, ophthalmologists, and speech therapists (Abdul Wahab & Md Monoto, 2018). Parent support groups offer emotional support, peer counselling, and advocacy for inclusive education and rights. Government hospitals collaborate by hosting health and dental check-ups and providing professional expertise at events organised by these groups (Abdul Wahab & Md Monoto, 2018). Despite these efforts, challenges remain in awareness, access and family support, requiring ongoing system improvements (Abdul Wahab & Md Monoto, 2018). In addition, national initiatives such as the *Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) programme* under the Department of Social Welfare provide therapy and training services at local centres, while the *National Health Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2016* emphasises equal access to healthcare and rehabilitation. Persons with DS who are

registered under the OKU Card scheme are also eligible for subsidised treatment in public hospitals, reflecting broader government efforts to strengthen health system responsiveness to the needs of people with disabilities (Lyra et al., 2022).

EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGES IN MALAYSIA

Employment challenges in Malaysia might be different based on demographics (LPPKN, n.d.). This reflects that Malaysia as a country consists of a complex interplay between economic, social, and structural factors (Stiftung, 2022). There are some of the employment challenges often faced by Malaysian citizens, such as job mismatch and underemployment, wage growth being too small and the cost of living rising, the impact of automation, workplace discrimination and youth unemployment (Hussin & Chan, 2023).

First, one of the most common employment challenges faced by Malaysians is job mismatch and underemployment. Many Malaysians have experienced a mismatch between their education qualifications and available jobs (Kamal, 2024). This might be because of an oversupply of graduates in some of the “famous” fields (Kamal, 2024). This situation leads to underemployment or even accepting jobs that are unrelated to their studies or profession (Kamal, 2024).

Second will be that salary growth is too small and the cost of living is rising too high. Although Malaysia has significant economic growth, the growth of salaries does not parallel the rising cost of living (Arfa, 2024). This difference creates financial difficulty, especially for fresh graduates and low-income workers (Hossain et al., 2018). To respond to this, the government has periodically revised the *Minimum Wages Order* under the National Wages Consultative Council Act, with the most recent revision in 2022 aimed at ensuring fairer compensation and helping workers cope with rising living costs (UiTM, 2022).

Next is the impact of automation on the employment rate. The rapid growth of automation and technology has replaced the traditional human labour force, especially in industries like manufacturing (Filippi et al., 2023). However, these changes also create quite a few new job opportunities, but most of the time those jobs require a higher educational level, and many workers lack the skills to transition into these roles

(Manyika et al., 2017). To address this, the Malaysian government has introduced initiatives such as the Pelan Induk TVET Negara (Zulkifli et al., 2024) and the TVET Digitalisation Roadmap 2022, which aim to strengthen reskilling and upskilling programmes in line with the country's digital transformation agenda (Mohd Hatta et al., 2025).

The fourth employment challenge faced by Malaysians is work discrimination. Although Malaysia is protected by laws that promote equality, some individuals are still facing discrimination based on age, gender, race, or disability (Mahyut, 2024). This creates uneven opportunities for the victims, especially for women returning to work after maternity leave or older employees nearing retirement (Franzoi et al., 2024).

The last one will be youth unemployment. Many fresh graduates face a common difficulty in the process of searching for jobs, which is employers seeking employees with years of working experience (Nazura, 2019). This concept of "no job without experience, no experience without a job" has led to a high youth unemployment rate (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021).

EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGES IN PENANG

Penang is one of Malaysia's economic powerhouses; it has a strong foundation in manufacturing industries and the services sector, and it has made a strong contribution to Malaysia's economic growth (Ong, 2020). Nevertheless, along with the faster development of globalisation and technological advancement, Penang's job market was facing a series of challenges (Institute for Political Reform, 2018). These challenges are not only causing regional economic pressure; they are also making a far-reaching impact on the well-being of the labour force (Institute for Political Reform, 2018).

First, the competitiveness of the employment market was growing intensely. In Penang, the local labourers not only need to scramble for high-paying jobs with foreign workers, but there is also fierce competition for highly skilled jobs (Ong, 2021). However, although the number of higher education graduates is increasing every year, most of them have learnt knowledge and skills that don't match the employment market, causing them to be in an unfavourable position when they look

for a job (Ng et al., 2022). The problem of mismatch is one of the factors contributing to the increasing unemployment rate (Ng et al., 2022). In response, initiatives such as the Penang Future Foundation Scholarship and state-level TVET enhancement programmes were introduced to strengthen graduate employability and address the talent mismatch in key industries, and these efforts reflect Penang's broader use of workaround strategies in policy-making to fill gaps left by federal-level limitations (Chan et al., 2024).

Second, the disconnect between the rate of wage growth and the cost of living has also become the biggest problem facing Penang's labour force (Choy, 2017). Although the development of the economy of the area had a strong momentum, the growth of salaries was well below the increase in the cost of living, especially the price of housing and food (Khalid, 2024). Many of the workers can only work on a base salary; it is difficult for them to improve their quality of life (Choy, 2017). The imbalance between income and expenditure further increases the pressure on the labour force to make ends meet (Choy, 2017).

Third, the impact of social factors on employment challenges also cannot be ignored (Moorthy et al., 2022). Although gender equality in Penang has improved, most of the females faced problems when they were seeking a job, for example, a lack of flexible working arrangements and promotion opportunities at work (Moorthy et al., 2022). This situation is particularly pronounced in the context of the difficulty of balancing work and family, where many highly educated and capable women have difficulty finding suitable job opportunities while raising children or caring for elderly family members (Moorthy et al., 2022).

In summary, employment challenges in Penang arise from multiple and complex factors, such as the competitiveness of the employment market, the disconnect between the rate of wage growth and the cost of living, and the impact of social factors on employment challenges. To address these challenges, the Penang State Government should collaborate with the company to boost the state's economy and the quality of life of its people through the development of skills training programs, the promotion of gender equality, and the improvement of the functioning of the institutions (Ong, 2022).

EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGES FOR DOWN SYNDROME IN PENANG

Employers hesitate due to limited DS experience and doubts about their abilities (Rahman et al., 2022). Additionally, this leads to discrimination, offering only low-skilled jobs despite their potential (Rahman et al., 2022). Moreover, employers are often unaware of government incentives for hiring people with disabilities (Rahman et al., 2022). They can get tax relief and financial aid to offset costs (Rahman et al., 2022). Besides, people with DS also face workplace discrimination, bullying, dismissal, and underpayment (Rahman et al., 2022). The lack of enforceable legal protections for people with DS compounds the challenges they face (Rahman et al., 2022).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study adapted the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health Model (ICF) based on a past study on challenges faced by disabled people at the workplace in Malaysia (Narayanan, 2018). The ICF Model was a framework developed by World Health Organisation (WHO).

Figure 1 below shows the theoretical model adopted by this study. The two variables functioning, disability and health are grouped as the first independent variable and the environmental factors are adopted as the second variable to contribute to the down syndrome worker employment in Penang. The two independent variables were tested to see how they influence people with Down syndrome in getting a job in Penang. The questions in the interview were also along the lines of the three variables as shown in Figure 1.

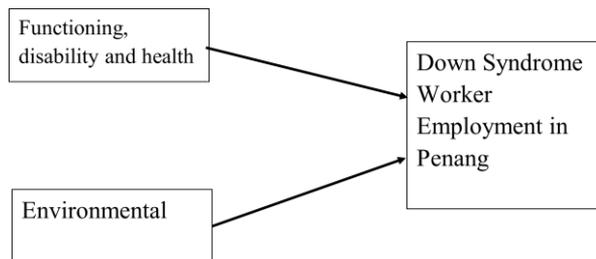


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework adapted from International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health Model (ICF) (Narayanan, 2018)

RESEARCH METHOD

As the population of Down Syndrome in Penang is limited, this research adopted a qualitative research method to learn more about their challenges during the employment process. Qualitative research methods are suited for limited populations needing in-depth insights. With the semi-structured interviews, this research would be able to obtain detailed opinion and personal experience of the interviewee, thereby widely understanding the employment challenges that people with Down syndrome face (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) further argued that semi-structured interviews are a commonly used method of data collection in qualitative research. They allow researchers to be flexible in adjusting the questions in a predetermined thematic framework to deeply investigate the feelings and beliefs of interviewees. This method obtains open data, suitable for sensitive issues and personal experiences.

Thus, semi-structured interviews were conducted with family members of people with Down syndrome, teachers, and relevant NGOs in Penang. Considering the specialty of the research population and the limitation of sample size, interviews are best suited to obtain in-depth information. By building a close relationship with the interviewees, the actual problem that people with DS face could be explored when they are in the employment process and their opinion of the existing policy and mechanisms.

The research was conducted through interviews as there is a very small group of Down Syndrome individuals in Penang (Opara, 2020). So, the experts were interviewed to have a comprehensive view of the employment challenges of Down syndrome individuals. Thus, the target population included DS adults aged 18-60 from various backgrounds.

For the purpose of providing comprehensive research, Down syndrome individuals who were employed and unemployed were targeted to capture a range of experiences. For accurate results, the data were kept within Penang to maintain relevance to the research study area.

Purposive sampling method was used to choose the participants. Researchers used this non-probability sampling method to pick participants who perfectly matched their research goals (Etikan et al. 2016). Researchers chose the interview method because these interactions

provided deep insights into what members of these organizations think and experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Interviews are particularly effective for collecting qualitative data and providing detailed insights into participants' thoughts, experiences, and perspectives. This instrument can take various forms, including structured interviews with fixed questions, semi-structured interviews with a blend of predefined and flexible questions, or unstructured interviews that allow free-flowing discussions guided by themes. When designing interview questions, we focused on clarity, relevance, and avoiding bias, often using open-ended questions to encourage comprehensive responses. Conducting interviews involve active listening, careful documentation, and subsequent analysis to identify patterns and extract meaningful insights. This approach is invaluable for studies requiring a deep understanding of complex or subjective topics.

Our research instrument included interview questions designed for three groups: teachers, NGOs, and parents. Each group had questions divided into four parts: basic details, challenges, support methods, and policies. For teachers, we asked about their experience, the challenges people with Down syndrome faced in developing skills, and how education can help. We also explored strategies for improving workplace inclusion and their views on policies that support these individuals. NGOs were asked about barriers to employment, how they worked with employers, and how effective current policies were for people with Down syndrome. For parents, we focused on the challenges their children face, the support they had, and how policies could be improved to help with employment. These questions gathered insights to address DS employment challenges.

In the process of data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted with family members of people with Down syndrome, teachers, and relevant NGOs in Penang. The data collection was kept within Penang to maintain relevance to the research study area. Since there are few Down syndrome associations in Penang, the study used purposive sampling to select participants. Researchers used this non-probability sampling method to pick participants who perfectly matched their research goals (Etikan et al. 2016). Participants for interviews or observation were identified, and then a schedule of organised and timely meetings was made. Email or phone was also used to arrange

appointments with confirmation at least two days in advance to avoid last-minute changes. Table 1 below shows the demographic details of the participants in this research.

Table 1: Demographic details of participants in this research

| No. | Types of Respondents | Total | Code |
|-----|----------------------|-------|------|
| 1 | Volunteer | 4 | V1 |
| | | | V2 |
| | | | V3 |
| | | | V4 |
| 2 | Teacher | 3 | T1 |
| | | | T2 |
| | | | T3 |
| 3 | Parents | 3 | P1 |
| | | | P2 |
| | | | P3 |

DATA ANALYSIS

This section presents the responses obtained from the in-depth interviews carried out in this research. The responses are presented according to the six different themes which emerged from the in-depth interviews that fall into each of the different research objectives that they address. The researchers were able to identify these themes based on the coding process using the thematic approach.

THEME 1: CHALLENGES OF COMMUNICATION ADAPTATION IN THE WORKPLACE (OBJECTIVE 1)

One of the primary difficulties individuals with Down syndrome face in securing and maintaining a job is communication. Several participants highlighted that individuals with Down syndrome often struggle with speech clarity and expressing their needs, which can lead to misunderstandings in the workplace. Employers and colleagues may find

it challenging to interpret their thoughts and instructions, leading to frustration on both sides. The evidence is as below:

First of all, they have their own language. It's hard for them to express themselves and what they want. And it's hard for them to understand what people are saying. (V3)

Additionally, some individuals with Down syndrome may take longer to process instructions, which can be mistaken for stubbornness or unwillingness to work. This further contributes to workplace miscommunication and makes it difficult for them to integrate into a professional setting.

Respondent T1 mentioned:

Some individuals may not understand instructions quickly, so employers must be patient and clear. (T1)

Many participants noted that individuals with Down syndrome require time and patience to adjust to new environments. Some parents and teachers expressed that their children or students had difficulties in the initial stages of employment due to unfamiliarity with the work setting. Proper training and structured guidance from employers are necessary for successful adaptation.

This was proven by Respondent V2:

The main obstacle is the work they do. If it's a designated job, they can do it. But if you want to teach them something new, you need patience and love. (V2)

Furthermore, several participants emphasised the importance of visual learning methods and hands-on demonstrations to help individuals with Down syndrome better understand their job tasks. Without such tailored support, they may struggle to keep up with workplace expectations. The evidence is as below:

Explaining to them what to do must come with visual pictures so that they can understand better. (T2)

The volunteers explained that people with Down syndrome may sometimes be stubborn and do not always follow instructions right away. Because of this, having a strict supervisor can help keep them on track. The volunteers also mention that they tend to work more slowly, which might be a problem for companies that focus a lot on speed and numbers. However, if an employer is patient and willing to accept their pace, they can still do their job well. This was proven by Respondent V2:

I would say they are stubborn. They don't really want to listen to instruction all the time. Also, if you don't have a supervisor who is strict enough with them, then it's difficult. That's the main thing. Other than that, if the employer can accept that they are slow, it's okay. You know, if the employer wants you to do a KPI of how many, forget it. They cannot. (V2)

People with Down syndrome often learn best by watching others, which can take time but helps them understand their tasks. However, their mood can be a challenge in the workplace, as their willingness to work may depend on how they feel at the moment, affecting their performance. This was proven by Respondent V1:

They will learn through observation. The challenge when they want to secure employment and maintain employment is their mood. (V1)

THEME 2: WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION AND BIAS (OBJECTIVE 1)

Participants expressed concerns that employers often hesitate to hire individuals with Down syndrome due to preconceived notions about their capabilities. Some companies set specific hiring criteria that exclude individuals with certain disabilities, limiting their job opportunities.

Respondent P2 mentioned:

Some companies explicitly stated that they only accepted individuals with an OKU card if they had a history of psychological or mental health conditions, but not for those with Down syndrome. (P2)

There is also a general lack of awareness among the public and co-workers, which can result in discrimination or bullying in the workplace.

Some individuals with Down syndrome may be assigned the easiest tasks or be overlooked for opportunities to develop new skills. The evidence was given by respondent V4:

Some people might bully or discriminate against individuals with Down syndrome. Maybe the public is also not very aware of Down syndrome. (V4)

A few participants shared experiences where individuals with Down syndrome were mistreated due to their slower work pace or emotional fluctuations. Employers and colleagues may misinterpret their behavior as laziness or incompetence rather than understanding their unique challenges.

Respondent P3 responded:

Bias against employees with Down syndrome certainly exists. If they are not in the right mental or emotional state to work, they may be subjected to unfair treatment. (P3)

In some cases, discrimination begins even before employment, with individuals facing biases in the education system that limit their future job prospects. Parents and educators expressed concern that these early experiences shape society's overall attitude towards individuals with Down syndrome, as mentioned by respondent P3:

Given that discrimination already exists in the education system, it is almost inevitable that similar biases will be present in the workplace as well. (P3)

Several respondents indicated that employers demonstrate negative attitudes toward hiring Down syndrome candidates because of their incorrect beliefs regarding their abilities and worries about their work productivity rates. Down syndrome individuals face discrimination in hiring processes because of prejudices held by employers at various stages of the recruitment process. The evidence was given by respondent P2:

Some companies explicitly stated that they only accepted individuals with an OKU (Orang Kurang Upaya) card if they had a history of psychological or mental health conditions, such as those who had undergone treatment and were in recovery. They did not accept individuals with conditions like hyperactivity, slow learning abilities, or Down syndrome. (P2)

People with Down syndrome often face systemic bias that makes it harder for them to get a job. This includes unfair hiring practices, a lack of workplace support, and employers assuming they are less capable, even when they have the skills to work. The evidence was given by respondent P3:

Bias against employees with Down syndrome certainly exists. My daughter has never had the opportunity to work outside, but based on our experiences, discrimination can already be observed in the education system. (P3)

THEME 3: LACK OF AWARENESS ABOUT DOWN SYNDROME (OBJECTIVE 2)

Lack of awareness about the abilities and potential of people with Down syndrome exists among employers. Employers maintain wrong assumptions about Down syndrome employees because of their limited awareness, which generates misjudgments that create resistance to hiring them, as they believe these workers need excessive supervision.

According to the respondent V1, employers need to study Down syndrome deeply before deciding to make employment decisions. Employment of people with Down syndrome requires complete comprehension of their specific cognitive processing mechanisms, together with their interactions. The casual employment of Down syndrome workers at a cinema without proper training reveals the problems that occur without understanding their needs. People who lack specific guidelines together with personalised assistance will face difficulties in learning new skills because they interpret instructions exactly as written and do not automatically perform tasks outside their original instructions. Employers should spend time understanding the special needs and typical behaviours of people with Down syndrome when creating workplace structures that foster their work success.

Respondent V1 mentioned:

Actually, those who want to employ these types of people have to study these people. It's not simply just saying that, okay, I can employ this person with Down syndrome without studying them. No. Sometimes, when, okay, let's say, we send them, before this, we send them to TGV cinema. What happens when they don't know what to do, actually? Okay, you give this job. I need this job. They will do this job only without doing other things. Because we are normal, we can think. Yes. But they, for them, okay, you say take this cup, and they will take this cup and hold it like that. You must understand the situation first. (V1)

THEME 4: COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES (OBJECTIVE 2)

People with Down syndrome can pose challenges for employers in the workplace when it comes to communication. People with Down syndrome frequently encounter problems in expression and complex instruction comprehension that result in miscommunication difficulties for both employees and employers.

Employers need to understand that they must recognise and tolerate cognitive differences, together with communication differences, within individuals who have Down syndrome. The statement demonstrates why workers with Down syndrome need additional time to understand instructions, therefore requiring employers to use clear communication with patience in their interactions. A proper understanding guides employers to build work environments that support the success of staff who have Down syndrome. Employers who demonstrate patience through detailed instructions build better communication interfaces, which leads to the effective accomplishment of tasks. This method enables employee support while developing a work environment that benefits all its members.

Respondent T1 mentioned:

Employers need to understand the cognitive and communication levels of individuals with Down syndrome. Some individuals may not understand instructions quickly, so employers must be patient and clear. (T1)

THEME 5: NEED FOR PATIENCE AND ADAPTABILITY (OBJECTIVE 2)

Various respondents observed that employees with Down syndrome require flexible employers because they learn at variable speeds and display mood changes. Employers need to show both patience and flexibility when working with Down syndrome.

The statement describes how individuals with Down syndrome face challenges regarding workplace emotional reactions and mood changes. The emotional state of individuals with Down syndrome varies widely, which affects their behavioural responses as well as how they perform their tasks. The emotional state of individuals with Down syndrome determines their level of cooperation and motivation, while unhappiness leads to aggressive or crying behaviour. Employers need to display observance together with empathy and adaptability as they work with individuals who have this condition. The work environment must incorporate emotional shifts to give people with Down syndrome a safe space for effective performance. To support workers through their mood, employers need to offer both emotional support and flexible working arrangements for constructive mood management.

Respondent V1 mentioned:

We must study their mood. Sometimes they are okay; they have their mood. When they are happy, they will do everything for you. And when they are not happy, they become aggressive. They can simply cry or simply just move. Out of sudden. (V1)

Employers should choose a workplace with good ventilation systems along with air-conditioning to create an environment that best benefits Down syndrome workers. The heat sensitivity of people with Down syndrome results in facial redness and leads them to wash their faces and heads frequently to cool down. Employers who establish comfortable temperatures in the workplace achieve benefits for all parties, which include diminished discomfort levels and decreased workplace distractions while promoting employee productivity.

Respondent T2 mentioned:

Employers can provide a comfortable environment, such as an air-conditioned working environment, because most people with Down

syndrome can easily get hot, their faces become red, and they will go to the washroom to wash their faces and heads as well. (T2)

THEME 6: IMPORTANCE OF EMPLOYER EDUCATION (OBJECTIVE 2)

Multiple survey participants highlighted the requirement to instruct employers through awareness programs that would enhance their knowledge and acceptance of workers with Down syndrome. The implementation of educational campaigns will assist in avoiding workplace biases and motivate employers to take on staff from the Down syndrome community.

The comment of respondent P1 stresses that employer-driven education sessions educate staff about the characteristics and needs of individuals with Down syndrome. Such training enables companies to prepare their staff members to communicate and work efficiently with Down syndrome employees while reducing conflicts and building an inclusive workplace. Such preventive steps get employees ready to assist their colleagues with Down syndrome and build an environment assisted by mutual understanding between workers. These actions reduce communication challenges, which enable successful workplace integration of people with Down syndrome while bringing benefits to employees and their organisations.

Respondent P1 mentioned:

The company can give an awareness talk or give training to their employees to let them know that these groups are like this. So that in the future, when they hire these people, they may avoid some communication problems (P1).

Education serves as an essential factor in educating future generations about inclusivity while raising their awareness. Young people benefit from education that incorporates Down syndrome content that enables them to build empathy with understanding toward people with Down syndrome. The development of knowledge creates an inclusive society, so the future of our country can fully support Down syndrome.

Respondent T3 mentioned:

I truly hope that education comes in to create awareness among the new generations because they are the future generation that will bring a new Malaysia with acceptance of our little angels. (T3)

DISCUSSION

This section presents the discussion of findings for Objective 1, which focuses on the difficulties of people with Down syndrome in securing a job. Securing a job is a fundamental challenge for many individuals with Down syndrome. Despite their capabilities, they often face significant barriers in obtaining employment, including communication difficulties, the need for workplace accommodations, and societal attitudes toward people with disabilities. This is parallel with the findings reported by Ramely et al. (2016)

Communication challenges are often one of the first obstacles. Many employers are unfamiliar with how to communicate effectively, leading to misunderstandings and reduced confidence in their abilities. Additionally, workplace adaptations, such as modifying job responsibilities or offering flexible working hours, are often not considered by employers. Some workplaces have fast-paced routines and require employees to learn new tasks quickly, but people with Down syndrome often need more time and guidance to get used to a new job (Rahman et al., 2022). This is in-line with the research done by Adenan et al. (2024).

They often have communication barriers, making it hard to express ideas, follow instructions, or work with others

Moreover, societal attitudes and biases contribute to these difficulties. Many employers have misconceptions about the abilities of people with Down syndrome, leading to discriminatory practices. Employers often believe they are less capable or need more supervision, so they hesitate to hire them (Rahman et al., 2022). Misconceptions based on stereotypes continue to affect hiring decisions. Policies such as the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 and the Employment Regulations (2010) were established to help the less fortunate, however, the challenges remain.

With proper training and support, individuals with Down syndrome are capable of contributing meaningfully to the labour force (Bush &

Tassé, 2016). Without focused policies and community engagement, the employment challenges faced by individuals with Down syndrome in Penang will likely persist. Overall, employers need more education about Down syndrome to better understand the challenges people with Down syndrome face at work. When employers are informed and willing to make small changes, they can create a more inclusive and supportive workplace.

This paragraph presents the discussion of findings for Objective 2, which focuses on the perception of employers in hiring people with Down syndrome. Perception patterns among employers stem from their lack of information about Down syndrome, communication struggles, and discriminatory attitudes. Many employers reported needing substantial oversight because they believed Down syndrome workers would fail to reach performance targets. These misconceptions result in both passivity and refusal by employers to hire these employees. Thus, offering a course on rising public awareness is expected to people with Down syndrome, especially in economically developed states such as Penang, would benefit from improved job opportunities, skills training, and workplace acceptance. This is parallel with the proposition of Lim (2020).

Findings emphasise the need for patient employers who make flexible arrangements. Discrimination and systemic biases continue to block hiring opportunities. Implementation solutions, including employer training sessions and awareness programs, provide opportunities to promote change.

Employers express various perceptions because they lack sufficient knowledge and have difficulty with communication while experiencing stereotypical assumptions. The study identified four key themes: (1) lack of awareness, (2) communication challenges, (3) the need for patience and adaptability, and (4) the importance of employer education.

Employers demonstrate limited knowledge regarding professional capabilities, maintaining false ideas such as requiring additional oversight and an inability to achieve job objectives. The absence of awareness affects decision-making, resulting in unwilling hiring (Mat Sidik et al., 2024).

Communication barriers were identified as core challenges. Employers find it challenging to understand communication methods because people with Down syndrome need more time to understand

instructions and struggle with self-expression. According to Teacher 1, businesses must show patience while being clear in their messages (Rahman et al., 2022).

Patience and adaptability are important. Employers need to handle emotional sensibility and mood swings that affect performance. According to NGO Volunteer 1, employers need to establish such support. Laboratory research reveals developmental disability employees require workplace emotional regulation support (Mat Sidik et al., 2024).

The investigation emphasises that educational programs should reach employers to break down barriers. Workshops and campaigns should teach employers and students about what Down syndrome patients are capable of achieving, according to Parent 1 and Teacher 3 (Moorthy et al., 2022).

The research reveals that major difficulties still exist. Workplaces need to progress with understanding and flexible environments. Employers need to overcome unhelpful preconceptions to perceive their workplace as worthwhile.

RECOMMENDATION

To improve DS employment opportunities, employers must show patience and understanding. Many participants noted that individuals with Down syndrome need long-term, structured training and mentoring to adapt. As a result, employers should use intuitive visuals and hands-on instruction with DS employees. If employers understand the slower working speed and provide support to them, they will enable good performance.

Employers should understand DS cognitive traits and behaviours to design suitable workplace structures. For emotional management, employers should support mood swings with flexible arrangements to maintain performance. Additionally, employers should prepare a comfortable environment with ventilation and air conditioning, as DS individuals are sensitive to heat, causing flushing and mood swings. Therefore, a comfortable working environment not only reduces discomfort but also improves their work focus and overall productivity.

Workshops and awareness campaigns should be conducted to educate both employers and students about the abilities and potential of

individuals with DS, reducing stigma and encouraging acceptance. Separately, ongoing in-house education initiatives should be held within companies to address bias and build a more inclusive work environment. These initiatives not only facilitate the smooth integration of employees with Down syndrome into the workplace but also help to build a respectful, multicultural, and inclusive corporate culture.

CONCLUSION OF FINDINGS FOR OBJECTIVE 1

The research shows that increasing awareness and providing education to employers can help break down these barriers. People with Down syndrome face several barriers to employment, including communication difficulties, the need for workplace adjustments, and discrimination. These challenges often prevent them from getting hired or succeeding in their jobs. By offering training and encouraging flexible work environments, employers can make a big difference. When employers understand the needs of people with Down syndrome and are willing to make necessary changes, it creates a better chance for these individuals to succeed in the workplace.

CONCLUSION OF FINDINGS FOR OBJECTIVE 2

This research outlines the main elements influencing the employment of individuals with Down syndrome and offers an understanding of how companies consider hiring them. Following that, the research discovered that many organisations had unfavourable views about employing individuals with Down syndrome as a result of employers' awareness of the circumstances and communication difficulties. Some companies are unwilling to give job opportunities because they believe that these workers need greater supervision and have trouble communicating at work. For those with Down syndrome, these misunderstandings cause ongoing obstacles to work.

However, the research also demonstrates that companies that are prepared to modify the workplace and offer assistance typically foster a more welcoming and satisfying work environment. It is crucial for businesses to display characteristics like patience, flexibility, and

adaptability when hiring a worker with Down syndrome. The study also highlights how crucial systematic employer training and awareness-raising initiatives are to lowering workplace discrimination. Barriers to employment and social integration of persons with Down syndrome can be effectively removed by raising employers' awareness of Down syndrome and promoting relevant educational programs.

Overall, this research validates that the employers' perceptions and attitudes play a crucial role in the employment process of people with Down syndrome. Achieving true occupational inclusion requires not only changing social stereotypes of Down syndrome but also making adjustments through policy, education, and corporate culture to create a more equitable employment environment.

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Does “Her” Perspective Matter? The Influence of Female Media Professionals in Film Industry on Representations of Women

Lim Shiang Shiang* & Chang Jia Yi**

Abstract: Film scripts are deeply influenced by the people who write and produce them. In societies where patriarchal values dominate, male control behind the camera often shapes the stories being told, and how women are portrayed within them. This study looks at how women are represented in film through the lens of female media professionals, with the goal of understanding how their growing presence in the industry can help challenge and shift long-standing stereotypes. Based on in-depth interviews, the findings show that when more women are involved in production, they bring fresh perspectives and contribute to more genuine, multi-dimensional portrayals of female characters, moving beyond the traditional male gaze. Grounded in the theory of Social Constructionism, this study views gender roles and identities not as fixed truths but as outcomes of ongoing social and cultural processes, including media representation. In this light, film becomes a powerful tool in shaping how society sees femininity. By bringing more women into creative roles, alternative narratives can emerge, stories that question and disrupt dominant portrayals. Still, progress is not without obstacles. Deeply rooted cultural beliefs about women's roles continue to pose significant challenges. True transformation will require not only increased female participation, but also broader societal support and a commitment to structural change.

Keywords: Gender Representation, Women Portrayal, Female in Filmmaking

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INTRODUCTION

As a multicultural Asian country, Malaysia's media production industry is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, religious, political, and societal values. These intersecting influences determine not only what stories are told but also how characters—particularly women—are portrayed on-screen and the roles women can occupy behind the camera. Within this context, female characters are often depicted in traditional and stereotypical roles, emphasizing emotional sensitivity, nurturing qualities, and physical appearance. In contrast, male characters are frequently portrayed as assertive, independent, and authoritative, reinforcing long-standing gender norms (Muslim et al., 2020, Tan et al., 2023). Previous research highlights these patterns of gendered representation in Malaysian media. For instance, Wahyuni and Adnan (2022) note that women remain underrepresented in leadership roles such as producers, directors, and scriptwriters, while their presence is more prominent in supporting roles like makeup artists, fashion stylists, or actresses. Although numerous studies have examined Malaysian films, there is still a lack of research that specifically explores the contributions of women in key creative roles. Therefore, this study is important for amplifying the voices of female filmmakers and understanding how their involvement can contribute to more balanced narratives and equitable representation in film storytelling and production. Understanding how women are portrayed on-screen and underrepresented behind the camera is critical, as these portrayals influence both audience perceptions and the structural dynamics of the media industry itself.

These recurring portrayals are particularly significant because they shape societal expectations of gender behaviour. Research indicates that media representations strongly influence public perceptions of gender roles, often reinforcing traditional norms and expectations, which normalize male dominance and marginalize women both on-screen and behind the camera (Doughman & Khreich, 2025). Despite the increasing presence of women in the industry, they remain underrepresented in leadership and creative decision-making roles. For example, a global survey found that only 22% of top editors across 240 news organizations are women, highlighting ongoing barriers to leadership positions (Bernama, 2023). Similarly, studies on Malaysia's creative industries

show that women's leadership experiences and contributions remain underexplored, pointing to structural challenges that limit women's influence in shaping narratives (Ariffin & Ibrahim, 2022). As a result, industry outputs often reflect a predominantly male perspective, perpetuating patriarchal norms and restricting opportunities for women's creative expression. Within the context of this study, examining these structural and representational dynamics is critical for understanding how female media professionals navigate such challenges and how their contributions can reshape the portrayal of women in Malaysian cinema. These dynamics are not only evident in industry statistics but are also reflected within the narratives of Malaysian films themselves.

This is evident in Malaysian films. For instance, the film *Cinta Kita* (1995) begins by challenging traditional gender expectations through the character Latifah, a taekwondo athlete played by Sofia Jane. But as the film progresses, it eventually returns to more conventional endings, where female characters are "tamed" into relationships led by dominant male figures. This shift reflects how male dominance in production can shape storytelling and reinforce familiar gender hierarchies. When women are underrepresented behind the scenes, female-led stories not only become fewer but are often less complex. This is mentioned by Nur Kareelawati and Siti Maziah (2024), who state that Malaysian Muslim women face major obstacles in career achievement, especially in industries such as the screen industry, due to the influence of religion and cultural practice within the community. The prolonged existence of gender inequality is not uncommon in a patriarchal society, which has often been a stepping stone that hinders women from gaining recognition and appreciation.

This research attempts to understand how women working in film—directors, producers, writers—can help shift this narrative. By interviewing the female media professionals, it looks at how their growing presence might lead to better, more accurate portrayals of women on screen. Gender stereotypes in film don't just appear out of nowhere—they often come from the people telling the stories. And when those people are mostly men, we tend to see the same kinds of gender roles repeated. As Putri and Hamedi (2022) stated, women have often not played a significant role compared to their male counterparts, and this scenario has been happening since the Malaysian film industry began to

flourish. Scripts or stories directed by famous female directors, such as Yasmin Ahmad, frequently faced criticism from Malaysian society due to their films' messages contradicting traditional practices. This gap matters, not just for fairness, but because it affects the kinds of stories that get told. Hence, this study highlights why having more women involved in film is important, not just to balance the numbers, but to bring in new perspectives and create stories that feel more real and inclusive. If we want to move away from outdated gender roles, we need a mix of voices shaping what we see on screen. In the long run, that can help push for more equality, both in media and in society.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to explore the role of female filmmakers in shaping the portrayal of women in film, focusing on how their involvement contributes to creating more authentic, multi-dimensional, and emotionally rich female characters. It also investigates the challenges these professionals face, including structural barriers, gender biases, and societal expectations, which can limit their influence and opportunities in the media industry. Together, these objectives provide insight into both the impact of women's creative contributions and the obstacles they encounter, highlighting the importance of fostering inclusive and balanced storytelling in film.

Research Objective 1: To explore the perspectives of female media professionals on how their involvement influences the portrayal of women in film.

Research Objective 2: To investigate the challenges female media professionals encounter while striving to create diverse and inclusive representations of women in film.

LITERATURE REVIEW

FEMALE MEDIA PROFESSIONAL INVOLVEMENT IN FILM: THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

Malaysia is a multiracial country that officially recognizes Islam as its main religion, while also allowing freedom of religion (Wan Norhasniah, & Haslina, 2016). This mix of cultural and religious values plays a big role in shaping many parts of life in Malaysia, including how films are made and what kinds of stories get told. As a result, the portrayal of female characters in Malaysian cinema, particularly those of Malay-Muslim identity, is often influenced by prevailing societal and religious norms (Muhammad, 2018). For example, production houses such as Tayangan Unggul, Metrowealth, and Grand Brilliance frequently feature female characters who embody Islamic values—such as wearing the veil and demonstrating religious devotion—as part of their character development and narrative progression (Muhammad, 2018). These portrayals often reflect the characters' internal struggles and life challenges, framed within a context that emphasizes religious identity. Similarly, Nur Kareelawati and Siti Maziah's (2024) study on Muslim women and production culture in Malaysia's screen industries shows that traditional norms and patriarchal structures can limit women's participation and career advancement. Within the Malay community, cultural practices shaped by both local traditions and Islamic values create a complex environment for Muslim women. The Malay concept of *adat* often overlaps with Islamic principles, which can sometimes reinforce restrictive gender expectations. As a result, Malaysian women frequently need to navigate their identities while managing the challenges of working in the screen industry.

Furthermore, from the late 1990s to the present, this kind of narrative plot has emerged as the most popular expression of the Malaysian film industry. Therefore, Malaysian filmmakers started constructing female main characters with religious identities and used those identities as the main theme of their films in order to develop the story (Muhammad, 2018). For example, Osman Ali's romance drama *Ombak Rindu*, also known as *The Pining Wave*, features a female traditional Islamic teacher known as *ustazah* in Islam as the lead role of the film who struggles to achieve her wish to be reunited with her

husband. Despite being consistently depicted in the film as devout and unshakable in their beliefs, the Muslim female characters have a variety of Islamic identities. Given the fact that Malaysian society is characterized as being strongly patriarchal such as patriarchal prejudices and polygamy, the representation of Muslims female in Islamic identities would actually contribute to broadening the diversity image of female Muslims character in the films (Muhammad, 2018). In the movie analysis of *3 Temujanji* and *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*, Jamaluddin, et al. (2022) also found that *3 Temujanji* failed most of the Bechdel Test criteria, with many scenes centering on male relationships, while *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* passed the test but still portrayed female voices within patriarchal values. This reflects a broader pattern where female perspectives remain underrepresented—an issue that is particularly significant because film narratives often mirror a country's prevailing cultural norms and social dynamics.

However, even though the Muslim female characters in the film are diversely portrayed religiously, their image is still limited to particular cultural and religious stereotypes. This restriction may cause viewers to form a monolithic perception of Muslim women and prevent them from accurately portraying their diverse range of life experiences. Md Syed et al. (2024) highlight this issue by noting that television dramas during the COVID-19 pandemic often framed Malay women primarily through themes of obedience, disobedience, and control. These portrayals coincided with government campaigns such as “Duduk Rumah” and “Kita Jaga Kita,” which placed additional domestic responsibilities on women, ranging from household management to children's education and maintaining family cohesion. The study underscores how popular culture continues to reveal the ongoing challenges and limited progress in the status of women within Malaysia's modernity.

Furthermore, with the arrival of the fourth Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad, the image towards Muslim female character has only become even more restrictive. Following his 1984 declaration of his political agenda to “Islamise” the country, the Malaysian government, functioning through the Malaysian Censorship Board of Malaysia, Lembaga Penapisan Malaysia (LPF), started actively censoring films that featured content that went against Islamic teachings (Muhammad, 2018). This had a significant impact on the country's film industry. And the first

film that encountered a ban was Aziz M. Osman's *Fantasia* in 1992 which had multiple visuals identified to be un-Islamic due to its association with superstitious beliefs (Wood, 2022). Not only that, the idea of Islamisation, which was brought up by the fourth Prime Minister, Mahathir bin Mohamad, gained more attention in 1998 when the national Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) stated that only films considered to be Islamic would be provided broadcast time (Muhammad, 2018).

Additionally, the portrayal of Muslim women with Islamic identity is not restricted to the front of the camera; it also extends to the women working behind the scenes. For example, Muslim popular celebrities, like actors and singers, are expected to wear veils in order to fulfill the concept of "Islamization" as started out by Mahathir bin Mohamad. Besides, the Muslim female character in the movie is prohibited from performing close or physical contact with the male character. Therefore, the director must look for different ways to depict intimate relations between Muslim women and men without violating the rule of Islam.

On the other hand, as expected, the Malaysian film industry is also dominated by men while there are relatively few women in it. Since the prevalent male-centricity of the Malaysian film industry might hinder women from entering the field through making a difficult environment in which they must frequently struggle to have their voices heard and their experiences shared. This is evident in Yasmin Ahmad's case. Suria et al. (2021) highlighted that Yasmin Ahmad's films sought to negotiate gender representation between modern and traditional values. However, her works often drew criticism from several conservative groups for being not only too liberal in their storytelling but also for unnecessarily challenging the status of Islam and Malay-Muslims in the country. Despite these criticisms, Yasmin's film *Sepet* (2013) received recognition as a significant contribution to Asian cinema. Her journey exemplifies the immense challenges faced by women in Malaysia as they strive to succeed and make their mark in the film industry.

Due to Malaysia being a Muslim and diverse country, there are stricter laws to ensure that movie content will not cause racial tensions, political unrest, or religious misconceptions. Additionally, Wan Amizah et al. (2009) pertinently pointed out that Malaysian censorship laws target both imported and local films that infringe upon the religious, cultural, and moral values of Malaysian society. The study discussed how certain

Malay films were censored for contradicting the religious, cultural, and moral standards set by the Film Censorship Board. This censorship practice inevitably discourages the diverse portrayal of women, as it has been “indirectly enforced” through adherence to a fixed traditional narrative that filmmakers are expected to follow.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM THEORY

Social constructionism has been widely applied to concepts like gender and race, asserting that these ideas are not innate but shaped by societal and cultural influences through human interaction (Freud, 1994). As such, these constructs evolve alongside changes in society, as they rely on collective human agreements, cultural norms, and social values. In essence, social constructionism posits that human understanding of the world—including perceptions of people—is not based on objective reality, but rather shaped by shared beliefs and interpretations (Burr, 2017). This theoretical lens will be used to explore how media platforms influence and reinforce gender norms and identities, often leading audiences to accept them as truths, and how the growing involvement of female filmmakers is contributing to the redefinition of women’s representation in film.

Within the context of Social Constructionism, gender stereotypes are reinforced by the way men and women are portrayed in movies, and these representations are not neutral and instead help preserve the power structures that currently exist (Carter, 2012). Since men predominate in the film industry, the narrative of the female character in the film is presented from the male point of view. To limit the opportunities for women’s advancement in society and uphold men’s higher standing, they will present women in ways that reinforce patriarchal ideas (Carter, 2012). For example, in order to discourage or prohibit women from entering workplaces, women are typically portrayed in the film as housewives, who always stay at home. Even though women are portrayed as working in the film, the positions they are seen holding belong into an unusual category of usually low-paying labour in order to convey the idea that women can only work as low-paid labourers in the fields of caregiving, cleaning, or clerical work (Tuchman, 2000). These traditional gender roles have been actively debated in recent studies. For instance, Wu et al. (2023) found that international streaming media contribute

substantially to how young Malaysian women imagine their identity, often reinforcing traditional expectations even as new kinds of portrayals emerge. Similarly, Tan et al. (2023) demonstrated through a systemic functional analysis of Malaysian Malay women protagonists that media texts provide spaces where women negotiate, perform, or resist societal gender expectations, highlighting both conformity and resistance.

Apart from that, female characters in films have consistently been shown as less intellectually and physically capable than male characters, or valued primarily for their sexuality or beauty (Carter, 2012). Such portrayals hinder women's opportunities for personal, professional, and financial success, as audiences may focus on external attributes while overlooking women's strengths and abilities. Recent work on *The representation of Malay-Muslim women's identity in contemporary Malaysian cinema* highlights that, although some contemporary films depict Malay-Muslim women as intelligent and resilient, many still reinforce restrictive cultural and religious norms, limiting the diversity of female representation (Muhammad, 2022). These patterns perpetuate the notion that a woman's value is tied to her appearance rather than her intelligence or skills. Therefore, if the media serves as a key tool for socialization, films function as cultural products that sustain traditional gender views and obscure women's contributions to society. Viewed through a social constructionist lens, this underscores the crucial role of female filmmakers in reshaping narratives, challenging entrenched gender norms, and advancing gender equality.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach by conducting in-depth interviews with six female filmmakers from diverse backgrounds and roles within the media production industry. A semi-structured interview format was employed, and participants were recruited using snowball sampling—beginning with a contact from the school's alumni network, given that the research is part of an academic assessment. Snowball sampling is widely recognised as an effective method for accessing participants within specific professional networks or hard-to-reach populations (Ting, et al., 2025). The first two interviews served as pilot tests to evaluate the effectiveness of the interview questions. Based on

feedback and observations, the questions were refined before proceeding with the remaining interviews. Data collection continued until saturation was achieved, which is commonly considered an appropriate criterion for determining sample adequacy in qualitative research (Ahmed, 2025). Given the participants' expertise in the field, a sample of six was deemed adequate to offer valuable insights into the research phenomenon and fulfil the study's objectives. It is mentioned in Vasileiou, et al. (2018) that smaller samples are often justified if participants are "information-rich" or expert, and data quality or saturation is high.

As part of the research procedure, participants were briefed at the beginning of each interview, and informed consent forms were provided to ensure voluntary participation and uphold data transparency. Participants were also informed that the interviews would be audio-recorded for analysis purposes (Arifin, 2018). The recordings were later transcribed into written format, and the data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2008) six-phase thematic analysis method.

Interview Guide:

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| <p>Opening Questions</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How long have you been working in the media production industry? 2. Could you please tell me about your role in the media production industry? |
| <p>Introductory Questions</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. What is your view on how women are typically portrayed in Malaysian films? 4. As a woman director/scriptwriter/camera operator/editor, do you think your perspective has contributed to a different approach to storytelling or character development in projects or issues related to women? 5. How do you think your role contributes to challenging or reinforcing gender stereotypes in the films you work on? |
| <p>Transition Questions</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Have you noticed any differences between how female and male media professionals portray women in films? |
| <p>Key Questions</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Do you think the increased involvement of women in the film industry would help create a more diverse perspective on women's representation in film? |

| | |
|------------------|---|
| | <p>8. How do you think having female representation behind the scenes can impact the overall portrayal of women in film?</p> <p>9. Can you share any specific challenges you've faced as a woman in a leadership or creative position within the media production industry?</p> |
| Ending Questions | <p>10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences or the role of women in media production that we haven't touched on yet?</p> |

The interview guide followed a semi-structured format, serving as a framework while allowing additional questions to be adapted as needed. It was divided into five sections: Opening Questions (warm-up questions), Introductory Questions (defining the study's purpose), Transition Questions (linking to the main objective), Key Questions (addressing the two primary research objectives), and Ending Questions (providing space for additional comments or clarifications). Table 1 summarizes the participants' demographic and professional backgrounds, consisting of female filmmakers in diverse roles—including scriptwriter, producer, director, videographer, and editor—representing various positions within the media production industry. These respondent profiles align with the study's objectives, particularly in addressing issues related to constraints within the film industry.

Table 1.0: Respondent Profiles

| Female Professional | Background | Years of Experiences |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Respondent 1 | Editor | 1.5 |
| Respondent 2 | Junior Art Director | 0.5 |
| Respondent 3 | Producer | 1.5 |
| Respondent 4 | Videographer | 5 |
| Respondent 5 | Scriptwriter | 2.5 |
| Respondent 6 | Assistance Creative Director | 1.5 |

DATA ANALYSIS

Research Objective 1: To explore the perspectives of female media professionals on how their involvement influences the portrayal of women in film.

AUTHENTIC FEMALE REPRESENTATION

With the involvement of female media professionals in the media production industry, it has enabled a more varied and authentic representation of women on the screen. According to the respondents, their perspectives ensure that women are portrayed with strength, complexity, and uniqueness by extracting them from conventional, one-dimensional female characters. From character development and storytelling to editing and graphic design, they contributed to creating a more powerful and authentic portrayal of women through every aspect of production.

Whenever I pitch idea, I always try to bring a fresh perspective, you know, to make sure women characters are shown as strong, relatable, and got many layers lah. It's about breaking out of all those usual stereotypes and showing women as they really are—complicated but super capable one! (Respondent 3)

This response highlights that when it comes to reshaping how women are portrayed in films, female media professionals go beyond conventional stereotypes. Instead of continuing to portray typical, one-dimensional roles of women, the respondent emphasizes the importance of presenting female characters as strong, multi-layered, and authentic. Furthermore, when respondents come up with project ideas involving women, she prioritizes creating unique and appropriate representations of female characters since they are both women, making sure that their images are realistic and relevant. However, this also implies that more female-driven narratives are still needed in this industry to completely ensure authentic female representation as a norm rather than a rarity.

When I'm involved in designing sets, props, or visuals, I can contribute to challenging gender stereotypes by moving away from

overly traditional or one-dimensional portrayals of women. I feel it's important to always question the choices we're making and think about how they'll come across on screen—whether it's the colours, the framing, or even the roles and dynamics between characters. It's a small part of the process, but every detail matters when it comes to shaping the audience's perception. (Respondent 4)

This response highlights that the visual design of a scene could also make a significant impact in creating authentic female representation in film. The respondent actively seeks to break conventional gender stereotypes and ensure that women are portrayed as multifaceted individuals rather than one-dimensional figures through carefully considering components like set design, props, framing and colour. Moreover, this response has pointed out an idea that any decision made on set, no matter how minor, has an impact on the audience's perception and has the potential to either reinforce or destroy the longstanding perception of women.

As women, we have firsthand experience of the challenges and nuances that come with being oppressed or marginalized. This unique understanding allows us to craft more realistic and empowering portrayals of women, moving beyond stereotypes. By having women in key roles behind the scenes, such as directing, writing, and producing, we can ensure that female characters are portrayed more authentically and that their stories are told from a first person's POV. (Respondent 6)

WOMEN-DRIVEN STORIES

Most of the respondents felt that women filmmakers bring a better understanding of what it's like to be a woman, which helps create more genuine and emotionally rich stories. Compared to films by male creators, where female characters are often stuck in small, supportive roles, women in the industry try to build characters who are layered, have their own goals, and face real struggles. Their perspectives help break away from the usual stereotypes, making room for stronger, more diverse, and more relatable portrayals of women on screen.

With male directors, women are often just supporting characters—usually tied to their relationships with the male lead, like as a love interest. But with female directors, even if the male is the lead, the female characters aren't just in the background; they bring unique perspectives and contributions to the story. Also, because women understand women better, when a movie involves the complexities of relationships, a male director, not having those lived female experiences, might struggle to fully portray a woman's point of view. (Respondent 4)

From this response, it further emphasizes how important it is to have female media professionals in the media production industry in order to create more meaningful and balanced stories for women in films. As stated by respondent 4, she underlined that female directors would make sure that women have a unique angle to the narrative even if they are not the lead of the films, while male-directed films frequently portray female characters in supporting positions, particularly in relation to the male characters. Since they are both women, they are better able to depict the complexity of female relationships, emotions, and identities by drawing from their own lived experiences, something that men directors can find difficult to do. Therefore, the necessity of women-driven storytelling is further supported from this perspective, as it enables more nuanced, real depictions that break conventional stereotypes of women and assure that every female character has flexibility and diversity in the storyline.

Honestly, I don't want to sound biased, but I really feel only a woman could bring that story to life. As women, we're able to truly empathize with the emotional journey of the character in the movie because we've lived through similar experiences. For men, it's hard la—they won't ever fully understand what it's like to live as a woman. (Respondent 5)

Following from the perspective of respondent 4, this response further supports the idea that female media professionals have the ability of delivering female characters on screen a greater level of emotional nuance and authenticity. According to respondent 5, personal experiences can be used to create stories as well, as it could allow them to produce

narratives that accurately present the realities, feelings, and issues faced by women. Due to this, they are able to create stories that can make the audiences feel empathetic where male media professionals are not able to do since they lack first-hand experience, which prevents them from accurately telling the stories of the women characters. Thus, in order to portray women in the film in a more equal representation and ensure that their narratives are portrayed with depth, and relatability, there is a need for more women-driven stories.

Often, male filmmakers can fall into the trap of depicting women through a more limited lens which means focusing on their physical appearance or reducing them to secondary roles, often in relation to male characters. In contrast, female filmmakers tend to offer more nuanced portrayals, giving women greater depth, agency, and complexity. Women are more likely to be portrayed as multifaceted individuals with their own stories, desires, and challenges. (Respondent 6)

BALANCE GENDER REPRESENTATION

The collaboration between male and female media professionals could help to achieve a balanced gender representation in film. This balance assures that the representation of both genders does not substitute one gender for the other, but rather encourages cooperation, enhances narratives, and increases diversity in the creation of media.

But honestly, if there's only women in the industry, it might create some imbalance too. To truly achieve balance, we still need men's perspectives to enrich the storytelling. (Respondent 1)

From this response, it emphasizes that having just women in the media production industry might result in uneven narrative structures, even while more women in this industry could better reshape the traditional representation of women on screen and provide more authenticity and variety. Furthermore, the respondent underlined that in order to ensure that stories are told more thoroughly and diversely, men and women must work together to achieve true advancement. As women can be portrayed in a more varied, rich, and realistic way, and maintain

narrative balance and diversity without affecting authenticity, when men and women media professionals collaborate and combine their perspectives and areas of expertise.

When men and women collaborate, they can complement each other's strengths and weaknesses. For example, there was a time when I worked on setting up a scene, but the entire art team was made up of guys. They decorated the room how they thought a girl's room should look like. When I told them that a girl's room doesn't necessarily look like this, they said, 'Oh, we feel like this is what a girl's room should be'—with dolls, neat and tidy, and pink in colour. That's when I realised, a woman's perspective is really needed to decorate girls' rooms. Or even when it comes to costumes, you need both male and female perspectives to discuss together. What guys think is a "cute" look might be very different from what girls imagine internally. (Respondent 2)

This response further emphasizes how crucial it is for the media production industry to have the collaboration between men and women media professionals in order to have an authentic and diverse portrayal of women on screen. According to the experiences of respondent 2, it shows how certain perspectives may be misinterpreted or oversimplified when just one gender makes decisions, especially evidenced by the example of how male team members made assumptions about the design of a girl's room. Thus, by combining the perspectives of men and women, filmmakers can make sure that their portrayals of women are more accurate and truer to life. Not only that, it would help to reinforce the necessity of gender balance in this industry, as the collaboration between men and women media professionals could enable a more inclusive creative process where various viewpoints contribute to a richer, more complex visual and narrative storytelling.

At the same time, I think having a balance of both female and male voices in the film industry is important too. It's not about replacing one with the other, but more about collaboration and complementing each other's perspectives to create well-rounded and authentic stories, so it's all about balance! (Respondent 4)

Research Objective 2: To investigate the challenges female media professionals encounter while striving to create diverse and inclusive representations of women in film.

GENDER BIAS

One of the most significant challenges female media professionals face in the filmmaking industry is gender bias. Respondents emphasized several concerns regarding stereotypes and prejudiced attitudes in the workplace.

But recently, we did have one really talented male intern join the company, and I think that sort of changed his perspective a bit. Still, he sometimes jokes about how women can be a bit “too emotional” and how, as the only “straight guy” in the company, he struggles to handle all the emotional energy. (Respondent 1)

One of the respondents highlighted a common stereotype that portrays women as overly emotional, while men are often viewed as more rational and better suited for decision-making roles. Such perceptions create a challenging work environment for female media professionals, limiting their access to significant and leadership positions in the industry. The belief that women can't separate emotions from their work creates an unfair and discouraging environment, making it even tougher for them to break through and contribute fully. This kind of bias continues to feed the gender gap in the industry.

My Art Director took me to a nearby restaurant to ask for props. He mentioned that it might be easier for a girl to borrow stuff, so I ended up going alone to talk to the restaurant owner. I told the owner we were from a production team and asked if we could borrow some props for filming. The owner was super friendly and immediately agreed, even enthusiastically asking if we needed anything else. (Respondent 2)

This response points to a clear example of gender bias—the idea that women are better at certain tasks just because they're seen as more

persuasive, approachable, or non-threatening. These traits are often viewed as helpful in situations that involve negotiation or building rapport. The Art Director's comment about a woman being more likely to succeed in borrowing props mainly because she's a woman reflects this mindset. While it might sound like a compliment on the surface, it actually reinforces the idea that women are only suited for "softer" roles, not technical or leadership ones. It downplays their actual skills and suggests their success comes from gender stereotypes instead of real competence.

One of the biggest challenges is people seeing us as less professional compared to our male counterparts. (Respondent 3)

This response points out a common gender bias women face in the media industry, where they are often seen as less professional than men. This probably comes from stereotypes that link authority and expertise with men, while women are seen as more emotional or nurturing. Because of this, men are often thought to be better at handling complex or technical roles, while women are expected to take on more supportive or secondary tasks.

While me and another female intern were often assigned to tasks like prop preparation, lighting, or sound recording. (Respondent 4)

RESISTING NON-TRADITIONAL FEMALE CHARACTERS

Another challenge faced by female media professionals in the filmmaking industry is the resistance to non-traditional female characters. Women are often depicted as homemakers, love interests, or side characters in films. Non-traditional roles where women are independent and assertive, or take on unconventional roles often receive less acceptance in society. Respondent 5 highlighted that attempts to portray women in these non-conventional roles face industry resistance, as audiences feel more comfortable with traditional gender depictions.

When I was writing the script for a short advertising video, I suggested switching the roles between the male and female characters, so instead of the woman being portrayed as the

homemaker, I made the man to take on the house chores. But, my supervisor not that happy with the proposal and said that the target audience for the advertisement was men, and he said he felt that men won't be happy seeing this kind of portrayal. (Respondent 5)

This response highlights how female media professionals can challenge traditional gender norms by proposing role reversals, such as depicting men as homemakers instead of women. Respondent 5's initiative demonstrates that the increased involvement of women in the media industry can foster authentic and nuanced female representations, breaking away from traditional portrayal of women in film. However, Respondent 5's proposal faced rejection and resistance, reflecting how audiences and stakeholders often cling to traditional gender depictions, which undermines efforts to create inclusive, diverse, and realistic portrayals of women in film, illustrating the challenges female media professionals face when advocating for non-traditional portrayals.

DOMINATING WITH MALE-CENTRIC NARRATIVES

Another challenge faced by female media professionals in the filmmaking industry is the dominance of male-centric narratives, where storytelling prioritizes male experiences, perspectives, and roles. This results in the minimization or marginalization of female characters and their experiences. These narratives reinforce traditional gender stereotypes and limit opportunities for inclusive and diverse portrayals of women in film.

For Malaysian dramas, I feel like they still haven't moved on from those traditional portrayals of women. Back then, like when I was younger, TV7 had a lot of famous shows, like *The Most Beloved* or something like that. Women in those shows were often portrayed as the victim—always kena bully, kena hurt, or indecisive—and in the end, they need someone to help them find the truth or “save” them. Even for Malay films or TV dramas, the female characters tend to follow this kind of pattern. (Respondent 1)

This response highlights how Malaysian dramas continue to portray women in traditional and stereotypical roles, as noted by Respondent 1.

Female characters are often portrayed as victims who suffer mistreatment, remain indecisive, needing external help, usually from a male to find solutions or be "saved." Such portrayals reinforce outdated gender norms and perpetuate narratives that diminish women's independence. Not only does this limit the complexity of female character, but also contributes to the perpetuation of gender biases in the media, which influence the societal perceptions of women's roles and capabilities. These recurring patterns underscore the need for more empowering and diverse representations of women in Malaysian dramas and films.

I don't usually watch Malaysian films, but maybe Singapore films can ah? Like I remember this movie called "Money No Enough 2" from 2008, written by Jack Neo. In the movie, women are often portrayed in the background while the men are shown supporting the family. They listen to their husbands and take on the homemaker role, but they're often undervalued or taken for granted by the husbands. It also reflects societal expectations for women to prioritize their family over their own aspirations. (Respondent 4)

Respondent 4 references the Singaporean movie, *Money No Enough 2* (2008), where women are depicted as homemakers who listen to their husbands and prioritize family over personal aspirations. This portrayal reinforces societal expectations that undervalue women's contributions while emphasizing male roles as primary decision-makers and financial providers. The persistence of such narratives limits the development of diverse storytelling that reflects the evolving roles of women. By prioritizing male perspectives, films often fail to present nuanced, empowering depictions of women, perpetuating stereotypes that confine women to secondary and supportive roles.

EVOLVING FEMALE REPRESENTATION

The way women are represented in films has changed over time, but the progress has been pretty slow. Even though things are getting better, women are still often stuck in traditional stereotypes or given secondary roles. Moving toward more diverse and strong female characters is tough, mainly because of deep-rooted industry standards and what audiences

expect. While there's a growing push for gender equality, the change is still happening at a slow pace, showing how important it is to keep pushing for progress. By encouraging new kinds of stories and letting women take the lead in telling them, the film industry can help create more diverse, inclusive, and real portrayals of women on screen.

I believe the change will come, but it takes time to reshape how women are represented on screen. It's not something that can happen overnight. It's a long process to build stronger portrayals of women on screen. (Respondent 1)

Respondent 1 points out that while female representation in the film industry is changing, the progress is still pretty slow, even with all the efforts to move past traditional gender stereotypes. The respondent also notes that changing how women are portrayed on screen isn't something that can happen overnight—it takes time, persistence, and a lot of advocacies. To build more genuine and stronger representations of women, it's necessary to challenge current norms and make room for different types of stories. As more people in the media push for change, there's a real chance for the industry to embrace inclusive storytelling that reflects a wider variety of female experiences.

I think it's important to highlight that change is happening, but its slowly. There's still a long way to go in ensuring gender equality in this industry, but with more awareness and support, I believe we can create a more inclusive environment for everyone. (Respondent 3)

Respondent 3 points out that while the filmmaking industry is slowly moving toward gender equality, there are still plenty of challenges, like deep-rooted gender biases and stories that focus mostly on men. However, the respondent also sees signs of positive change. While things may be moving at a slow pace, growing awareness and support could help create an environment where both women and men can contribute without being limited by old gender roles. This hopeful perspective highlights how important it is for everyone to work together to create more inclusive and diverse representations in media.

Err... I feel that the role of women in media production is still evolving, but there's definitely progress. While we've come a long way, there's still a lot of work to be done to ensure equal representation in all areas of production, whether it's directing, camera work, editing, or even behind-the-scenes roles like sound and lighting. (Respondent 4)

This response by Respondent 4 highlights how women's roles in media production are changing, but still points out that there's a lot of work left to do for equal representation, especially in areas like directing, camera work, editing, and technical roles like sound and lighting. This comment reflects the ongoing gender gap in media production, where women are still underrepresented in creative and technical positions. It shows that there's a need for more effort to break down barriers, challenge stereotypes, and make sure women have equal opportunities to fully contribute to and shape the media stories we see.

DISCUSSION

The findings highlight how important female media professionals are in changing the way women are portrayed in film. Their work often brings more authentic, emotionally complex, and multi-dimensional female characters, drawing on their own experiences. Based on social constructionism, which argues that gender roles are shaped by cultural norms rather than biology (Lorber, 2018), this study shows how powerful the media is in shaping societal views. As women become more involved in media production, there's a real chance to challenge the old gender stereotypes and shift away from the male-dominated narratives that have traditionally shaped film.

This point is backed up by Callahan (2025), who found that when women hold leadership positions, they tend to create more complex and independent female characters. Their creative input adds depth to the stories and moves away from the usual portrayal of women as passive or side characters. But even with this progress, systemic gender biases and deeply ingrained social norms still hold back the full impact of women's contributions. Many respondents in this study mentioned facing obstacles like limited access to leadership roles, being given less important tasks, or

having their ideas dismissed—especially when they challenge traditional gender norms.

These barriers tie into Goffman's (1979) theory of gender advertisements, which says that society often portrays women as dependent or passive. The media industry, as a reflection of society, mirrors these imbalances. Research by Doughman and Khreich (2025) also shows that these biases limit women's creative freedom, making it harder for them to break away from male-dominated storytelling.

Even when women succeed in creating female-led stories, getting those stories accepted by society is still a big challenge. The public's resistance, shaped by long-held patriarchal values, often makes it hard for non-traditional female characters to gain full acceptance. Examples like the backlash against *Catwoman* (2004) and the mixed reactions to *Barbie* (2023) show how uncomfortable people can feel with characters who don't fit traditional gender roles. As Schudson and Gelman (2023) point out, biased and prejudiced attitudes are largely shaped by both social constructionist and essentialist mindsets. Therefore, challenging these underlying belief systems is essential for fostering broader acceptance of diverse and empowered female representations in media.

To tackle these ongoing issues, many participants in this study stressed the importance of collaboration between male and female creatives. Working together can bring more balanced perspectives and help break down old biases, ultimately leading to a more inclusive and fair media landscape. This is supported by Giris et al. (2023), who suggest that mixed-gender collaboration can help balance perspectives and challenge stereotypes, thereby contributing to more balanced and inclusive narratives in film storytelling.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that female media professionals are reshaping the portrayal of women in Malaysian films, offering authentic, emotionally complex, and multi-dimensional characters that challenge traditional stereotypes. However, their efforts are not without obstacles, including male-dominated perspectives in creative decision-making, persistent gender stereotypes, and deep-rooted societal norms that continue to limit their full impact.

The findings suggest that greater mixed-gender collaboration and expanded leadership opportunities for women can foster more inclusive and balanced narratives. By addressing these challenges and valuing women's creative contributions, the Malaysian film industry can not only enrich its storytelling but also contribute to broader cultural shifts toward gender equity in media representation. This study thus fills an important gap in understanding the experiences of female media professionals in Malaysia and underscores the role of media in shaping societal views.

To create lasting change in the representation of women, it's crucial to not only increase the presence of women in production roles but also to invest in educational programs that challenge and deconstruct the limiting social constructions of gender. This approach can help shift societal perceptions and create a more inclusive environment where diverse, authentic portrayals of women are the norm, both on and off the screen. According to social constructionism, once individuals become aware of how gender roles are culturally imposed, they can begin to challenge and reshape them. This requires conscious reflection from both media creators and audiences, especially diverse representation in both production and on-screen content fosters inclusivity, improves creative outcomes, and promotes broader societal change. In essence, when female media professionals are given equal voice and space, their work can serve as a powerful tool to deconstruct harmful gender norms.

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The Role of Attitudes, Subjective Norms and Behavioural Control in Spreading Fake News on Social Media Among Youth in Penang

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of social media has reshaped how information is consumed and shared, but it has also accelerated the spread of fake news, particularly among youth. This study examines the factors influencing the dissemination of fake news on social media among youth in Penang, Malaysia, through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 206 respondents via a structured questionnaire and analyzed statistically. The findings reveal significant relationships between attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and the tendency to share fake news. Specifically, personal beliefs, peer influence, and perceived ability to manage online behaviour all play critical roles in shaping youths' sharing practices. The results underscore the urgent need for targeted media literacy programs and awareness initiatives to strengthen critical evaluation skills and foster responsible digital citizenship. By highlighting the psychological and social dynamics that drive fake news dissemination, this research offers practical insights for policymakers, educators, and media organizations in designing interventions to curb misinformation and safeguard the integrity of information ecosystems.

Keywords: Fake News, Social Media, Youth, Penang, Theory of Planned Behaviour

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INTRODUCTION

Fake news, often referred to as misinformation or disinformation, has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges of the digital era. While the phenomenon is not new, its influence has intensified with the rapid expansion of the internet and social media platforms, where information is produced and circulated with unprecedented speed and reach (Gallagher & Berger, 2019; Bounegru et al., 2017). The problem gained global prominence following the 2016 United States presidential election, where fake news was found to significantly influence voter choices (Friedlander, 2019). Since then, concerns regarding its impact on democratic societies, social trust, and political stability have grown worldwide. A Gallup Research Center survey conducted in 2016 found that 23% of Americans are inclined to share fake news, whether knowingly or unknowingly (Barthel et al., 2016). Furthermore, a study by Silverman and Singer-Vine (2016) revealed that a majority of Americans believe in fake news. Additionally, research conducted by Chen et al. (2015) discovered that over 60% of students have shared fake news on social media. Given that college students are heavy users of social media platforms, they are particularly vulnerable to exposure to fake news. Consequently, there has been a surge in articles discussing strategies to prevent the spread of fake news and urging individuals to combat inappropriate and false information (Gallagher & Berger, 2019). Proposed measures include labeling false information and equipping individuals with tools to independently identify it (Friedlander, 2019).

The advent of social media has transformed the information ecosystem, granting individuals the ability to act as both producers and distributors of content. However, the absence of effective gatekeeping mechanisms, combined with the sensationalized nature of much online content, has led to a proliferation of unverified or deliberately false information (Del Vicario et al., 2016). One particularly susceptible group in this ecosystem is the heavy users of social media, who often lack the necessary skills to critically evaluate the authenticity of the information they encounter. Relying on public opinion to avoid social isolation, these users inadvertently contribute to the dissemination of fake news (Gearhart & Zhang, 2014). A study conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that fake news spreads 70% faster than true news

(Vosoughi et al., 2018), largely because it appeals to novelty, surprise, and sensationalism—psychological factors that influence how individuals process and share information (Chan et al., 2017). Consequently, heavy users of social media, particularly youth, are highly susceptible to exposure and uncritical dissemination of fake news (Chen et al., 2015; Nelson & Taneja, 2018).

Fake news proliferates not only due to social media platforms but also because of psychological and cognitive factors. Numerous studies in psychology and sociology have demonstrated that false, misleading, and biased information is more likely to spread among individuals, both in physical crowds and online environments, due to their information acquisition behavior (Jolls et al., 1998). A psychological study shows that people are more likely to share false or biased information because of behaviors such as cognitive inertia and confirmation bias, which lead them to accept information aligned with their existing beliefs rather than critically evaluating it (Chan et al., 2017). Research further indicates that fake news spreads more rapidly than real news because it often uses language that evokes surprise and disgust, appealing to novelty and sensationalism, while real news typically triggers emotions like sadness and trust (Vosoughi et al., 2017). Ultimately, while social media facilitates dissemination, human psychology is the key driver behind the rapid spread of fake news.

The issue holds particular relevance in Malaysia, where internet penetration is among the highest in the world. According to the Digital Global Overview Report, 96.8% of Malaysians are internet users, and 26.8 million are active on social media (Kemp, 2023). Notably, youth account for nearly a quarter of the population, with 28.6% under the age of 25. Moreover, Malaysians heavily rely on the internet for information-seeking (76.2%) and news consumption (65.8%), while more than half (57%) actively share news via social platforms and messaging apps. This widespread dependence on digital platforms, combined with limited media literacy, creates fertile ground for the proliferation of fake news, with profound social and political consequences (Ngadiron et al., 2020; Sukumaran, 2020).

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to examine the factors contributing to the spread of fake news among youth social media users in Penang, Malaysia. By focusing on this demographic, the research

addresses a critical gap in understanding how young users—who are both the most active and vulnerable online population—interact with fake news.

Understanding these factors is essential not only for developing effective media literacy strategies but also for safeguarding democratic values, social cohesion, and the integrity of journalism in Malaysia's rapidly evolving digital landscape. As Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) assert, everyone plays a vital role in the information ecosystem. By identifying these factors, policymakers, educators, and media organizations can gain valuable insights to develop targeted interventions and strategies that address the underlying causes and mitigate the impact of fake news.

Firstly, policymakers play a pivotal role in developing regulations and legislation specifically designed to combat the spread of fake news on social media platforms. They can allocate resources to support independent fact-checking organizations that can verify the accuracy of information and punish the production and dissemination of false content. In addition, policymakers should advocate for media literacy programs in schools and communities that foster critical thinking skills and transparency in social media algorithms. Secondly, educators can make a significant contribution by integrating media literacy education into the curriculum and empowering students to evaluate sources of information, recognize bias, and verify information. Encouraging students' critical thinking skills and promoting the verification of information sources is an important part of their role in combating fake news. Thirdly, media organizations also have a responsibility to proactively fact-check and verify information before disseminating it. They should also adhere to ethical standards of journalism, avoid grandstanding and prioritize accuracy. Their impact can be further enhanced by working with educators, supporting media literacy programs and seminars, and providing resources and expertise in this regard. The findings have the potential to empower youth by equipping them with knowledge and awareness. By fostering critical thinking skills and media literacy, youth can effectively discern and evaluate information, reducing their vulnerability to fake news. Lastly, news agencies, as the Fourth Estate of a nation, bear the crucial responsibility of upholding objectivity and safeguarding the public interest. In this context, it becomes imperative for

news agencies to understand the impact of fake news on social media. Such understanding is vital to maintaining their legitimacy and protecting the welfare of the public they serve (Baptista & Gradim, 2020). News agencies are entrusted with the important task of monitoring the activities of governments and other powerful entities, reporting any violations or injustices to the public. However, the proliferation of fake news can deceive and mislead the public, undermining the fairness and objectivity of the news media. Therefore, news agencies need to develop a deep understanding of the influence of fake news on social media to defend the integrity of the news media itself. It is crucial to promptly identify and address fake news to preserve the credibility of news agencies.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study aims to examine how attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural controls contribute to the spreading of fake news on social media among youth in Penang.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of fake news has evolved from early print fabrications to a global concern amplified by social media, particularly following events like the 2016 US presidential election and Brexit referendum. Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) propose a two-dimensional understanding of 'fake news': the 'fake news genre' and the 'fake news label'. The 'fake news genre' refers to intentionally fabricated information that imitates real news, characterized by a lack of factual accuracy, intent to deceive, and journalistic representation. The 'fake news label', in contrast, describes the strategy used by politicians to discredit media outlets with differing views, turning 'fake news' into political rhetoric aimed at undermining credibility.

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) define the fake news phenomenon as 'information disorder' and propose a comprehensive conceptual framework for studying this problem. They argue for the categorization of 'fake news' into various subtypes. Firstly, there are factually incorrect messages without malicious intent, referred to as "misinformation,"

which can arise due to accidental dissemination or misrepresentation of information. Secondly, there are factually incorrect messages that are intentionally created with malicious motives labeled as "disinformation," as they are intended to deceive or harm a particular target. Lastly, factual messages with malicious motives are categorized as instances where accurate information is employed to target specific individuals, organizations, or countries, such as the unauthorized release of private information or the dissemination of hate speech.

The definition reveals that 'fake news' not only encompasses falsehoods, but also encompasses a variety of motives, ranging from unintentional dissemination to entertainment, profit-seeking, harm, and even the manipulation of public opinion. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) assert that understanding problematic information requires considering three key elements: (i) Agent: Who is responsible for creating and spreading problematic information? What are their motives?; (ii) Message: What is the nature of the message? How is it formatted? What are its defining characteristics? and (iii) Interpreter: How do individuals who receive the message perceive and interpret it? What actions do they take in response?

There are seven common types of fake news, including satire or parody (no intention to cause harm but has potential to fool); misleading content (misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual); imposter content (when genuine sources are impersonated); fabricated content (new content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm); false connection (when headlines visuals or captions do not support the content); false context (when genuine content is shared with false contextual information); and manipulated content (when genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive) (Koulolias et al., 2018). The existence of these forms highlights the complex challenges that media users face in distinguishing fact from fiction. This directly underscores the need for digital and media literacy, which equips individuals with the skills to critically analyze information, question sources, and verify authenticity before sharing. By developing these competencies, users can recognize misleading techniques, question the credibility of sources, and resist the spread of misinformation. Thus, understanding the various forms of fake news not only illustrates the scale of the problem but also emphasizes why comprehensive media

literacy education is essential to empower individuals, particularly youth, to navigate today's digital information landscape responsibly.

SOCIAL MEDIA ACCELERATES THE SPREADING OF FAKE NEWS

The rise of social media has significantly accelerated the spread of fake news due to its accessibility, affordability, and interactivity. Algorithms, personalized recommendations, and emotionally charged content reinforce echo chambers, where users are primarily exposed to information that aligns with their existing beliefs (Laybats & Tredinnick, 2016; Guess et al., 2019; Bakir & McStay, 2017; Trilling et al., 2017). This creates a feedback loop that prioritizes shareability over accuracy, driving polarization and the viral spread of misinformation (Nelson & Taneja, 2018).

In Malaysia, the spread of political disinformation is shaped by entrenched political and ethnic identities, as well as psychological factors such as the backfire effect, where corrective information can reinforce false beliefs rather than dispel them (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Fake news gained prominence during the 2008 General Election, resurfaced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and was weaponized during the 2018 General Election via bots, manipulated hashtags, and partisan narratives (Neo, 2021; Naeem et al., 2020; Hacıyakupoglu et al., 2018; Jalli & Idris, 2019). During these events, misinformation often exploited ethnic and religious sensitivities, and circulated through social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, demonstrating how political disinformation in Malaysia stems from systemic, algorithmic amplification as well as strategic manipulation.

These dynamics illustrate that fake news is not merely a result of individual cognitive biases but also reflects structural, social and political forces. Its virality is enhanced by sensationalism, emotional impact and identity signaling, which makes it highly shareable and difficult to correct (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Wardle, 2017; Suparno & Susilastuti, 2010; Barfar, 2019).

EVOLVING MEDIA LITERACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Media literacy, traditionally defined as the ability to access, analyze, and interpret media messages (Buckingham et al., 2005), has evolved in

the digital age to include the active creation and dissemination of media content (Luan et al., 2020). Digital and civic information literacy enables individuals to recognize misinformation, evaluate sources critically, and respond responsibly to online content (Auberry, 2018). It reflects broader competencies in processing information, achieving personal goals, and adapting to societal demands (Levine, 1986; Berger & Luckmann, 1990).

New media literacy emphasizes the audience's shift from passive consumers to active participants, requiring skills in navigating online environments, understanding algorithms, and evaluating credibility (Lin et al., 2013; Koc & Barut, 2016; Gilster, 1997). For youth—among the most active users of digital and social media—media literacy is crucial for mitigating exposure to fake news and misinformation, particularly in Malaysia where online platforms are primary sources of news (Nazim & Normal, 2025; Tan et al., 2023).

Collectively, understanding the types, spread, and impact of fake news, alongside the development of digital media literacy, provides a foundation for addressing misinformation in contemporary society, highlighting both the scale of the problem and the importance of education and systemic interventions.

THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), developed by Icek Ajzen (1991), is one of the most influential models for predicting and explaining human behavior. It extends the earlier Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) by adding a third component: Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC). According to the TPB, behavior is primarily determined by an individual's intention to perform that behavior. Intention, in turn, is shaped by three key factors: (i) attitude toward the behavior (an individual's positive or negative evaluation of performing the behavior); (ii) subjective norms (perceived social pressure from important others, such as family, friends, peers or society to perform or not perform the behavior); and (iii) perceived behavioral control (how easy or difficult individuals believe it is to perform the behavior, considering their skills, resources and opportunities). Ajzen emphasises that behavior is not just a product of personal attitudes or social influence, but also of individuals' perceptions of control. This makes the model

particularly useful for studying behavior of youth spreading fake news on social media (Ajzen, 1991).

Attitudes are shaped by individuals' beliefs about the outcomes of a behavior and their evaluation of those outcomes (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). In the context of news sharing, positive attitudes toward sharing can increase the likelihood of engaging in this behavior. Research shows that emotions also play a critical role: real news often evokes trust and joy, while fake news tends to elicit stronger emotional reactions such as shock, anxiety, or disgust, which drive individuals to share (Vosoughi et al., 2018). The appeal of novelty, surprise, and even entertainment in fake news further motivates people to spread it, linking emotional responses to attitude formation and subsequent behavior.

Subjective norms, the perceived social pressure from important others, strongly influence fake news sharing. Individuals often mirror the behaviors of their peers, friends, or family members to gain approval or avoid being left out (Madden et al., 1992; Talwar et al., 2019). On social media, if misinformation is widely shared within one's network, individuals may feel compelled to do the same. This conformity fosters an echo chamber effect, where people primarily engage with like-minded groups and reinforce their social identity (Gallagher & Berger, 2019; Marwick & Boyd, 2018). Fake news, therefore, functions like online gossip, serving as a means of social interaction, belonging, and peer recognition, rather than as an exchange based purely on factual accuracy.

Finally, Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC) refers to individuals' belief in their ability to perform or resist a behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In the case of fake news, PBC moderates the link between intention and action: people with strong self-control and critical thinking skills are less likely to share misinformation (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). However, habitual behaviors, impulsive reactions, or the perception that benefits outweigh risks can encourage the spread of fake news (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010; Cheok et al., 2017). Emotional or "lazy" thinking, combined with cognitive biases, often leads individuals to share misinformation without verifying its accuracy (Burkhardt, 2018; Friedlander, 2019). This suggests that fake news dissemination is not always intentional but is influenced by attitudes, social pressures, and perceived control within the digital environment.

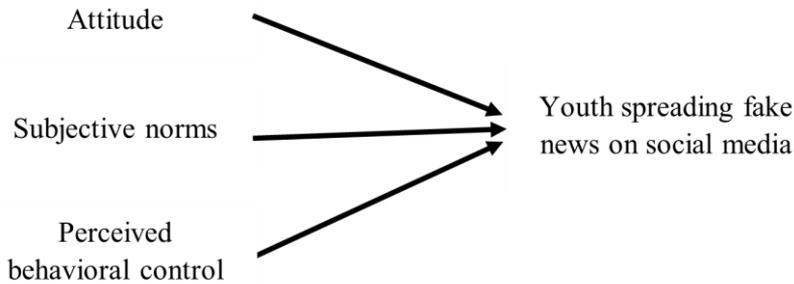


Figure 1: Icek Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (1991) explained the three main components that influence youth spreading fake news on social media

RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine the dissemination of fake news among youth, as it enables statistical analysis, hypothesis testing, and the collection of large-scale data efficiently (Sukamolson, 2007; Holton & Burnett, 2005; Choy, 2014). A total of 206 respondents aged 15–24 in Penang, Malaysia were surveyed, consistent with the World Bank's (2023) definition of youth and Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) guideline suggesting a minimum sample size of 200 for reliable analysis. Penang was chosen due to its sociocultural diversity and significant youth population, making it a suitable location for studying fake news sharing behavior.

A non-probability sampling strategy was applied. Purposive sampling targeted youths who actively use social media and are exposed to fake news, ensuring relevant responses (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Etikan et al., 2016). To complement this, snowball sampling was used, where initial respondents referred peers, allowing the study to reach broader and harder-to-access groups, a method especially effective in social media research (Goodman, 1961; Marwick & Boyd, 2010). While purposive and snowball sampling effectively targeted youths exposed to fake news, these non-probability methods have limitations. They may introduce selection bias and reduce the representativeness of the sample, as youths less active on social media or outside initial referral networks might be underrepresented. Therefore, caution is required when generalizing the findings to the broader youth population.

Data were collected via a Google Forms questionnaire consisting of three sections: Section A collects demographic details (age, gender, education), news consumption habits, social media platforms used, and knowledge/understanding of fake news; Section B (using a 5-point Likert scale) measures attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control toward sharing fake news. Items address motivations such as interaction, novelty, ease of sharing without verification, social approval, peer or family influence, and ability to share or verify content; and Section C further examines factors influencing fake news sharing among Penang's youth, including social engagement, peer conformity, ease of sharing, and awareness of potential harm.

To analyze the data, descriptive statistics were used to summarize patterns (Saunders et al., 2016; Trochim, 2006), reliability testing assessed internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.7 considered acceptable (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011; Sim & Wright, 2005), and Pearson correlation analysis measured the strength of relationships between variables (Cohen, 1988).

A pilot test involving 20 participants (approximately 10% of the sample) was conducted online on September 12, 2023, to identify ambiguities and refine the instrument, following Connelly's (2008) recommendation. Feedback from the pilot improved clarity and validity, ensuring the robustness of the final questionnaire (Lancaster et al., 2004; Arnold et al., 2009).

DATA ANALYSIS

This study surveyed 206 youths in Penang to explore demographic characteristics, news consumption patterns, knowledge of fake news, and behavioral factors influencing its spread. Gender distribution was fairly balanced, with 53.4% female and 46.6% male respondents. In terms of age, the largest group was 21–24 years old (43.7%), followed by 18–20 years (34.5%), and 15–17 years (21.8%), showing that most respondents were in their late teens and early twenties. Educational background varied, with a significant proportion pursuing undergraduate degrees (32%) and diplomas (27.7%), followed by pre-university/STPM (20.4%), and secondary school/SPM (19.9%).

When examining news consumption, social media emerged as the primary source of news for 80.6% of respondents, overshadowing traditional outlets such as online news websites (37.4%), print newspapers (10.2%), or television (28.2%). The most frequently cited platforms for encountering fake news were Facebook (56.6%), Twitter (56.6%), Instagram (57.6%), TikTok (36.1%), and WhatsApp (20.5%), reflecting the central role of social networking sites in shaping youth exposure to misinformation.

Respondents' knowledge of fake news varied significantly. About 25.9% admitted to having very limited knowledge, while others indicated very good (16.6%), moderate (17.6%), limited (20.5%) or good (19.5%) understanding. When asked to define fake news, participants highlighted multiple perspectives, including intentionally fabricated stories (48.1%), satirical or parody content misinterpreted as real news (46.6%), misleading headlines (49.5%), manipulated context (49.5%), and misattributed information (34%). A portion of respondents (26.7%), however, remained uncertain about its meaning, underscoring the challenges of media literacy among youths.

Reliability testing confirmed the robustness of the questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha values demonstrated high internal consistency across variables: attitudes ($\alpha=0.79$), subjective norms ($\alpha=0.89$), perceived behavioral control ($\alpha=0.72$), and fake news spreading behavior ($\alpha=0.86$), all exceeding the accepted threshold of 0.70. This indicates that the survey items reliably measured the constructs of the study.

Correlation analysis revealed strong and statistically significant relationships between the independent variables and fake news sharing behavior. Specifically, attitude ($r=0.80$), subjective norms ($r=0.77$), and perceived behavioral control ($r=0.89$) were all positively correlated with the dependent variable. It should be noted, however, high correlations observed between attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control may partly reflect multicollinearity or conceptual overlap among the constructs. Specifically, the survey items all relate to online sharing behavior, for example, a respondent who enjoys sharing fake news (attitude) might also feel influenced by peers (subjective norms); and a respondent who feels confident in sharing fake news (perceived behavioral control) may also report positive attitudes and subjective norms. This overlap could contribute to the inflated correlations among

the three variables. In addition, because all variables were measured using the same self-report questionnaire at a single time point, common-method bias may have further increased the observed correlations.

Despite these considerations, these results suggest that youths with more favorable attitudes towards sharing, greater social influence and stronger perceptions of control are significantly more likely to spread fake news. Hypothesis testing further supported these findings, confirming that all three constructs attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control have a significant impact on the likelihood of sharing fake news. Among these, perceived behavioral control showed the strongest correlation, indicating that when youths feel it is easy and within their ability to share information, they are more likely to engage in spreading fake news, regardless of its accuracy.

Overall, the results highlight the importance of psychological and social factors in driving youth behavior online. Attitudes and social norms encourage sharing for social engagement and approval, while perceived control amplifies the ease of spreading information. Together, these findings underscore the urgent need for targeted media literacy programs, peer influence interventions, and awareness campaigns to curb the spread of misinformation among youths in Penang.

DISCUSSION

The findings provide important insights into the susceptibility of Penang's youth to fake news but also raise critical questions about the structural, social, and cognitive mechanisms driving this phenomenon. The reliance on social media as the primary source of news (46.1%) highlights a shift away from traditional journalism, but it also exposes youth to platforms where algorithms prioritize engagement over accuracy (Tandoc et al., 2018; Pennycook & Rand, 2019). This raises the concern that misinformation is not merely an individual problem of low media literacy, but a systemic issue embedded within the design of social media ecosystems (Evanson & Sponcel, 2019; Lazer et al., 2018). Thus, interventions cannot focus solely on individual skill-building; they must also address the accountability of digital platforms that amplify sensational and misleading content.

The correlation results grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) highlight that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control are predictive of fake news sharing (Ajzen, 1991; Apuke & Omar, 2021). While this confirms the explanatory power of TPB, it also suggests that combating fake news requires strategies beyond individual awareness campaigns. For instance, the strong influence of subjective norms ($r = 0.77$) underscores the role of peer approval and social environments in shaping behavior (Talwar et al., 2019; Vosoughi et al., 2018). This points to the importance of cultivating a “culture of verification” where social sanctions discourage the casual sharing of unverified information. Without tackling these social dimensions, interventions may fail to create lasting behavioral change.

Equally significant is the high correlation between perceived behavioral control and fake news sharing ($r = 0.89$). This may indicate that youth, despite recognizing misinformation, feel empowered to engage with and spread it, whether for humor, attention, or group belonging. Such behavior suggests a paradox: higher digital confidence does not necessarily translate into critical digital citizenship (Guess et al., 2019; Machete & Turpin, 2020). This calls for more nuanced educational approaches that distinguish between digital proficiency and critical literacy.

Psychological explanations, such as reliance on heuristics and confirmation bias, further complicate the issue. While these findings resonate with past studies (Swire & Ecker, 2017; Lodge & Taber, 2005; Pennycook & Rand, 2021), they also highlight the limitations of purely rationalist approaches to media literacy. Information processing is not a neutral activity; it is shaped by emotions, ideological commitments, and identity politics. Hence, even highly educated individuals may fall prey to misinformation if it aligns with their beliefs. Addressing fake news, therefore, requires not just cognitive training but also interventions that foster openness to diverse perspectives and encourage reflection on personal biases.

Moreover, the study reveals uneven levels of fake news awareness, with 25.7% of youth showing very limited knowledge. This variation calls for differentiated interventions - blanket media literacy programs may not be equally effective across audiences. Tailored approaches that consider socioeconomic background, education level, and digital access

are needed to close these awareness gaps (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Vraga & Tully, 2021). Otherwise, interventions risk reinforcing existing inequalities, where only more privileged youth acquire the tools to navigate misinformation effectively.

While the study provides robust reliability and correlation measures, it does not fully account for contextual factors such as political polarization, economic precarity, or cultural attitudes toward authority—all of which can exacerbate misinformation dynamics (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Lazer et al., 2018). This limitation points to the need for future research that integrates structural and cultural analyses with psychological models like TPB. While the findings affirm the importance of attitudes, norms, and perceived control in explaining fake news sharing, a more critical perspective reveals that misinformation is not merely a problem of individual cognition but also of social norms, platform design, and structural inequalities. Effective solutions will therefore require a multi-level strategy: strengthening individual critical media literacy, fostering collective social norms that discourage misinformation, and holding digital platforms accountable for their role in amplifying deceptive content.

CONCLUSION

The study aims to investigate the factors that contribute to the spread of fake news on social media among the youth population in Penang. Through an analysis of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, this study provides insights into the complex dynamics involved in the dissemination of misinformation in the digital realm. The findings underscore the significant role that attitudes play in the propagation of fake news among Penang's youth. The level of belief or skepticism individuals hold toward the information they encounter significantly influences their propensity to share it. This suggests that addressing the issue of fake news requires a focus on shaping individual attitudes and fostering critical thinking.

Additionally, subjective norms, influenced by social pressures and peer influence, emerge as influential factors contributing to the spread of fake news. The desire for conformity and acceptance can drive individuals to disseminate unverified information without critically

assessing its veracity. Recognizing the power of social dynamics in the digital age, it becomes imperative to cultivate a social environment that discourages the dissemination of fake news. Moreover, perceived behavioral control is a critical determinant in the dissemination of fake news. The perceived ability, or lack thereof, of individuals to discern between accurate and fabricated content significantly impacts their decision-making process when sharing information on social media platforms.

Limited digital literacy, coupled with the ease of content sharing, contributes to the rapid propagation of misinformation. The findings emphasize the importance of future educational interventions and initiatives to enhance digital literacy among Penang's youth. Equipping individuals with critical thinking skills and promoting media literacy will empower them to navigate the online landscape responsibly and discern between reliable and false information. Addressing the issue of fake news requires a collaborative approach involving governmental organizations, educational institutions, media outlets, and social media platforms. Future guidelines, fact-checking mechanisms, and robust algorithms need to be established to identify and flag false information, thereby mitigating the spread of fake news.

In essence, this research acknowledges that the proliferation of fake news on social media among Penang's youth presents significant challenges to journalism, democracy, and societal well-being. By conducting this study and implementing the recommended measures, we anticipate fostering a more informed and resilient digital society in the future. This study also serves as a call to action, urging stakeholders to work together in safeguarding the integrity of information in the digital age and ensuring that the youth of Penang and beyond can navigate the vast landscape of information with confidence and discernment.

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The Impact of *No More Bets* Film on Cyber Fraud Awareness and Behavior Among Penang Audiences: A Theory of Reasoned Action Perspective

Lim Tse Shaun* & Justina Tan Wan Ting**

Abstract: With the rise of digital technology and the Internet, cyber fraud cases have been greatly increasing in Southeast Asia in recent years including Malaysia and China. In response, Chinese filmmakers are increasingly producing films that reveal the harsh realities of cyber fraud and the hidden activities of cyber fraud companies. In fact, film has a strong impact on society by shaping attitudes, values, and ethics, and raising awareness. Through storytelling and visual imagery, films can evoke strong emotions and spark important conversations about social issues. Hence, a growing number of Chinese films are being released with anti-fraud themes to provoke conversation about the cyber fraud issue and raise awareness of cyber fraud among the audience. One of these films is the Chinese film '*No More Bets*' which was released in August 2023 and set a new box office record for Chinese-language films in Malaysia in 2023. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how the film '*No More Bets*' raises awareness of cyber fraud among the Penang audience. Film has the power to spark change and help the audience better understand the world, shaping or reshaping how they see events or issues. Thus, this study also aims to study the impact of the film '*No More Bets*' on the perception and behaviour of the Penang audience. This study uses a qualitative research method by forming a focus group of seven informants during the interview session to gather their response and thoughts after watching the film. The results affirm that a strong emotion attached to the film increased their awareness towards cyber fraud. Furthermore, there is an increased sense to educate others and

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share news about cyber fraud to protect the community. It shows that the film played a crucial role in shaping both individual attitudes and societal vigilance against cyber fraud.

Keywords: *No More Bets*, Cyber fraud, Theory of Reasoned Action, Attitudes, Social Norms, Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

Fraud is the deliberate distortion of facts by an individual or organisation to persuade someone to give up something valuable or waive a legal right and often through acts of deception or misrepresentation (Akers & Gissel, 2006). This has always been a serious issue in every country and remains a major concern around the world, especially with the rapid development of technology in recent years. There are various types of fraud, including home repair fraud, social security and insurance fraud, and financial fraud, all of which can target anyone, from individuals and businesses to organisations and government agencies (Kratcoski, 2018). However, with the Internet seamlessly woven into our lives, fraud has taken on new forms in cyberspace, evolving into what is now known as cyber fraud (Stalans & Finn, 2016; Rathinasabapathy & Rajendran, 2007). Cyber fraud is a criminal activity by using a computer as a tool or method to carry out additional crimes, offences, or legal violations (Rathinasabapathy & Rajendran, 2007). Cyber fraud has been at an all-time high and it has become the fastest-growing type of fraud (Experian, 2017) due to the widespread reliance on digital technologies by cyber users (Nasution et al., 2018). Its global impact continues to grow, seriously affecting people around the world, including those in Southeast Asia. Based on Lee (2023), thousands of victims, especially from China, Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan, have been trafficked by cyber fraud organisations allegedly operating in countries such as Myanmar and Cambodia.

As technology becomes more advanced, the Internet creates a wide chance for crime in cyberspace. The rapid development and accessibility of the Internet and information technology foster the opportunity for a new type of criminal to emerge which is cyber fraud (Stalans & Finn, 2016). Cyber fraud is a serious threat in the digital era as it involves

illegal activities carried out through the Internet which pose serious threats to personal privacy and financial security. Cyber fraudsters use various techniques to access the victims' personal information and convince them to take actions that lead to financial loss (Pratt et al., 2010). The impact of cyber fraud is not just limited to the individual victims, but it extends to affect a nation.

In recent years, Malaysia has become an increasingly attractive target for cybercriminals in Asia. The growing number of Malaysians engaging in digital transactions has led to a continuous rise in cyberattacks (Jayabalan et al., 2014). According to Mahari (2024), the number of cyber fraud cases in Malaysia has increased from 17,668 in 2019 to 34,495 in 2023, almost double the amount in just four years. It is believed that the development of technology such as artificial intelligence (AI) would make efforts to combat these crimes more challenging. Based on Malay Mail (2023), there were 32,462 cases of cyber fraud recorded from January to November 2023 in Malaysia, resulting in losses totalling RM1.3 billion.

Starting from the 21st century, both Malaysia and China have produced many anti-fraud films to raise awareness about cyber fraud among audiences. One example from Malaysia is the film '*Oppa*' which was released in May 2024 and explores the world of scams in Malaysia (Malay Mail, 2024). Similarly, China has released several anti-fraud films in recent years as well, including '*Butcher Hunter*' (2022), '*Dancing Green*' (2023), and the highest-ranking Chinese film in Malaysia in 2023, '*No More Bets*' which was produced by director Shen Ao and released on 7 September 2023 in Malaysia cinemas. The film '*No More Bets*' has topped the box office in China since its release and led China's box office for four consecutive weekends by earning over 3.4 billion yuan, approximately RM2.176 billion (Epardafas, 2023). Besides China, the film '*No More Bets*' has also successfully exceeded RM10 million at the box office just four days after its official release and this set a new record for the highest-ranking Chinese film in Malaysia for 2023 (China Press, 2023).

The film '*No More Bets*' tells the story of three individuals who fall victim to a cyber fraud organisation in their pursuit of money. Two of them, Pan Sheng and Anna, are lured abroad by job offers and are forced to assist the organisation in engaging with criminal activities such as

promoting fake investments and online gambling platforms. The third character, Gu Tianzhi, is a postgraduate from a wealthy family who becomes addicted to online gambling after an initial lucky streak. However, it is revealed that the result was manipulated by the cyber fraud organisation through software. When he loses all his money, the organisation uses various methods to persuade him to borrow from lending companies that are colluding with the scammers. They set up a “pig butchering” scheme by building a fake relationship with Gu Tianzhi over time, gaining his trust through Anna’s online chats, and eventually tricking him into investing in a fake scheme to drain his family’s assets. His gambling problems are soon revealed to his parents and his family life becomes strained. At the same time, Anna pretends to care for Gu Tianzhi online, encouraging him to continue gambling with the promise of a big win. Under Anna’s influence, Gu Tianzhi takes extreme actions, stealing from his family and ignoring warnings from his loved ones and anti-fraud calls. He eventually used eight million yuan to buy virtual currency. When the money arrives, Anna blocks him which makes Gu Tianzhi despair and eventually takes his own life. On the other side, Pan Sheng and Anna secretly send detailed information about the scam to the police and collaborate with them to successfully destroy the core of the cyber fraud organisation, rescuing numerous victims and gaining their own freedom.

The official message of the film *‘No More Bets’* is to prevent the public from falling victim to scams. With its interesting plot and strong theme, the film has reached a large audience which sparks discussions about both the movie and the broader issue of cyber fraud. Therefore, the study will investigate the impact of the film *‘No More Bets’* on Penang audience’s behaviour towards cyber fraud. This study will be significant to raise awareness for Malaysians in identifying cyber fraud and serve as a guideline for the government to ensure safeguards against cyber fraud.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study aims to:

1. Study how the Penang audience’s attitude after watching the film *‘No More Bets’* influences their behaviour towards cyber fraud.

2. Explore the subjective norms of Penang audience on behaviour towards cyber fraud as portrayed in the film '*No More Bets*'.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To develop a better understanding of the subject matter, a literature review was conducted encompassing the topics of cyber fraud, the emergence of anti-fraud films, and Theory of Reasoned Action. This review serves as a foundational framework for examining the issue of cyber fraud and assessing the influence of '*No More Bets*' in addressing this growing concern.

CYBER FRAUD

Over the past 30 years, the adoption of the Internet has rapidly increased. Starting with about 16 million users in 1995, the number grew to 361 million by 2000, nearly 2.5 billion by 2011, over 3.4 billion by 2016, and around 5.45 billion by 2024, reflecting a significant global increase in internet usage (Jewkes & Yar, 2010; Internet World Stats, 2012; Internet Live Stats, 2016; Petrosyan, 2024). The advancement of mobile computing devices has greatly expanded Internet access across many countries and has transitioned from computers to laptops, tablets, and phones, and now to connected devices like TVs, heating systems, and vehicles (Button & Cross, 2017). The creation and growth of the Internet have made technology more accessible which allows anyone with a computer or smartphone to connect easily (Milojicic, 2000).

However, the very same technological advancements have developed new forms of fraud, mainly cyber fraud. In the past, fraud was often constrained by geographic boundaries and the need for face-to-face interactions, but the emergence of the Internet has removed these limitations, providing fraudsters with a global platform to operate from anywhere in the world (Koong et al., 2017). The technology has not diminished the offender's motivation to commit fraud; instead, it has transformed the methods by which these crimes are committed (Button & Cross, 2017). Offenders can now effortlessly access personal information to target numerous innocent victims, which has led to the rise of cyber fraud.

Cyber fraud has emerged as a major crime of the 21st century that has caused severe impacts on victims, including damage to their reputations, emotional trauma and financial losses (Korsell, 2020; Setyawan et al., 2023). Recent crime statistics show a clear shift from traditional crimes involving physical money to cyber fraud. In 2023, cyber fraud surged across Southeast Asia, with an alarming 82% increase compared to previous years (Cheng & Chow, 2023). Singapore alone reported over 46,000 cases, an increase of approximately 45% compared to 31,728 cases, marking the highest number since 2016 (Faizal Rahman, 2024). Besides, a report from the Supreme People's Procuratorate revealed that in 2023, cases of cyber fraud surged by 36.2% to impact 323,000 individuals in China, marking a significant rise compared to the previous year (Kurtenbatch, 2024). From 2017 to 2021, cyber fraud in Malaysia resulted in estimated losses of RM2.23 billion (AAG, 2024). From January to July 2022, there were 11,367 reported cyber fraud cases in Malaysia, reflecting an increase of almost two times compared to the rate in 2016. Cyber fraud is not only one of the most frequently reported crimes on the Internet but also one of the crimes that often result in non-reporting of victimisation (Cross, 2016). According to Brunton-Smith (2017), the high variability in cybercrime victimisation is due to differences in online behaviour, awareness of threats, attitudes, and knowledge about protective measures. Setyawan et. al. (2023) also mentioned that cyber fraud represents one of the most difficult security concerns of the 21st century due to the low reporting and investigation rates. This makes it difficult to fully understand the extent of the differences in experiences among victims of various types of cyber fraud.

RISE OF ANTI-FRAUD FILMS

The rise of anti-fraud films around the world reflects increasing awareness and concern about the widespread problem of fraud in many forms (Wells, 2014). Some of these frauds even became so infamous that producers decided to capitalize on their stories by bringing them to the world of cinema (Personable, 2024). The films are usually based on real-life situations or inspired by actual scams that aim to reveal the strategy used by fraudsters and the devastating impact their acts have on their victims. Based on Personable (2024), the seven famous financial scam

movies and series that are based on true events include *'Catch Me if You Can'* (2002), *'The Wolf of Wall Street'* (2013), *'The Big Short'* (2015), *'The Wizard of Lies'* (2017), *'Fyre: The Greatest Party That Never Happened'* (2019), *'The Tinder Swindler'* (2022) and *'Inventing Anna'* (2022).

Over the last few years, cyber fraud has grown rampant in China which inspired China's filmmakers to produce anti-fraud films and this has marked a vital development in the global fight against cyber fraud (Ding, 2023). As is the case with other countries, most of the anti-fraud films in China are based on real-life fraud cases. A notable example is the film *'No More Bets'* which the director stated is inspired by tens of thousands of actual fraud cases in China (Li, 2023). The film depicts various scams, including online gambling, investment frauds, and click farming showcasing the everyday realities that many people face. Through the inspiration from actual fraud cases in China, the film provides an unprecedented view into the complicated web of global cyber fraud (Ding, 2023). The film has made a concerted effort to address the growing issue of cyber fraud, especially younger generations which are now the main target of cyber fraud. When the anti-fraud film *'No More Bets'* was released, the debate about overseas cyber fraud was widely spread on social media with many people sharing their experiences of being frauded. Besides, a related hashtag accumulated over 1.3 billion views on the short video app Douyin.

In recent years, in order to educate and highlight the importance of cyber awareness in using digital technology, the Malaysian government has launched various awareness programs, such as CyberSAFE (Cyber Security Awareness For Everyone) and film production has been a key component of these efforts (Loheswar, 2023). On May 9, 2024, DREAM FILM SDN BHD, in collaboration with the Royal Malaysian Police Commercial Crime Investigation Department (CCID) produced Malaysia's first Cultural Awareness Film titled *'OPPA'* (Dream Film, 2024). The film is also based on a true story that portrays the global issue of online love scams. Besides, inspired by the success of the Chinese film *'No More Bets'*, Communications and Digital Deputy Minister Teo Nie Ching has planned to work together with film producers to create a Malaysian context film that would raise awareness about the various forms of human trafficking and the prevalence of scams within the

country. Therefore, the rise of anti-fraud films in Malaysia reflects the government's efforts to raise awareness about cyber fraud.

THEORY OF REASONED ACTION (TRA)

Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) was developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) who were influenced by Dulany's (1962) theory of propositional control by emphasising the significance of conscious intention in shaping behaviour and highlighting how expected outcomes influence the strength of intention (Al-Suqri & Al-Kharusi, 2015). The theory is a conceptual framework for understanding and forecasting human behaviour (Al-Bukhrani, et al 2025). However, it does not include certain types of behaviour such as those that are habitual, merely scripted or unthinking, spontaneous, or the result of cravings and impulses.

Over time, TRA has undergone several revisions and expansions, finding relevance in various fields like adoption of technology, health behaviours, environmental conservation (Al-Bukhrani, et al 2025), and in this case, film. Different from other cognitive theories, this theory highlights behavioural intentions and recognises social norms as significant influencing elements (St. Lawrence and Fortenberry, 2007). According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), TRA suggests that the behaviour of an individual can be largely predictable by behavioural intention, which is influenced by both personal attitude and subjective norm. Based on the theory, these attitudes and subjective norms together shape an individual's intentions, determining the probability of performing the behaviour. The two key concepts in TRA, attitudes and subjective norms, deserve a detailed study to understand its application especially in this study.

ATTITUDE

Attitude is an affective response towards engaging in a specific behaviour rather than a response to a general attitude object (Hale et al., 2002). An attitude towards a behaviour is considered as a personal factor as it is internally generated and depends on an individual's beliefs and evaluations of the potential outcomes. In simple terms, the theory asserts that there is a direct correlation between attitudes and outcomes, where attitudes toward a specific behaviour can be positive, negative or neutral

(Fishbein, 1967; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). For example, if an individual believes that the behaviour will lead to a favourable outcome, they are likely to develop a positive attitude toward it. However, if the individual expects the behaviour to result in an unfavourable outcome, they will adopt a negative attitude (Fishbein et al., 1975; Ajzen & Albarracín, 2007). The attitude, whether positive or negative will influence their decision to perform or avoid the behaviour.

SUBJECTIVE NORM

The second factor that significantly influences behavioural intention is subjective norm. According to Field et.al. (1993), the subjective norm can be defined as the individual's perception of the social pressure whether to engage in a particular behaviour. It is seen as a social factor because the individual will depend on the information external to them as well as the social pressure they perceive to perform a behaviour (Ajzen, 1988). These social influences have the power to influence an individual's intention to perform a behaviour, which arises from the individual's perceptions of what others will think about them if they perform the behaviour (Vallerand et al., 1991). The subjective norm of an individual is also determined by their nominative beliefs whether the person significant in their life approves or disapproves of the behaviour, weighted by the person's motivation to follow with those referents (Montano, 2015). An individual who believes that important referents expect them to engage in a behaviour will have a positive subjective norm while if an individual who believes the referents expect them not to engage in the behaviour will form a negative subjective norm.

TRA was applied in this research because it is the most suitable theory for understanding how personal attitudes and subjective norm factors directly influence audience behaviour towards the film '*No More Bets*'. By using the theory, the study intends to obtain information about the dynamics between personal beliefs and social influences in shaping behaviour towards cyber fraud. To provide a meaningful study on the topic, the elements of attitude and subjective norm are important as they directly influence behavioural intentions on cyber fraud, which are the most significant predictors of actual behaviour (Tsai et al., 2012). By exploring these factors, this will enhance the understanding of how anti-fraud messages shape the attitudes and social norms on cyber fraud.

POST-BEHAVIOUR

Subjective norms and attitudes play a pivotal role in shaping the post-purchase behaviour of Gen Z in the realm of perfumes. Seeking social validation is a prevalent trend among Gen Z individuals, and when peers, influencers, or celebrities endorse a particular perfume, it significantly influences post-buying decisions. Positive subjective norms, such as friends expressing satisfaction with a specific fragrance, contribute to heightened post-purchase satisfaction (Azcárate, 2022). Additionally, Gen Z's strong identification with specific groups or subcultures shapes subjective norms, making perfumes associated with a particular group identity more appealing as individuals seek alignment with their chosen social circles (Azcárate, 2022). The endorsements of influencers and celebrities further contribute to positive subjective norms, creating an encouraging environment for Gen Z to both purchase and endorse the perfume after the initial buy (Willis, 2023).

Attitudes, particularly those influenced by brand image and values, are key determinants of post-buying behaviour for Gen Z. Gen Z tends to align themselves with brands that mirror their values, and attitudes toward a perfume are shaped by the brand's overall image and messaging. When a brand resonates positively with Gen Z's values, it not only enhances post-buying satisfaction but also contributes to long-term loyalty (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). The sensory experience of a perfume, encompassing fragrance notes, the feel on the skin, and aesthetic appeal, is another influential factor. A positive sensory experience contributes to favourable post-buying attitudes, creating a pathway for continued positive behaviour (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). Moreover, the perceived quality of a perfume significantly impacts attitudes, with high-quality fragrances fostering positive attitudes, leading to post-purchase satisfaction and potential brand loyalty (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

In conclusion, understanding and aligning with the subjective norms and attitudes of Gen Z are imperative for brands targeting this demographic in the perfume industry. These factors extend beyond the initial purchase decision, significantly shaping post-buying behaviour, including satisfaction, loyalty, and advocacy. Brands that effectively tap into the social and attitudinal dimensions can establish strong and lasting connections with Gen Z consumers, fostering a sense of identity and community within their target audience.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research employed a qualitative research method. According to Bryman (2008), qualitative research is a method that usually focuses on the use of words instead of numerical data during the collection and analysis process. The qualitative research method is frequently employed to collect in-depth information which is used to understand how people perceive, experience, interpret, and shape the social world (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). Since the perception of the audience is subjective and shaped by individual background, qualitative methods would allow the researcher to gain deeper insights into the Penang audience's thoughts, feelings, interpretations and their behaviours towards the anti-fraud film which are difficult to capture through quantitative methods. By exploring these true perceptions and behaviours, the researcher can offer valuable references for the government and the future Malaysian film industry in effectively raising cyber fraud awareness.

The research applied focus group interview as the primary data collection method. In a focus group, the researcher can understand and explain the meanings, beliefs and cultures that influence the informants' feelings, attitudes and behaviours (Rabiee, 2004). The criteria for the selection of interviewees were the interviewees had to be from Penang, aged 18 years old and above, and have watched the film '*No More Bets*'. Seven individuals were selected and the eight questions which were asked during the interview are as follows:

Part A: Attitude a

1. How do you feel when watching the events and portrayal of cyber fraud in '*No More Bets*'?
2. How do you describe cyber fraud after watching the film '*No More Bets*'?
3. What do you think are the potential real-world consequences of getting involved in cyber fraud after watching the film '*No More Bets*'?

Part B: Subjective Norm

1. Do you discuss the issue of cyber fraud portrayed in the film '*No More Bets*' with your family or friends? If so, how did those conversations influence your views?
2. Will people like you become more aware of cyber fraud after watching the film '*No More Bets*'?
3. Do most people who are important to you think that you should or should not be aware of cyber fraud?

Part C: Behaviour towards Cyber Fraud

1. Do you discuss the issue of cyber fraud portrayed in the film '*No More Bets*' with your family or friends? If so, how did those conversations influence your views?
2. How likely is it that you will become more aware of cyber fraud in the future?
3. What factors do you consider important before engaging in online activities to avoid cyber fraud in the future?

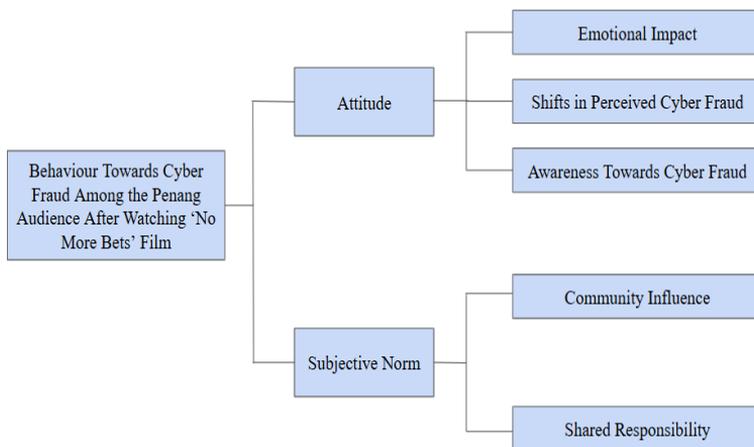
Section A will examine the impact of the film '*No More Bets*' on the Penang audience's attitude towards cyber fraud which is to achieve the research objective 1. Interview questions 1 to 3 fall under this section. Interview question 1 explores the emotions that are evoked in informants when watching the portrayal of cyber fraud in '*No More Bets*'. Interview question 2 examines the way film '*No More Bets*' shaped informants' understanding of cyber fraud. Interview question 3 seeks to determine whether the informants realise and are aware of the consequences of engaging in cyber fraud after watching the film '*No More Bets*'.

Section B will explore how social influences or subjective norms affect the Penang audience's perception of cyber fraud as portrayed in the film '*No More Bets*' to achieve the research objective 2. Interview questions 4 to 6 fall under this section. Interview question 4 assesses how conversations with their personal networks on the film contribute to a greater understanding of the issue. Interview question 5 examines whether the film's message to raise awareness of cyber fraud resonates beyond the informants and spreads within their social circles. Interview

question 6 explores whether the opinions of people surrounding the informants influence their perceptions of cyber fraud.

Section C will explore the impact of the film '*No More Bets*' on the behaviour of Penang audience towards cyber fraud which is also to study how attitude and subjective norms will influence the behaviour. Interview questions 7 and 8 fall under this section. Interview question 7 aims to find out how much attitude and subjective norms shape the behaviour of informants about cyber fraud, particularly concerning their level of awareness. Lastly, interview question 8 seeks to understand the Penang audience's cyber fraud awareness and the preventive actions they adopt to protect themselves after watching the film '*No More Bets*'.

DATA ANALYSIS



The first objective is to study how the Penang audience's attitude after watching the film '*No More Bets*' influences their behaviour towards cyber fraud. By analysing data on audience reactions and attitudes after watching the film '*No More Bets*', the study demonstrates that a film has the potential to shape individuals' perceptions of a social issue. The second research objective is to explore the subjective norms of the Penang audience on behaviour towards cyber fraud as portrayed in the film '*No More Bets*'. This aspect highlights how the audience's behaviour can be further shaped by their social environment, reinforcing their awareness and attitudes toward cyber fraud after watching the film. Based

on answers given by the interviewees, Chart 1 highlights the sub-themes based on the two research objectives.

Under the first research objective, the sub-themes are: i) emotional impact, ii) shifts in perceived cyber fraud, and iii) awareness towards cyber fraud. After watching the film *'No More Bets'*, the informants showed different attitudes, including strong emotions and changes in their perception of cyber fraud. These evolving attitudes not only heightened their awareness of cyber fraud but also influenced their behaviour, encouraging them to adopt proactive measures to protect themselves.

EMOTIONAL IMPACT

According to Wirth & Schramm (2005), emotional impact refers to the strong feelings or responses evoked by a particular experience or event. In media studies, emotional impact refers to how information such as film or news reports impacts audiences' emotions. Most informants expressed that they were shocked by the portrayal of fraudulent activities and the deeper aspects of the fraud operations shown in the film.

Watching it was shocking to me. ..., I didn't realize there were so many stories and setups behind it that I hadn't considered, (I5).

..., the movie shows the deeper side, with skilled programmers and teams of scammers. That left me in shock as it's not a small group, but a massive organization, (I4).

The responses highlight the audience's sense of shock and unease when exposed to the large scale and advanced methods of the fraud operations portrayed in the film. One of the scenes that impacted the informants is where the character Pan Sheng, is lured to Myanmar for a job taken to a massive factory in a rural area. There, he discovers thousands of workers seated in front of computers, engaged in elaborate fraud schemes. The informants mentioned this scene a lot as it evoked a sense of fear and disbelief as they recognised the large resources of the fraud organisation, the involvement of skilled professionals and the highly advanced methods used in these operations. Moreover, the wide

range of scams, many of which were subtly concealed and integrated into the everyday aspects of modern life, surprised the informants and made them aware of the various fraud tactics present in daily activities and surroundings.

In the film, the director incorporates several popular cyber fraud schemes based on real-life incidents. As Informant 2 mentioned, the film showcases fraud tactics such as sports betting, online games, cryptocurrency scams, and student loan frauds subtly hidden in ads, as well as online gambling and human trafficking. By presenting these tactics, the film not only informs the audience but also serves as a warning, urging audiences to be more vigilant in their online interactions as there are many dangers lying around. The film effectively exposed the dark reality behind cyber fraud, leaving informants with an unsettling feeling.

In the movie, the victim initially believed he could win big but realized too late that he had lost everything, leading him to suicide. That suicide scene struck me, it was horrifying to think that falling for a scam could end like that, (I3).

After seeing the operations behind these scam groups, it's worrying.... I'm also worried that some of those brutal scenes like finger-breaking and beatings could actually happen in reality. (I1).

SHIFTS IN PERCEIVED CYBER FRAUD

The next sub-theme, shifts in perceived cyber fraud, highlights how the film has transformed the way informants view the nature and complexity of cyber fraud. Many initially assumed cyber fraud as straightforward and relatively easy to identify, often perceiving it as the work of small, unorganised groups. However, the film revealed the complex operation behind such scams which significantly shifted their perception towards cyber fraud.

I used to think that scamming was a simple act, but I didn't realize there were so many stories and setups behind it that I hadn't considered, (I5).

I've also heard of people around me getting scammed while trading cryptocurrency. I thought I knew about it, but after watching the movie, I realized there are so many layers and tactics that make people fall for these scams, (I6).

The film shows how the fraud organisation works in an organised way, reshaping how the audience thinks about such a group's function. As Informant 6 mentioned, there is more awareness of fraud after watching *'No More Bets'*. The audience came to understand that scams are not just random events but involve well-planned strategies and sophisticated tactics aimed at deceiving victims, especially with the aid of advanced technology in this digital era. Thus, this aspect emphasises how the film effectively educates audiences on the organised and systemic nature of cyber fraud, replacing outdated notions of simplicity with a deeper understanding of its complexities.

Some informants admitted that although they had previously seen news about cyber fraud, their understanding was limited to basic details such as the amount of money stolen or the number of victims involved in cyber fraud without feeling it could happen to them. However, the film caused a huge paradigm shift, making them realise how close cyber fraud is to their daily lives, especially if targeted by these organisations, it would be easy for them to fall victim.

Before watching, I'd just look at the news and see how many people were defrauded without feeling it could happen to me. But after watching the movie, I feel like fraud is closer to our everyday lives than I previously thought, (I2).

Before this movie, I'd read about people escaping these groups and sharing their experiences, but I couldn't truly understand the reality. Seeing it portrayed in the movie allowed me to grasp the intense suffering they endured, and I believe real-life cases are likely even worse, (I1).

AWARENESS TOWARDS CYBER FRAUD

In addressing the awareness towards cyber fraud, most of the informants noted that their awareness of cyber fraud has increased after watching the film '*No More Bets*'. This change is largely due to the film's detailed portrayal of how cyber fraud traps are set and the serious consequences they can bring, creating a strong emotional and cognitive impact on the audiences.

The film taught us a lot about cyber fraud, and that knowledge has naturally raised our caution levels, (I4).

This movie has definitely made my family and me more alert to fraud. It showed us the entire process of cyber fraud and the severe consequences, which has motivated us to be even more cautious to avoid becoming victims ourselves, (I5).

This response emphasises how the film resonates on a personal level, particularly for those who have encountered cyber fraud before. For audiences who had already been cautious, such as Informant 1, the film '*No More Bets*' acted as a crucial reinforcement, strengthening their commitment to remain alert and avoid complacency. For those less familiar with the complexities of cyber fraud, the film served as an eye-opener, pushing them to rethink their habits and adopt safer online practices. The response highlights the film's success in connecting real-life experiences with its message, effectively reaching both victims and non-victims to recognise the importance of safeguarding themselves in the digital world. In fact, this increased awareness has led to changes in the informants' behaviour, leading them to think carefully before taking action online such as avoiding gambling ads, exercising caution when purchasing from online sellers and being more reluctant to share personal information with strangers.

Besides, Informant 5 emphasised how the film's portrayal of cyber fraud had a ripple effect, influencing not just their personal awareness but also their family. By showcasing the full process of fraud operations and the severe aftermath for victims, the film motivated them to take proactive measures to protect themselves. This heightened awareness fosters a more cautious mindset, allowing the audiences to better identify

and avoid fraudulent schemes. The shared sense of caution among audiences demonstrates how the film successfully instils a collective responsibility and urgency to stay vigilant against cyber fraud. In conclusion, each of these sub-themes provides a deeper understanding of how *'No More Bets'* influenced the Penang audience's behaviour, highlighting the film's capacity to evoke strong emotions, change perceptions, and enhance awareness regarding the dangers of cyber fraud. The research found the film significant in raising awareness and fostering a deeper understanding of cyber fraud. In fact, the film not only informs but also engages audiences emotionally and intellectually, prompting them to reassess their behaviour and develop preventive actions.

The other main theme, subjective norm, has two sub-themes which are community influence and shared responsibility.

COMMUNITY INFLUENCE

According to Terry & Hogg (1999), community influence refers to the effect that people or groups have on an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. The influence of the community on individuals' behaviours toward cyber fraud can be subtle and significant. Instead of direct pressure or expectations from family and friends, this influence often comes through exposure to the opinions, experiences, and shared discussions within one's social circle. The film *'No More Bets'* acted as a conversation starter, giving the audience a shared reference point to discuss its portrayal of cyber fraud with family and friends. Through these discussions, informants not only gained new perspectives but also became more cautious in their online behaviour. Hearing personal stories or reflections from trusted people can amplify their understanding of the risks and reinforce their vigilance against potential scams.

After watching it, we discussed the movie and my dad mentioned that he felt the movie portrayed cyber fraud in a relatively gentle way, while in reality, the consequences can be much harsher.... Hearing his perspective made me more cautious, especially with sensitive keywords like "high-paying jobs" and now I'm extra vigilant, (I2).

...I did discuss it with friends, and one of them even shared their own experience of getting defrauded, which surprised me since I never thought he would fall for it.... After listening to my friend share their experience with cyber fraud, it changed my perspective, making me realise that no matter how smart we think we are or how certain we are that we won't be tricked, we still need to be very cautious, (I3).

Informant 2 and Informant 3's response highlights how the collective sharing of experiences and insights within a community can amplify the film's impact. Informant 2 mentioned that after watching the film '*No More Bets*', their family member discussed the film's portrayal of cyber fraud. During the discussion, their father pointed out that while the film showed the seriousness of cyber fraud, the reality might be even worse. Informant 3 shared how a friend recounted their own experience of being defrauded. This revelation was particularly impactful because it came from someone they never expected to fall victim to a scam. Hearing about their friend's experiences shifted the informant's perspective, making them realise that intelligence or confidence does not necessarily protect against cyber fraud. Instead, it highlighted the importance of constant caution and awareness. Hence, discussions and personal stories not only broadened the informants' understanding of cyber fraud but also motivated them indirectly to adopt more vigilant and preventive behaviours when undergoing online activities.

Community influence can also be a kind of pressure that often motivates people to act in ways that align with the values and expectations of their community (Garcia et al., 2023). This influence is exerted by a community or social network such as family and friends that encourages individuals to perform certain behaviours and beliefs. Most informants noted that their family and friends play an important role in shaping their behaviour to prevent cyber fraud. This is because after watching the film '*No More Bets*', their parents and close friends started to regularly remind them to be cautious about cyber fraud and discouraged them from actions that could lead to cyber fraud.

When my friends watched this movie, they shared their thoughts, They suggested that we should improve our awareness by watching

more videos that teach us about fraud prevention, and learn how to avoid becoming the next victim. ... After hearing my friends' thoughts, I felt more strongly that whenever we make online purchases or deal with people, we should do our research and think carefully, (I5).

This response acknowledges how social networks serve as agents of change. The influence of family and friends creates a dynamic where individuals feel compelled to follow shared values and preventive behaviours. Informant 5 explained that after discussing the film *'No More Bets'*, their friends suggested watching more educational content about cyber fraud prevention and emphasised the importance of doing research before making online transactions. This peer-driven advice motivated Informant 5 to follow their friends' suggestions, fostering a sense of dependence towards the people surrounding them and encouraging them to adopt a proactive approach toward avoiding cyber fraud.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

The second sub-theme of subjective norms is shared responsibility. This element considers a shift in the audience's sense of shared responsibility to protect the community from cyber fraud, going beyond personal caution to actively preventing harm to their social circle. From this sub-theme most of the informants said after watching the film *'No More Bets'*, they and the people around them became more attentive to news and articles about cyber fraud. They began sharing these news and updates with each other to increase awareness and enhance the understanding of the tactics used by fraud organisations. The informants felt that by sharing this information, they not only helped themselves to stay alert but also helped people around them such as family and friends to stay informed and avoid potential scams.

After watching the movie and constantly hearing my mom's reminders, I actually pay more attention to cyber fraud now. My family frequently shares such stories, so I see them often and then pass the news along to my friends to keep them alert as well, (I6).

After watching the movie, my family, friends, and I have become more attentive to news about cyber fraud and the latest fraud techniques. Now, whenever one of us sees news on cyber fraud, we share it to remind each other to be careful. For example, my dad used to occasionally share these news stories, but after watching the movie, he shares them even more often, (I2).

These responses highlight how the film “*No More Bets*” sparked a ripple effect of social responsibility. By fostering conversations and encouraging the exchange of valuable information, the film has helped audiences take an active role in protecting not only themselves but also the community at large through social media platforms. For example, Informant 6 shared that the constant reminders from his mother led him to pay closer attention to cyber fraud-related news. He even felt a responsibility to pass along these stories to his friends, ensuring that their peers were equally alert. This behaviour reflects a shift from passive awareness to active participation in spreading preventive measures.

If I see someone on social media sharing a fraud story, I’ll check it out to learn from their experience and avoid similar traps. I’ll also share it on my social media to keep people around me informed, (I5).

Sometimes TikTok has short videos where creators teach ways to prevent cyber fraud. I often share these videos on my social media, as I believe they not only increase my own awareness but also help those around me stay vigilant, (I1).

Both responses emphasise how the film ‘*No More Bets*’ and the community have influenced individuals’ behaviour to actively share information to protect others in their networks, rather than simply consuming it for their benefit. They also highlight the significant role of social media in fostering a culture of shared vigilance against cyber fraud. By sharing stories, insights, and educational content about cyber fraud, individuals contribute to a continuous exchange of knowledge that strengthens collective awareness and caution. By engaging with these posts and learning from the experiences of others, the informant gains a

practical way to identify and avoid cyber fraud. Besides, resharing these stories on social media creates a ripple effect, spreading awareness and ensuring that people within their social circles gain access to this critical information. This also reflects a collective desire to protect others from falling victim to scams.

In conclusion, the study reveals that the influence of a film extends beyond individual viewers, as subjective norms within a community or social circle can amplify the film's impact, motivating collective action against cyber fraud. The research effectively demonstrates that *'No More Bets'* serves not only as a source of entertainment but also as an educational and social catalyst. By raising awareness and inspiring action, the film drives change on both individual and communal levels, creating a ripple effect that deepens the understanding of cyber fraud risks and highlights the importance of vigilance. Besides, the study also underscores how the sharing of cyber fraud-related information, sparked by watching *'No More Bets'*, contributes to spreading awareness across wider social networks. This behaviour is not merely an act of communication but also a reflection of a deeper sense of responsibility and care within communities. By presenting the realistic portrayal of cyber fraud, the film engages the audiences on an emotional level which further strengthens their desire to protect those around them. This dual role of films as both storytellers and societal influencers showcases their potential to address critical issues while encouraging a sense of unity and shared responsibility.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the film *'No More Bets'* plays a significant role in shaping audience attitudes and subsequent behaviours toward cyber fraud. This aligns with the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) framework where attitude is a central determinant of behavioural intention (Yousafzai et al., 2010) and the emotional responses triggered by the film play an important role in changing these attitudes. By portraying fraudulent activities in a vivid and unsettling manner, the film provokes strong emotional reactions such as shock, fear, worry and unease, compelling audiences to reassess their perceptions of cyber fraud critically. This emotional engagement leads to the development of more

cautious and vigilant attitudes, emphasising the role of emotions in influencing attitudinal shifts.

The film facilitates a transformation in attitudes by shifting the audience's beliefs about cyber fraud. Instead of perceiving it as a distant or abstract issue that they will never fall to, the film's portrayal of the intricate schemes and psychological manipulation employed by fraudsters helps the audience to reframe cyber fraud as a personal and imminent threat. According to TRA, beliefs form the foundation of attitudes and 'No More Bets' effectively strengthens the audience's beliefs about the risks and consequences of cyber fraud. This heightened awareness fosters a defensive attitude, encouraging individuals to adopt a more vigilant approach to their online interactions.

Furthermore, the film translates these attitude changes into actionable behaviours as theorised by TRA where attitudes influence intentions, ultimately shaping the behaviours (Taylor et al., 2006). Most interviewees started adopting preventive measures after watching the film '*No More Bets*', such as avoiding gambling advertisements, exercising caution when purchasing from online sellers, and being more reluctant to share personal information with strangers. In addition, they also became more proactive in staying informed about cyber fraud. They began to actively seek out news articles, reports, and updates on emerging cyber fraud tactics. Instead of just recognising cyber fraud risks in their activities, this increased awareness also changed the audience to seek information on how to avoid falling victim to these scams. The film also emphasises the importance of having a comprehensive understanding of cyber fraud by highlighting its complexities, including the psychological manipulation and elaborate planning involved. This detailed portrayal strengthens attitudes by emphasising the importance of taking action such as being aware of cyber fraud tactics. Through these mechanisms, '*No More Bets*' efficiently bridges the gap between awareness and behaviour, demonstrating a clear link between the audience's attitude (through emotional and cognitive responses) and behavioural processes outlined in TRA.

Regarding Research Objective 2, the film serves as a catalyst in establishing these norms by fostering a shared understanding of cyber fraud and encouraging discussions within their social circles. Through these interactions, the audience gains new perspectives on cyber fraud

and understands the importance of adopting preventive behaviours. These shared experiences and conversations significantly influence the audience's beliefs about what is considered socially approved and responsible behaviour regarding cyber security. The film acts as a conversation starter to enhance the influence of subjective norms by providing a shared reference point for evaluating cyber fraud. After watching the film, many respondents engaged in discussions with family and friends, exchanging personal experiences, stories, or advice about avoiding cyber fraud. Such exchanges not only reinforce individual awareness but also create a social environment where taking preventive measures against cyber fraud becomes a valued norm. According to TRA, subjective norms are particularly impactful when individuals place high importance on the opinions of those within their social circle (Chung & Rimal, 2016).

As the film highlights the risks and tactics of cyber fraud, the discussion with their family or friends caused a notable shift, with many individuals actively sharing information about cyber fraud to those in their immediate social circles when they came across related news. In today's digital society, this change extended to using various social media platforms where informants began sharing updates, prevention tips, personal experiences, and educational content concerning cyber fraud on their social media. This shift in behaviour reflects the influence of subjective norms, where social circles and societal expectations encourage individuals to align with shared values in combating cyber fraud. This transformation shows a growing understanding of cyber fraud not just as an individual concern, but as a collective issue that requires the effort of the whole community. This sense of shared responsibility increases awareness of cyber fraud, as people begin talking about and sharing information more frequently. Furthermore, this interaction between the film's influence and the social environment shows how social norms can lead to meaningful changes in behaviour.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this film also serves as a call to action on the problem of cyber fraud by encouraging the audiences to appreciate the film while keeping a critical eye on this social issue. According to the filmmaker,

the goal of the film is to raise awareness and promote a safer, more peaceful social environment. As a result, the study has shown that '*No More Bets*' effectively sparked the strong emotions in audiences after witnessing the fraudulent activities portrayed in the story, leading them to be more aware about the issue of cyber fraud. This heightened awareness then leads to increased sharing and discussions among individuals. Therefore, the film can be considered successful in expanding its influence, fostering a broader sense of responsibility and encouraging proactive behaviour within the community.

The research study is significant in raising awareness about cyber fraud issues by educating the public about the potential risks involved with cyber fraud as portrayed in the film '*No More Bets*'. Ultimately, this study underscores the power of film as a medium for social commentary and public education. By analysing the impact of '*No More Bets*' on audience awareness and behaviour, the research highlights the potential of visual storytelling to not only entertain but also inform and inspire collective action. Future research may build upon these findings by exploring similar media interventions in addressing other pressing societal issues.

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Most-Used vs Most-Useful Vocabulary Learning Strategies Among Malaysian Undergraduates: A Mixed-Method Analysis

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Abstract: Vocabulary knowledge is central to second-language use and growth, and purposeful vocabulary learning strategies can shape how effectively learners discover, consolidate, and retrieve words. This mixed-method study examined undergraduate vocabulary learning strategies in a Malaysian English-as-a-Second-Language context, investigating the association between frequency of use and perceived usefulness and eliciting learners' rationales. A 27-item questionnaire structured across four subscales namely cognitive, memory, determination, and social was administered to 150 Diploma students, with parallel five-point ratings for frequency and usefulness. Subsequently, 20 purposively selected students participated in semi-structured interviews. Quantitative analyses (descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations) indicated a clear, positive relationship between frequency and perceived usefulness. Five strategies consistently ranked highest on both dimensions: learning through project work, consulting dictionaries, constructing self-generated sentences, mentally rehearsing spelling, and linking new words to contextual occurrences. Qualitative findings clarified the mechanisms underpinning these preferences: projects recycle target items across task stages; dictionary use enhances accuracy and confidence; sentence construction supports productive control; rehearsal strengthens retention; and contextual anchoring promotes appropriate usage. Overall, the evidence supports a concise, high-yield strategy toolkit centered on purposeful tasks, efficient dictionary routines,

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sentence generation, context/collocation mapping, and scheduled retrieval. Pedagogical recommendations include embedding brief, explicit strategy instruction within project-based coursework, institutionalizing high-quality dictionary practice, and implementing low-stake checks of strategy application. Future research should incorporate objective receptive and productive vocabulary measures and extend sampling across multiple sites to enhance generalizability.

Keywords: vocabulary learning strategies, perceived usefulness, frequency of use, undergraduates, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) are the deliberate actions learners take to understand word meanings, learn them, and use them appropriately (Nation, 2024). Because vocabulary is a fundamental tool for communication, strategy use sits at the centre of effective language learning. Learners should recognise both the centrality of lexis and the role of strategies in successful acquisition (Li, Wang & Al-Hamed, 2024). As a cornerstone of communicative competence, vocabulary links grammar, discourse, and pragmatics, shaping what learners can perceive and express (Carter & McCarthy, 2014). Vocabulary knowledge enables successful language use, and sustained language use through reading, listening, speaking, and writing drives further vocabulary growth via incidental learning and strengthened recall (Montero-Perez, 2022). In ESL/EFL contexts, vocabulary underpins all skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Nation, 2024). Empirical work further shows patterned use of VLS across memory, cognitive, and metacognitive categories, underscoring the need for explicit strategy instruction (Çelik & Toptaş, 2010). Without an adequate lexicon, learners struggle to deploy grammatical structures and functions for comprehensible communication (Durbahn et al, 2024).

Despite this centrality, Malaysian undergraduates continue to face challenges in vocabulary development and English communication, and employer studies consistently flag these as hiring risks. Employers have long reported communication especially English use as one of the largest skill gaps among graduates, affecting recruitment decisions (Gurvinder

Kaur & Sharan Kaur, 2008). More recent evidence likewise links graduate unemployment to limited English proficiency and weak communication skills (Ting, Marzuki, Chuah, Misieng, & Jerome, 2017), and syntheses of employer surveys suggest that a substantial share of employers cite poor English communication as a barrier to employability (Nesaratnam, 2020). There is a limited understanding of how undergraduates perceive both the *frequency* and the *usefulness* of specific VLS, and whether high-frequency use actually aligns with the strategies they consider most useful; this misalignment may constrain vocabulary growth and reduce motivation to learn English. Addressing this gap, the present study focuses on undergraduates from selected programmes and asks which strategies students report using most often and why, whether high-frequency use shapes perceived usefulness, and whether profiles differ across programmes. The study aims to map students' VLS usage and perceived usefulness, explain the rationales behind strategy choice, and generate actionable insights for learner-centred instruction that prioritises high-yield strategies and strengthens self-regulation in coursework tasks.

The investigation is carried out within a Malaysian tertiary setting and employs a mixed-method design to yield practical implications for lecturers and programme leaders while remaining mindful of scope. Conclusions are bounded by a modest, programme specific sample and time-limited data collection; larger multi-site cohorts and longitudinal follow-up would enable stronger generalisation and clearer evidence of change over time. Even with these constraints, aligning instruction with demonstrated strategy profiles can enhance classroom practice and support students' communicative performance across reading, writing, speaking, and listening in their disciplines.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES AMONG UNDERGRADUATES

Vocabulary is not learned or used as isolated items but as part of an interconnected lexical system in which *multiple dimensions* of word knowledge form, meaning, use, grammatical patterns, collocations, and register jointly support comprehension and production (Alshumrani,

2024). In this view, a large, well-structured lexicon is essential for L2 functioning (Schmitt, 2010). Vocabulary knowledge enables language use and, reciprocally, sustained language use across reading, listening, speaking, and writing promotes further vocabulary growth; world knowledge also scaffolds both processes (Schmitt, 2019).

Early survey work reported positive learner attitudes toward vocabulary learning and an association between English proficiency and vocabulary breadth, with some gender differences in reported strategy use (Zhi-Liang, 2010). Studies distinguishing receptive and productive knowledge show that non-English majors typically know more words receptively than productively, and that productive knowledge builds upon receptive knowledge (Zhou, 2010). Motivation and contextual factors also shape strategy deployment: motivation predicts strategy use, while family involvement and years of study play supporting roles; teacher encouragement is recommended to help learners adopt more effective strategies (Wu, 2013). Experimental evidence suggests that direct strategies' explicit introduction, spaced review, and flashcards can outperform more indirect approaches for vocabulary storage and transfer to reading (Naeimi & Chow, 2015). Qualitative findings from Iranian undergraduates indicate frequent reliance on memory and low use of cognitive strategies, consistent with teacher-centred classroom norms (Yazdi & Kafipour, 2014).

Within the Malaysian ESL context, postgraduate learners reported using memorization techniques, dictionary strategies, and linguistic clues, with note-taking rarely used (Noor & Amir, 2009). Among Diploma students, preferred strategies were guessing and dictionary use, while natural exposure was less favoured; rehearsal, note-taking, encoding, and activation were used to a lesser extent (Mokhtar et al., 2010). A school-based survey in Pahang found overall positive perceptions of vocabulary learning; social strategies were most preferred and memory strategies least preferred, with no significant gender differences (Muthu & Shah, 2019).

A consistent theme across studies is that learners often default to surface strategies (e.g. rote repetition) not because these are optimal but due to limited metacognitive knowledge about what strategies exist, when to use them, and why they work. Learners with stronger knowledge of person–task–strategy dimensions select deeper options spaced retrieval,

collocation work, contextualised use monitor progress, and adapt when tactics underperform; those with weaker metacognitive knowledge remain with shallow tactics, constraining long-term retention and transfer (Teng & Mizumoto, 2025).

Across contexts, undergraduates tend to (i) possess greater receptive than productive vocabulary, (ii) favour accessible strategies such as guessing and dictionary use, and (iii) show limited uptake of deeper, high-yield practices unless motivated or explicitly taught. Malaysian studies echo these patterns but vary by level and programme. What remains underexplored is why particular strategies are perceived as useful by Diploma-level learners and how metacognitive knowledge shapes their choices within project-based coursework and everyday study. Addressing this gap motivates the present study.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a mixed-method design that links the research questions to complementary quantitative and qualitative procedures: a questionnaire survey followed by semi-structured interviews for explanatory depth (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Poth, 2023). The design specifies how evidence will be obtained from the target population and how findings from both strands will be integrated to address the study aims.

SAMPLE

Participants are DISTED College undergraduates enrolled in the Diploma in Business Studies and Diploma in Hotel Management programmes (ages 18–22). The survey is planned for $n = 150$ students during regular class sessions to maximise response rates, then purposefully 20 students (10 per programme) are selected for follow-up interviews to represent varied strategy profiles. Participation is voluntary; informed consent will be obtained, anonymity assured, and data handled under institutional ethics.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The survey adapts Cheung (2004) and is organised around the updated Schmitt & Schmitt (2020) taxonomy. Four subscales capture strategy used for discovering, rehearsing, and using new words: cognitive (COG; 5 items), memory (MEM; 10 items), determination (DET; 9 items), and social (SOC; 3 items). Each item is rated on two 5-point Likert scale frequency of use (1 = Never to 5 = Always) and perceived usefulness (1 = Not useful to 5 = Extremely useful). Cheung's pool was chosen because it maps cleanly onto Schmitt's categories and aligns with contemporary views of vocabulary knowledge as multidimensional and strategically self-regulated; prior to scoring to report α and ω reliabilities and examine the four-factor structure using CFA/CCA.

DATA COLLECTION

Questionnaires will be administered to the 150 students during regular class periods by course lecturers. Within one week of the survey, semi-structured interviews (in English) will be conducted on campus with the 20 selected students using a piloted guide; prompts probe projects/tasks, repetition and retrieval, collocation work, dictionary use, and contextualisation. With permission, interviews will be audio-recorded; brief follow-ups with up to three participants may be used to clarify interpretations.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data will be screened for missingness, outliers, and distributional issues, then analysed in SPSS to produce descriptive statistics (means, SDs) for frequency and usefulness across the 27 items and four subscales; reliability indices (α , ω) will be reported and model-fit statistics for CFA/CCA (CFI/TLI, RMSEA, SRMR). Where relevant, subgroup comparisons (e.g., programme, gender) will be run using t-tests/ANOVA with effect sizes and assumption checks. Interview transcripts will be analysed via reflexive thematic analysis with an audit trail, memoing, and peer debrief to enhance trustworthiness (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section will report the findings of the analysis of the survey and interview data and attempt to answer the three research questions set out in introduction which are:

1. What are the most used vocabulary learning strategies adopted by the undergraduate students? Why?
2. Do the undergraduate students' high-frequency usage of various vocabulary learning strategies influence their choices of choosing their most useful vocabulary learning strategies?
3. Is the high-frequency usage of vocabulary learning strategies change between undergraduate students of different courses? Why?

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN STRATEGY-USE FREQUENCY AND PERCEIVED USEFULNESS

Table 1: Five most frequently used and most useful vocabulary learning strategies in the perceptions of students.

| Vocabulary Learning Strategies (N=150) | | Frequency | | Usefulness | | Correlation Coefficient r |
|--|---|-----------|--------------------|------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| | | Mean | Standard Deviation | Mean | Standard Deviation | |
| COG 18 | I remember words by doing a project. | 4.09 | 1.07 | 4.31 | 0.93 | .988* |
| DET 24 | Use a dictionary to check the word. | 4.06 | 1.26 | 4.26 | 1.09 | .999* |
| DET 14 | I make up my own sentence using new word. | 4.03 | 1.12 | 4.23 | 0.98 | .903* |
| COG 2 | I repeatedly spell the word in my mind. | 3.94 | 1.16 | 3.74 | 1.44 | .909* |
| MEM 13 | I remember the new word together with the context where the new word occurs | 3.77 | 1.21 | 4.26 | 1.07 | .866* |

*p<0.01 Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The figures obtained from the questionnaire are tabulated and classified in terms of mean, standard deviation and correlation coefficient

to answer the first research question. The questionnaire is distributed to 150 DISTED College students comprising Diploma in Business Studies and Diploma in Hotel Management.

Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviations and correlation coefficients of five most frequently used and most useful vocabulary learning strategies as rated by the participants. To answer the first research question on whether DISTED College's undergraduate students' frequency of vocabulary learning strategies use is related to their perceptions about the usefulness of the vocabulary learning strategies, several vocabulary learning strategies used by the students with high frequency had strong and significant correlative relationship with their perceived usefulness (Refer table 1).

For example, the highest mean in frequency of use ($M = 4.09$ on a 5-point Likert scale) and the highest mean ($M = 4.31$ on a 5 – point Likert scale) in the perceived usefulness are achieved by strategy item 18 “I remember words by doing a project” with a strong significant correlative relationship ($r = 0.998$, $p < 0.01$). Strategy item 24 “Use a dictionary to check the word” is the second highest mean which records a mean of ($M = 4.06$ on a 5-point Likert scale) for the frequency of use and the second highest mean of ($M = 4.26$ on a 5-point Likert scale) for the perceived usefulness. Both variables are strongly and significantly correlated ($r = 0.999$, $p < 0.01$). Next, item 14 “I make up my own sentence using new word” achieves the third highest mean of 4.03 in terms of frequency of use and a mean of 4.23 for perceived usefulness with a significant correlation ($r = 0.903$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, item 2 “I repeatedly spell the word in my mind” records a mean of 3.94 in terms of frequency of use and a mean of 3.74 in terms of perceived usefulness with the correlation coefficient of ($r = 0.909$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, a mean of 3.77 on the frequency of use and a mean of 4.26 for perceived usefulness is recorded for item 13 that is ‘I remember the new word together with the context where the new word occurs and has a significant correlation of ($p = 0.866$, $p < 0.01$).

The results above show that there is a robust correlation between the frequency of vocabulary learning strategy use and their perceived usefulness. From the result, it is comprehensible that students who frequently used a vocabulary learning strategy would view that strategy as a very useful strategy to use. Therefore, the study has answered the

first research question and arrived at the result that the frequency of vocabulary learning strategy use among DISTED College undergraduate students is positively and significantly correlated with their perception about the usefulness.

Table 2: Five most useful vocabulary learning strategies in the perceptions of students

| Vocabulary Learning Strategies (N=150) | | Usefulness | |
|---|---|------------|--------------------|
| | | Mean | Standard Deviation |
| COG 18 | I remember words by doing a project. | 4.31 | 0.93 |
| DET 24 | Use a dictionary to check the word. | 4.26 | 1.09 |
| DET 14 | I make up my own sentence using new word. | 4.23 | 0.98 |
| COG 2 | I repeatedly spell the word in my mind. | 3.74 | 1.44 |
| MEM 13 | I remember the new word together with the context where the new word occurs | 4.26 | 1.07 |

As was stated in Methodology, an open - ended interview is conducted to gather more information for cross- checking purposes. The interview is conducted after the mean, standard deviation and correlation coefficient are calculated to identify the most frequently used and most useful vocabulary learning strategy.

The data obtained from SPSS clearly answers the second research question which is in the students' perceptions, the most useful of the 27 vocabulary learning strategies are the following items 1) I remember words by doing a project (Item 18, M = 4.31); 2) Use a dictionary to check the word (Item 24, M = 4.26); 3) I make up my own sentence using new word (Item 14, M= 4.23); 4) I remember the new word together with the context where the new word occurs (Item 13, M= 4.26) and 5) I repeatedly spell the word in my mind (Item 2, M = 3.74). The vocabulary

learning strategies are ordered according to the level of usefulness from high to low (Refer table 2). To find out the reasons for students' perceptions of the usefulness of these five vocabularies learning strategies, structured open-ended interview is carried out with 20 students, the result of which is stated as follow. The student took 15-20 minutes to complete the questions.

Item 18: I remember words by doing a project

All the 20 students thought that vocabulary learning strategy item 18 was very useful as doing projects could help them learn vocabulary, as they are required to look up for information about the words, use the word in group discussions and make sure that the words are correct because they need to present them in class. For example, a student shared his experience of doing a group project by saying that he would need to search for the meaning of the word on a website and make sure he understood and practised the word so that he could present the word to his group members:

Of course, I learn vocabulary when doing group work. I search for pronunciation and the meaning of the word up on my smartphone as I had already installed the dictionary application. I make sure that I learn up the pronunciation so that my groupmates, lecturers and classmates understand me during presentation. (Student D)

Another student highlighted the importance of doing research on the web and searching for meaning of words in an online dictionary:

There are many words to search and look for the meaning when I write a group report. I have to search the web and check the online dictionaries. The online bilingual dictionary is very helpful to me as I can get better understanding of the word as I can relate to my L1. (Student A)

The questionnaire results align with recent work showing that learners favour project- or task-based activities to remember new words. Such projects create high *involvement load* and repeatedly recycle target

keywords across planning, drafting and presenting, which boosts retrieval practice and consolidation especially for productive use. Findings from PBL studies and spacing research indicate that this kind of repeated, contextual use leads to stronger vocabulary retention than recognition-only tasks (Yan & Zhou, 2023).

Item 24: Use a dictionary to check the word

All the 20 students said that vocabulary learning strategy item 24 is very useful. A bilingual dictionary is necessary due to the level of the students at the beginning. An English-English one is only used with advanced learners. It is necessary to use one, very often you first must teach them how to take advantage of it and take time to work with examples on the different meanings depending on the context. In addition, from the open -ended interview, it can be concluded that by adopting this strategy it can boost students' confidence. One of the students shared her opinion of using the dictionary to check the words:

In my point of view, I think dictionaries are useful for all of us sometimes we are not familiar with the words that have been used in lectures, speeches, news etc. I think it is essential to be able to use a dictionary well in order to expand vocabulary, especially in everyday situations. (Student B)

Similarly, another student said he learns new words by consulting a dictionary checking meaning, pronunciation, spelling, example use, and synonyms "a must" in class':

In my opinion, using dictionaries inside the classroom is a must. It helps students to check the meaning, the pronunciation and the spelling. Moreover, it gives a student a chance to see the word in examples also see its synonyms. (Student D)

Recent work frames strategy uses self-regulation: when learners plan, monitor, and review their learning (e.g., spaced retrieval and goal-setting), they become more independent and confident, set goals and sub-

goals, track developmental progress, and participate more actively in learning (Habók, Magyar & Molnár, 2022).

Item 14: I make up my own sentence using new word

All the 20 students said that vocabulary learning strategy item 14 is a very good way of learning a new word. The students concluded that making up sentences using newly learned words enables them to use the words in the most accurate manner. They can convey their messages across effectively and efficiently. Recent research shows that making sentences with target words a high-involvement, output task enhances explicit (productive) vocabulary learning, outperforming recognition-only activities and helping learners consolidate form meaning use (Liu & Reynolds, 2022).

I make up my own sentence using new word as it aids me in my speaking skills. I am actually able to speak up what I really intended to say to my friends and acquaintances effectively. (Student C)

This strategy allows me to use the word appropriately. I am able to relate the word to real life situations by making up my own sentences. (Student B)

Item 2: I repeatedly spell the word in my mind

All the 20 students said that they think vocabulary learning strategy item 2 is very helpful as they could remember the spelling of the words in their minds way easily compared to other methods such as writing the spelling repeatedly. They also think it is a good habit of learning as they spell the words in their minds without paper and pen. Below are comments from two students to support the use of this strategy.

I prefer repeating the words in my mind. I am able to remember and learn the word better and it enhances my writing and speaking skills. (Student A)

This strategy is useful to me because speaking in my mind is the best when I am studying in a crowded place like common area in my hostel. (Student B)

Repetition especially spaced retrieval helps learners become more effective, self-regulated language learners who set goals and sub-goals, monitor developmental stages, and actively engage in the learning process (Yan & Zhou, 2023).

Item 13: I remember the new word together with the context where the new word occurs

All the 20 students agreed that Item 13, I remember the new word together with the context where the new word occurs, is very useful as the students tend to relate the context in which the word occurred in. Below are comments from two interviewees:

I often remember the new word together with the context where the new word occurred in as it makes it easier for me put the word in use. I can develop sentences and utterances using similar structures in my speaking and writing. (Student A)

I find it useful for me as I can enhance my knowledge of a new word by relating it to the context in which the word occurred. It makes it more sustainable in memory as I have more than enough reinforcement of the new words. (Student C)

Alshumrani (2024) shows that learners and teachers view vocabulary learning as multidimensional, consistent with Nation's form-meaning-use framework. Learners showed greater metawareness of what can be learned about new words, paid closer attention to collocation and spelling, and became more conscious of contextual learning; notably, higher-proficiency learners treated context as a key resource for discovering, consolidating, and retrieving vocabulary.

DATA FROM THE SECOND INTERVIEW

To make the first interview valid and reliable, a second interview was conducted with 3 out of the 20 interviewees from the first interview. The interviewees are informed of the purpose of the second interview and their participatory was voluntary. They understand that the objective of the second interview. The same 5 questions were asked to the 3 interviewees and their response recorded and transcribed. Each session lasted about 5-10 minutes.

The criteria for choosing these 3 interviewees in particular are because their response in the first interview looked promising and it is believed that by probing them further in the second interview new insights and information can be collected to build a solid foundation on the study.

Item 18: I remember words by doing a project

All the 3 students reaffirmed their stand and said that the vocabulary learning strategy '*I remember words by doing a project*' is useful to them because they are exposed to new vocabulary. During the completion of the project, they are familiar to the words and they can use it correctly. Following is their response:

Well, I think the project is useful me in terms of I get familiarize with the new word like I get the opportunity on how to identify the meaning of the word and then in what type of context I can use the word. For example like, you know how many assignment we get each semester right. So, in each semester when I always encounter with the new words. So the old ones like curriculum. So after I do the assignment I know that what is the difference with the curriculum and the meaning of syllabus. (Student A)

If the words in question are related to my assignment, like some terminology. At one time in psycholinguistics I had to read about neurology it related to my assignment because I had to write about the functions of the brains as far as processing language. There was an article review about the relationship between the brain and language. If I use the word repeatedly in my assignment, then I can

remember what it means even if it is not in the assignment anymore, I will remember the general meaning of the words. (Student B)

I think it is useful because it help me to expose to new word and I can know new vocabulary such as the term pedagogy. So, when I am doing project on pedagogy, so I know what it is and the meaning of it. (Student C)

From the responses for the students, the vocabulary learning strategy item 18 is a very useful strategy which can be adopted by the students to excel in learning vocabulary.

Item 24: Use a dictionary to check the word

All the 3 students said that item 24 ‘Use a dictionary to check the word is useful to them because a dictionary is a very useful tool for English Language learners. A dictionary is an easily available resource, and it can help students to check the meaning of the word, pronunciation, spelling and many more. Below are the responses from the 3 students:

For me I find the dictionary is quite useful because is a resource for me to check the word, the meaning of the word. So, in other words like dictionary is a consider as word bank whereby you can find all types of words. The best thing is it is cheap and easily available because I believe that every English student got dictionary. So, it is compulsory for them. And if in terms of pronunciation I can identify the phonetic terms and phonology which I can practice to make the pronounce of the word easier. (Student A)

I find looking up words on the dictionary useful especially for words that are hardly used in modern English. The books that I read most of them are written in the 19th century. So, there are a lot of words, like countenance, swooning, and troubadour that are not used in modern English. When I look up these words in the dictionary, I found out that countenance means the face and then swooning is to faint and troubadour is a kind of musician. So, I find it useful to remember odd words for literature projects. (Student B)

It is useful because I will know the meaning of the word. I can check my pronunciation and spelling. Sometimes I can also find examples in the dictionary, like sentences. (Student C)

Item 14: I make up my own sentence using new word

All the 3 students agreed that vocabulary learning strategy item 14 is useful to them because it helps them to remember the word better if it is put into a sentence. To further support this claim, here are their responses:

For me it is useful because I remember and know better when I put the new word mentally, the sentence. So, this method is a quite useful also because it does make a lot of sense but at the same time need to worry about the meaning of the word. So, the same word I can apply to other sentence or other similar sentence structure. (Student A)

I find that practice help me to remember new words and making new sentences reaffirms that helps to practice using the words along with the sentences required for the words. I did not know that soon was a verb until I look it up in the dictionary then I had to practice making the sentence in my head. So, something like she spoon when she saw the superstar basically it means the same thing as she fainted when she saw the superstar. So, I know that the same sentence structure can be used for swooning as subject-verb-object faint. (Student B)

Because it is really helpful. When I build new sentences or what so I know the meaning is correct and I know where to apply and how to apply in the context. (Student C)

Item 2: I repeatedly spell the word in my mind

All the 3 students agreed that by repeatedly spelling the word in their mind it helps them to remember the word better and for a very long time. Following is their response from the interview:

Yes, because other than pronouncing the word and speaking the word, I am able to practice my mind without making noise because for me it is a way of me to remember the word for a long time and it will stick to my brain. If sit in the class I cannot obviously speak aloud or pronounce the word suddenly right so it is causing others to feel uncomfortable. (Student A)

Sometimes even though I know the word very well, I keep forgetting how to spell it like necessary. I know how is the spelling but I keep forgetting that is one 'C' not two and two 'S' instead of one. And a long time ago, I kept forgetting how to spell tomorrow. I use to spell it with two 'M' not one 'M' and just one 'R' because of the sound. So, after practicing how to spell it and writing it down now I can remember how to spell those words. (Student B)

Because it is like help me to remember the spelling so when it is repeated in the mind so when I am speaking or listening or anything even when I am writing I will know the spelling is correct or what. (Student C)

Item 13: I remember the new word together with the context where the new word occurs

All the 3 students agreed that by remembering the new word together with the context is useful to them because they can be able to use the word appropriately in similar context. Following are their responses:

I think that I am able to recall and then use the word correctly so I think that is quite useful for me. (Student A)

That is because some words are only useful in certain context like teaching is only related to education or knowledge. Therefore, if I saw it is appropriate for me to talk about teaching somebody a lesson when it comes to classroom or schools. Except that is the slang word to fight with somebody but that is not the actual use of the term teaching and for curriculum. I always associate it with education because they don't usually see curriculum use in other situations unless it has to do with schools or university. And you

never heard of the word curriculum being used in sports or entertainment have you? Because some words are very strongly associated with certain occupation as well but when you say doctor, usually you think that kind of doctor who gives you medicine, tells you what wrong with your body but actually there is another kind of doctor PhD holder which are after postgraduate studies. (Student B)

It helps to understand the meaning very well. I can also find similar meaning, similar word to the similar meaning sometimes. (Student C)

After interviewees first got exposed to Vocabulary Learning strategies

All the 20 interviewees said that they were first exposed to vocabulary learning strategies when they were very young. Although at the time they didn't know what they were doing was vocabulary learning strategy. The interviewees mentioned that their parents were the ones who first got them exposed to vocabulary learning strategy. The parent would usually ask them to repeat after them so that they learn the new word effectively. The interviewees also mentioned being blended in the environment where real world conversations take place also help them to be actively engaged in learning the language. Usually, these interviewees sit nearby their parents and listen to how they speak, and they acquire the language unconsciously or indirectly.

As the interviewees age, they learn how to use the dictionaries. Usually, it was their teachers who first got them exposed to using the dictionary. The teachers usually give them a list of words to look up in the dictionary and the interviewees were find the meaning and construct a sentence.

When the interviewees could take charge of their own learning, they learn by reading. Reading got them exposed to new vocabulary and they look up for the meaning themselves without being told.

In conclusion, the findings showed that the DISTED College's students clearly adopted the vocabulary learning strategies in their learning process. The figures obtained evidently prove that the students' vocabulary learning strategies significantly correlate to each other and make their understanding better and memorable.

CONCLUSION

This study shows a clear, positive association between how often undergraduates report using particular vocabulary learning strategies and how useful they judge those strategies to be, with project work, dictionary consultation, student-generated sentences, mental spelling, and context-based linking emerging as high-yield options in both frequency and usefulness. Taken together with current theory that views word knowledge as multidimensional encompassing form, meaning, and use, these findings suggest that strategies which repeatedly recycle target items in meaningful tasks are most likely to strengthen both receptive and productive knowledge (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020; Nation, 2024). Interview evidence further indicates that strategy choice is shaped by learners' metacognitive knowledge what strategies exist, when to use them, and why they work echoing recent work showing that stronger person's task strategy knowledge predicts deeper strategy deployment and better vocabulary outcomes (Teng & Mizumoto, 2025). In short, integrating deliberate practice with authentic language use appears to be a practical pathway for improving undergraduate vocabulary development (Webb & Nation, 2017; Schmitt, 2019).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Instruction should make a small "core toolkit" of strategies explicit and routine: efficient dictionary triage, student-generated example sentences, context/collocation mapping, and scheduled retrieval practice. Such practices align with evidence that productive, high-involvement tasks and spaced review outperform recognition-only activities for durable retention (Liu, 2022; Yan, Gu, & Liang, 2023; Webb & Nation, 2017). Because limited metacognitive knowledge keeps many learners in surface routines, brief, ongoing training in planning, monitoring, and evaluating strategy use is recommended; positioning VLS within self-regulated learning has been shown to increase independence and confidence (Oxford, 2018; Rose et al., 2018; Teng & Mizumoto, 2025). At course level, project-based cycles can be designed to recycle target vocabulary across stages (proposal–draft–presentation) while requiring students to maintain a vocabulary log with form, meaning, collocations,

and a self-produced sentence, thereby reinforcing the form meaning use triad (Nation, 2022; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). Programmes should also assess what they teach through brief retrieval checks and light-touch rubrics for strategy artefacts and periodically review cohort data to refine teaching. Future work should expand to multi-programme samples and pair self-report with objective receptive/productive measures to strengthen generalisability (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020; Nation, 2022).

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Social Influence and Engagement: Factors Driving Penang Youths to Follow Micro-Influencers on Instagram

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Abstract: Social media has reshaped the way audiences consume content, with micro-influencers emerging as influential opinion leaders in the digital space. Characterised by relatively small but highly engaged followings, micro-influencers are often perceived as authentic, specialised, relatable and qualities that foster strong audience loyalty. In Malaysia, particularly among Penang youths, Instagram has become a prominent arena where these influencers shape trends, preferences, and purchasing behaviour. Guided by the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), this study examines how attitudes, subjective norms, and behavioural intentions influence Penang youths' decisions to follow micro-influencers on Instagram. Using a quantitative approach, purposive sampling recruited 100 active Instagram users aged 15–40 to complete a structured questionnaire. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation tests. Findings show strong positive correlations between all three predictors and following behaviour: subjective norms ($r = 0.884$), attitudes ($r = 0.876$), and behavioural intentions ($r = 0.854$). While positive attitudes and clear intentions are important, peer influence and perceived social expectations exert a slightly greater impact on engagement. The study extends TRA's application to influencer marketing within a multicultural Malaysian context. For practitioners, the results highlight the need to pair authentic, interest-aligned content with strategies that leverage social influence, enabling brands and content

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creators to better connect with and retain young audiences in Instagram's competitive environment.

Keywords: Micro-influencers, Instagram marketing, Penang youths, Theory of Reasoned Action, Social media engagement

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become an integral part of everyday life, especially among the younger generation. Of all the platforms, Instagram is one of the most popular worldwide and has changed the way people connect, share content, and interact with brands (Huang & Su, 2018). A notable factor in the popularity of Instagram has been the rise of the influencers, which are individuals who use the platform to share lifestyle content, promote products, and shape trends as individuals (Arif, 2023). However, as social media has become more saturated with sponsored content, audiences have grown more skeptical of influencers who are perceived as primarily motivated by financial gain. Influencers who come across as relatable are often more successful in creating a positive brand image, while those perceived as disconnected or overly commercial are less effective (Matin et al., 2022).

Among these influencers, micro-influencers who have smaller but highly engaged audiences, have gained attention due to their authenticity and relatability (Heuvel, 2022). Park et al. (2021) through their study found that micro-influencers, those with 1,000 to 100,000 followers, are more persuasive than mega-influencers with over 1 million followers as their perceived authenticity enhances the credibility of the brands they endorse. Micro-influencers are perceived as more authentic and persuasive than macro-influencers due to their stronger personal connections and higher organic engagement rates, although macro-influencers have a broader reach and can connect with a larger audience (Klijnsma, 2020).

Micro-influencers are often seen as more genuine, as their smaller followings allow them to maintain closer, more authentic relationships with their followers (Pham, 2023). They typically focus on niche interest areas and provide specialised content that resonates more deeply with their audience (Guzman, 2024). This emphasis on specific interests

makes their content highly relevant and engaging, further fostering loyalty among their followers (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). In addition, the cost-effectiveness of working with micro-influencers is increasingly appealing to businesses, especially SMEs that may not have the budget to work with macro-influencers (Pamela, 2024).

Micro-influencers have also gained increasing acceptance in Malaysia, particularly among younger audiences. Malaysian youth are drawn to them for their authenticity, relatability, and ability to connect on a more personal level (Faizol & Nawi, 2020). However, despite their growing popularity, there is still a gap in understanding the motivations that drive youth, especially in the context of Penang, to follow micro-influencers. Understanding these motivations is crucial as Penang's unique socio-cultural landscape may significantly influence the factors that attract its youth to follow this category of influencers. By focusing on the reasons why young Penangites are attracted to micro-influencers, this study aims to reveal the key factors behind their success and provide valuable insights for future marketing strategies.

Furthermore, this study enhances the understanding of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) by applying it to the context of micro-influencer marketing in Penang. By examining how subjective norms, attitudes, and behavioural intentions influence the decision-making process of young Penangites in following micro-influencers, this study provides empirical evidence to support existing TRA structures in a new and unique cultural context. This contribution is valuable for future research in the areas of digital marketing, influencer engagement, and youth consumer behavior, especially in Malaysia and other multicultural societies. By revealing the factors that influence youth's decision to follow micro-influencers, this study deepens our understanding of how digital marketing can be utilised to create a deeper connection with target audiences.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study aims to examine how attitudes, subjective norms and behavioral intentions influence Penang youths' decisions to follow micro-influencers on Instagram.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is structured into three areas: the development of social media, micro-influencers on Instagram and the TRA concept which was used to examine the factors influencing youth to follow micro-influencers.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media's early stage began when people started using the internet to share information and communicate, but the early platforms were more technical and less user-friendly compared to the focused and interactive platforms we use today (Taprial & Kanwar, 2012). Amperawati (2022) stated that social media, a rapidly growing online platform, connects people globally, allowing them to communicate, share, and collaborate without geographical or time limitations, making it an essential tool for exchanging information. Chambers (2013) mentioned that social media has reshaped peer group interactions and personal relationships by allowing users to stay in touch with significant others, making it easier for them to maintain friendships within the online space and engage in meaningful communication.

In addition to facilitating personal connections, organisations use social media for various purposes such as marketing, advertising, recruitment, and feedback (Duane & O'Reilly, 2016). For businesses, social media offers many advantages, including the ability to create new markets and shape customer behaviour (Piller et al., 2011). Currently, social media includes a variety of online and mobile platforms such as blogs, wikis, social bookmarking sites, and social networks such as Facebook, as well as status update services such as Twitter, all of which enable users to share content, join communities, and engage in interactive exchanges (Dewing, 2010).

Today, social media continues to evolve, shaping the way individuals and organisations communicate, collaborate, and share content (Thomas & Akdere, 2013). Social media platforms such as Instagram have become important tools not only for personal expression, but also for branding, online marketing, and public engagement (Haenlein et al., 2020). Chia (2011) stated that the interactivity of these platforms enables real-time feedback, personalized advertisements, and user-

generated content, which have changed the way businesses connect with their audiences. Social media has become a powerful tool for brands to cultivate communities, interact directly with consumers, and track market trends through data analytics (Tracy, 2023).

In Malaysia, social media plays an important role in everyday life and business (Hassan & Shahzad, 2022). Malaysians are also using social media not only for personal connections, but for following trends, discovering products, and interacting with influencers (Khalid et al., 2018). This is due to the rise of mobile device penetration and tech-savvy millennials, which has caused the popularity of platforms such as Instagram to skyrocket, especially among the youth (Arrington, 2021).

MICRO-INFLUENCERS ON INSTAGRAM

Influencers are individuals who share content on social media platforms in exchange for monetary or non-monetary compensation (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). Lou and Yuan (2019) defined influencers

more specifically as content creators with expertise in a specific field, who have a large and loyal audience and who provide value by sharing engaging content on social media. According to Khamis et al. (2017), the concept of influencers can be traced back to the rise of social media platforms such as Instagram in the late 2000s, when ordinary people began to attract large numbers of followers by creating content in specific areas such as beauty, fashion, fitness and lifestyle. Initially, the term “influencers” was more broadly applied to people with large numbers of followers, often in the hundreds of thousands or even millions (Ozuem & Willis, 2022).

However, as influencer marketing has evolved, marketers and brands have started to realise that the engagement, trust, and authenticity of influencers with smaller, more niche followings may be stronger, leading to the rise of the “micro-influencer” (Daniel, 2020). Launched in 2010, Instagram has become a key platform for influencers due to its highly visual format, enabling individuals to display carefully curated, aesthetically pleasing content (Chae, 2018). As brands shifted their focus from high-profile influencers to micro-influencers who engage more authentically with their audiences, micro-influencers were born (Huynh, 2022). Typically defined as social media users with between 1,000 and

100,000 followers, micro-influencers have become important players in the social influence space (Michael, 2023).

Unlike macro-influencers who may draw attention due to their famous status, micro-influencers are usually ordinary people who build a loyal fan base by sharing relevant and authentic content (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019). Kumar (2024) revealed that the rise of Instagram algorithms and features such as stories, which prioritise real-time content, has further emphasised the role of micro-influencers. These tools have enabled influencers to interact with their followers more casually and frequently, enhancing a sense of community and real-time connection (Gaire, 2024). Due to that, audiences perceive them as more approachable and trustworthy than larger influencers who often seem more commercialised (Belanche, 2021). This shift in perception has led to increased engagement rates for micro-influencers as their content is more closely related to their followers' interests, making their recommendations and endorsements more impactful (Hughes, Swaminathan & Brooks, 2019).

Additionally, as micro-influencers leverage their expertise, they become more than just content creators, guiding their followers' perspectives and behaviours through carefully curated content and personal stories (Harrison, 2022). This relationship fosters a sense of loyalty and advocacy among followers, who are more likely to support brands endorsed by influencers they feel connected to, thus amplifying the influence of micro-influencers on consumer purchasing decisions (Yeo, 2023). In fact, many Malaysians, especially young people began to follow local and international influencers who provided content that reflected their lifestyles and aspirations (Hassim et al., 2020). The micro-influencers culture in Malaysia indeed is particularly strong, as authenticity and relevance are highly valued due to the diverse and connected communities on social media (Ong et al., 2023). This trend has not only influenced consumer behaviour, but has also changed the way brands market themselves, with many local businesses harnessing the power of micro-influencers to promote their products and services on Instagram (Rahmah & Ren, n.d.).

THEORY OF REASONED ACTION

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) explains that human behavior is influenced by individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and intentions, which ultimately shape their behavior (Al-Suqri & Al-Kharusi, 2015). The theory suggested that behavior can be better understood and anticipated by carefully selecting and applying diverse viewpoints to test the theory, taking into consideration the unique conditions under which certain outcomes are expected (Trafimow, 2009). The theory suggested that a person's behavior is best predicted by their intention, which is shaped by two primary factors: their attitude toward the behavior and their perceived social norms (Glantz et al., 2015). When individuals have a favorable attitude toward a behavior and believe that influential people in their lives support it, they are more likely to form an intention to engage in that behavior (Glantz et al., 2015). Furthermore, if they perceive that those around them are also participating in the behavior, especially with encouragement from people they value, they are more inclined to do the same (Farah & Newman, 2010).

Previous studies have successfully applied the theory to social media and influencer environments, highlighting its relevance in understanding online behavior. Jin and Phua (2014) used TRA to examine how consumer attitudes and social norms influence intentions to follow social media influencers, particularly on Instagram. Their study found that users' positive attitudes toward influencers, coupled with peer approval, significantly influenced their likelihood of engaging with influencer content (Jin & Phua, 2014). Similarly, Yang et al. (2017) applied TRA to explore how social media users' attitudes toward influencers affect their purchase intentions, suggesting that both personal attitudes and social pressures play key roles in decision-making. These studies highlighted the value of the theory in predicting behavior in social media in digital environments where influencer culture thrives on social approval and perceived benefits of interactions.

ATTITUDE

An attitude refers to how we see someone or something, regardless of the outcome or our response, which indicates how much we value it or not (Nickerson, 2023). Forsyth (1980) stated that an individual's moral

philosophy shapes his or her attitude towards moral behavior. Penang youth may develop positive attitudes towards micro-influencers if they perceive the content provided by them as authentic, relevant and valuable. Since micro-influencers typically share more personal and niche content that can be seen as more authentic and trustworthy than macro-influencers, viewers perceive them as more approachable and credible (Piroti, 2023).

This authenticity often creates a higher level of emotional connection with followers, which is especially important for younger viewers, who often seek out influencers who reflect their values, lifestyles, or interests (Jun & Yi, 2020). In this case, the more Penang youth believe that following micro-influencers enhances their social experience or matches their personal interests, the stronger their attitudes towards this behaviour will be, thus increasing the likelihood that they will continue to follow these micro-influencers.

SUBJECTIVE NORMS

Perceived pressure from significant others to act in a particular way is known as subjective norms (Thompson et al., 2012). Subjective norms, according to Han et al. (2010), are a reflection of how important others view particular behaviors. Jin & Ryu (2020) concluded a study on social media use among younger audiences and found that peer influence significantly impacted their willingness to follow social media influencers. When individuals perceive that their friends or social circles are interacting with specific influencers, they feel pressured to do so in order to stay connected and relevant within their own group (Jin & Ryu, 2020). Another study by Chu and Kim (n.d.) suggested that social network interactions positively influence consumer behavior on social media. Their study suggests that subjective norms influenced by peer engagement on social platforms may motivate users to follow trends, including following influencers in order to fit into social conversations (Chu & Kim, n.d.).

For Penang youth, subjective norms may include the idea that following micro-influencers is a trend recognised within their social circle. For example, if their friends regularly discuss what certain micro-influencers share, or if they see their peers interacting with these influencers by liking, commenting on, or sharing posts, they may feel a

certain level of social pressure to follow suit. This behavior can have a ripple effect, encouraging young people to follow influencers not only because of their personal interests but also because they want to fit in with their peer group or be part of the latest social trend.

BEHAVIOURAL INTENTION

Behavioral intention is the state of being ready to perform a behavior, indicating that someone is determined to perform the behavior (Nickerson, 2023). According to Thompson et al. (2012), subjective norms and attitudes have an impact on behavioral intentions. Hwa (2017) examined the influence of influencers on social media platforms such as Instagram and how their authenticity, trustworthiness, and peer influence affect the behavioral intentions of their followers. The study found that users with positive attitudes towards influencers were more likely to interact with them, and social pressure from peers further strengthened their intentions to follow and interact with these influencers (Hwa, 2017). Similarly, Lee & Eastin (2021) explored how the content created by influencers and the surrounding social norms contribute to strong behavioral intentions to engage with influencers' posts, particularly in terms of liking, commenting, and sharing, which can also be extended to following influencers themselves.

Penang youth's behavioral intentions can be shaped by a combination of their attitudes towards micro-influencers and the subjective norms around them. For example, they may intend to follow a particular micro-influencer if they have developed a positive attitude toward that influencer because of relevant content or lifestyle. If their social group encourages following certain influencers, young people are more likely to act on that intention. Additionally, behavioral intentions may also be driven by perceived benefits, such as staying up to date on trends, gaining insight into products or services, or simply feeling more connected to the community (Chen et al., 2012).

RESEARCH METHOD

A quantitative approach was employed using a structured questionnaire of 20 questions across four sections, assessing both

independent variables (subjective norms, attitudes, behavioural intentions) and the dependent variable (following micro-influencers on Instagram). Data were collected via Google Forms from active Instagram users aged 15–40, recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling targeted Penang youths who actively engage with micro-influencers, with the questionnaire distributed via WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram to relevant groups and pages. Snowball sampling was then used to expand recruitment, with initial respondents recommending others who met the study criteria, leveraging social networks to increase diversity and trust among participants.

The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale (1 means “strongly disagree”, 2 means “disagree”, 3 means “neutral”, 4 means “neutral”, and 5 means “neutral”) and covered demographics, general engagement patterns, and key motivational factors such as authenticity, content relevance, and peer influence. Distribution took place via WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram, with a target sample size of 100 respondents to ensure reliable results. This method allowed access to diverse participants while focusing on individuals meeting the study criteria. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability and Pearson correlation tests to identify patterns and relationships between variables, providing measurable and generalisable insights into the impact of micro-influencers on youth behaviour in Penang.

DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1 shows that among the 100 respondents, males made up 51% and females 49%. The largest age group was 20–24 (63%), followed by 25–29 (17%), 30–34 (7%), 35–40 (7%), and 15–19 (6%). This indicates that the sample was predominantly youths between 20 and 24 years old and is the majority following micro-influencers on Instagram.

As shown in Table 2, the most common reasons for following micro-influencers on Instagram were authentic content (64%), keeping up with new trends (59%) and product recommendations (55%). These motivations were often complemented by interest in niche content (54%) and a sense of community connection (51%). Approximately 32% followed micro-influencers for unknown reasons, suggesting that some engagement may occur subconsciously or through habitual browsing.

Most respondents (37%) followed 6–10 micro-influencers, followed by 11–15 (24%) and 16–20 (17%). Only 9% followed more than 20, while 13% followed 0–5. Fashion (75%), health and fitness (65%) and food (61%) were the most popular categories, followed by lifestyle (60%), technology (59%), beauty (55%), education (48%), business (47%), pets (46%), gaming (45%), art and design (42%), and photography (41%). These preferences reflect the diverse yet lifestyle-oriented nature of micro-influencer appeal among Penang youth.

The reliability test in Table 3 indicates high internal consistency across attitude ($\alpha = 0.910$), behavioural intention ($\alpha = 0.921$) and subjective norms ($\alpha = 0.883$) for the independent variables; and factors influencing Penang youth to follow micro-influencers ($\alpha = 0.808$) for the dependent variable.

Table 4 confirms all three hypotheses:

H1: Subjective norms showed a strong correlation with Penang youths' following behaviour on Instagram ($r = 0.884$)

H2: Attitude showed a strong correlation with Penang youths' following behaviour on Instagram ($r = 0.876$)

H3: Behavioural intention showed a strong correlation with Penang youths' following behaviour on Instagram ($r = 0.854$)

Overall, the findings suggest that micro-influencer engagement among Penang youth is driven primarily by lifestyle-related interests, authenticity, and perceived social norms. The strong correlations highlight the importance of both social and personal factors in shaping Instagram following behaviour, reinforcing the relevance of attitudinal and normative constructs in social media marketing strategies.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

| Category | Percentages (%) |
|-----------------|------------------------|
| Gender | |
| Male | 51 |
| Female | 49 |
| Age | |
| 15-19 | 6 |
| 20-24 | 63 |
| 25-29 | 17 |
| 30-34 | 7 |
| 35-40 | 7 |

Table 2: Engagement patterns of respondents

| Category | Percentages (%) |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Reasons for following | |
| Authentic content | 64 |
| Niche content | 54 |
| Discover new trends | 59 |
| Connect with community | 51 |
| Product recommendations | 55 |
| Others | 32 |
| Number followed | |
| 0-5 | 13 |
| 6-10 | 37 |
| 11-15 | 24 |
| 16-20 | 17 |
| >20 | 9 |
| Types followed | |
| Fashion | 75 |
| Beauty | 55 |
| Health and fitness | 65 |
| Food | 61 |

Factors Driving Penang Youths to Follow Micro-Influencers on Instagram

| | |
|------------------------------------|----|
| Technology | 59 |
| Lifestyle | 60 |
| Art and Design | 42 |
| Gaming | 45 |
| Pet | 46 |
| Photography | 41 |
| Business and Finance | 47 |
| Education and Personal Development | 48 |
| Others | 36 |

Table 3: Results of reliability test

| Variables | Cronbach's alpha value (α) |
|---|---|
| Independent | |
| Attitude | 0.910 |
| Subjective norms | 0.883 |
| Behavioral intention | 0.921 |
| Dependant Following micro-influencers on Instagram | 0.808 |

Table 4: Results of Pearson correlation test (r)

| Independent variable | Following micro-influencers on Instagram |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Attitude | 0.876 |
| Subjective norms | 0.884 |
| Behavioral intention | 0.854 |

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that attitudes, subjective norms, and behavioral intentions are all significantly and positively correlated with the factors influencing Penang youths' decision to follow micro-influencers on Instagram. The results align closely with the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), which posits that attitudes and subjective norms shape behavioral intentions, which in turn influence actual behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

Among the three factors, attitude emerged as the second strongest predictor ($r = 0.876$), slightly lower than subjective norms ($r = 0.884$) but higher than behavioral intention ($r = 0.854$). This suggests that Penang youths are more likely to follow micro-influencers when they hold favorable perceptions of them, particularly when they view their content as authentic, relatable, and personally valuable. This is consistent with prior studies conducted by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) as well as Schouten,

Schouten et al., (2019) that emphasize the role of perceived credibility and authenticity in fostering positive attitudes toward influencers. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found that young audiences, particularly on Instagram, tend to form favorable attitudes toward influencers when they perceive their content as genuine, relatable, and reflective of the influencer's actual lifestyle rather than purely promotional. Their study highlighted that authenticity, such as sharing personal experiences, behind-the-scenes moments, or unscripted opinions, enhances trust and emotional connection, which in turn strengthens the audience's willingness to follow and engage. Schouten et al., (2019) similarly demonstrated that influencer credibility, built through consistent and honest communication, plays a decisive role in shaping attitudes. They noted that followers are more responsive to influencers who demonstrate expertise in their niche, maintain transparency in brand collaborations, and avoid over-commercialization of their content. Together, these studies suggest that credibility and authenticity not only attract initial attention but also sustain long-term positive attitudes toward influencers. In the context of Penang youths, this means micro-influencers who are seen as trustworthy, relatable, and transparent are more likely to cultivate loyal followers, as these qualities

resonate with the audience's preference for genuine, value-driven content over overtly polished or purely commercial posts. The high correlation underscores the importance for micro-influencers and brands to cultivate genuine and trustworthy online personas to strengthen audience engagement.

Subjective norms also demonstrated a very strong correlation ($r = 0.884$), indicating that social pressure from peers, family, or the broader online community plays a substantial role in influencing following behavior. This captures the perceived social expectations of significant others, which can strongly shape an individual's decision-making process (Ajzen, 1991). Research has shown that when individuals believe that important referents—such as family members, friends, or influential figures—approve of or engage in a certain behavior, they are more likely to adopt it themselves (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). This phenomenon is highly relevant in the context of youths' engagement with micro-influencers on Instagram. Micro-influencers, typically defined as content creators with a smaller but highly engaged follower base, often build trust through relatability and perceived authenticity (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Youths are particularly responsive to these influencers because they mirror the lifestyles, interests, and values of their peer group, creating a sense of social closeness and normative approval (Jin et al., 2019). As a result, when young people observe their friends following or interacting with certain micro-influencers, they may feel a social expectation to do the same in order to maintain belonging and relevance within their online communities (Lee & Choi, 2017). Furthermore, Instagram's algorithmic features—such as visible follower counts, likes, and story interactions—amplify social proof, making the act of following an influencer appear not only normative but also desirable (De Veirman et al., 2017). For youths navigating identity construction and social approval online, subjective norms therefore serve as a powerful driver of influencer-following behavior, reinforcing the idea that such actions are not purely individual preferences but are embedded within broader patterns of peer influence and online community expectations.

Behavioral intention ($r = 0.854$) was likewise found to be a significant predictor, confirming TRA's assertion that intention is a critical precursor to action. Youths who express a strong desire or plan to follow micro-influencers are highly likely to translate this intention into

actual following behavior. This finding is in line with studies done by Lim et al. (2017), as well as Lee and Eastin (2021) that link clear behavioral intentions with higher likelihoods of engagement in digital contexts. Lim et al., (2017) found that when individuals perceive influencers as authentic, trustworthy, and aligned with their personal interests, they are more likely to form concrete intentions to engage, such as liking posts, sharing content, or following the influencer's account, which frequently translate into actual behaviors. Similarly, Lee and Eastin (2021) demonstrated that digital engagement is often a direct outcome of prior intention, shaped by both internal evaluations (attitudes) and external pressures (subjective norms). In their study, users with well-defined intentions to interact with influencer content exhibited higher levels of consistent engagement, ranging from casual interactions to active participation in discussions or product promotions. These findings reinforce the Theory of Reasoned Action's assertion that behavioral intention serves as the most immediate predictor of behavior, bridging the gap between an individual's attitudes or perceived social pressures and their eventual actions. In the context of Penang youths. This suggests that once a decision to follow a micro-influencer has been formed, driven by positive perceptions and peer influence, the likelihood of actual following becomes significantly higher, reflecting a strong alignment between intention and action in social media environments.

From a practical standpoint, these findings have important implications for both marketers and micro-influencers seeking to grow and maintain their follower base among Penang youths. First, campaign strategies should prioritise shaping favorable attitudes by producing content that is authentic, relevant, and value-driven. This means avoiding overly polished or purely promotional posts and instead sharing personal stories, behind-the-scenes insights, or practical tips that reflect the influencer's true personality and expertise. Such approaches enhance credibility and emotional connection, which, as the results suggest, are critical in driving positive attitudes.

Second, marketers and influencers can leverage social proof to strengthen subjective norms. This can be achieved by showcasing visible engagement from peers—such as highlighting user-generated content, displaying testimonial posts, or featuring collaborations with well-known community members. When followers see that their friends, classmates,

or colleagues are engaging with the influencer's content, it creates a bandwagon effect, making it more socially rewarding (and in some cases socially expected) to follow the influencer.

Third, campaigns should aim to stimulate behavioral intentions by creating a sense of anticipation and personal benefit for the audience. Examples include exclusive product previews, limited-time offers, interactive Q&A sessions, or countdown events for special announcements. By giving followers a clear reason to look forward to upcoming content or interactions, influencers can convert casual interest into a firm intention to engage. Over time, strong behavioral intentions are likely to translate into consistent, long-term following.

Overall, combining authenticity-driven content with peer-based social reinforcement and intention-focused incentives offers a holistic strategy. This integrated approach addresses all three factors identified in the study: attitude, subjective norms, and behavioral intention maximizing the potential to attract, engage, and retain followers in a competitive social media environment. The results highlight that while external social influences are important, personal attitudes and clear behavioral intentions are the strongest determinants of whether Penang youths follow micro-influencers. This underscores the need for a balanced approach that combines authenticity, peer endorsement, and strategic content planning to optimize influencer marketing outcomes in the local context.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the motivations of young people in Penang to follow micro-influencers on Instagram is important as this behaviour can significantly impact consumer trends, marketing strategies and the wider cultural dynamics of the region. Given that social media has become an integral part of young people's daily lives, it is important to explore the influence of micro-influencers. This study employed the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) as a theoretical framework to explore the role of attitudes, subjective norms and behavioural intentions in Penang youth's decision to follow micro-influencers on Instagram. The study adopted an interpretive research design and quantitative methodology, using

purposive sampling to select respondents who were interested in following micro-influencers on social media.

The study highlighted the importance of understanding the factors that drive youth engagement with micro-influencers on Instagram, which has important implications for corporate and social media strategies targeting young audiences. In addition, this study adopted the TRA framework and provided a basis for future research in similar contexts, which could help improve theoretical models related to social media behavior. The results of this study provided practical recommendations for marketers and influencers and provided a theoretical basis for future research on the impact of social media on youths' behaviour in Malaysia and beyond.

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Investigating Factors Contributing to Interpersonal Conflicts Among Students in Han Chiang University College of Communication

Nur Adillah Maaz* & Chan Weng Khan**

Abstract: The social impact of interpersonal conflicts among students in educational institutions is reflected in their interactions, mental well-being, and academic success. This study focuses on three key conflict variables—disagreement, interference, and perceived negative emotions—that are particularly relevant in the context of Han Chiang University College of Communication. The purpose of the research is to examine how these factors influence students' engagement and critical thinking within a multicultural and diverse learning environment. Specifically, the study clarifies the roles of social relationships, communication styles, academic stress, and cultural variations in contributing to interpersonal conflict among students. To achieve this, a quantitative research design was employed using simple random sampling with a total of 101 respondents drawn from undergraduate students at Han Chiang University College of Communication. This approach allowed for an objective assessment of conflict patterns and their effects on student experiences. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on student dynamics by highlighting the importance of intervention strategies. By introducing techniques such as conflict resolution training, emotional recognition sessions, and improved methods of student group formation, interpersonal problems can be addressed more effectively, thereby enhancing collaboration and overall learning experiences within universities.

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Keywords: Interpersonal Communication, Communication, Public Communication, Communication Style, Multicultural Communication

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal conflict can be defined as a process of interaction between individuals who perceive incompatible goals, interests, or values, leading to tension, disagreement, or emotional strain in their relationship (Rahim, 2011; De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). According to Rahim (2011), interpersonal conflict occurs when “the activities, interests, or goals of one individual or group are incompatible with those of another.” This incompatibility can manifest through disagreement, negative emotions, or interference with one another’s objectives. Similarly, De Dreu and Gelfand (2008) explain that interpersonal conflict is “a process that begins when one party perceives that another has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something the first party cares about.” This emphasizes the *perceptual* nature of conflict—meaning that even if there is no actual opposition, perceived threat or tension can still cause conflict.

Interpersonal conflicts are a common phenomenon in educational institutions, often affecting students’ academic performance and overall well-being. Establishing a peaceful learning environment, such as at Han Chiang University College of Communication, requires an understanding of the underlying causes of these conflicts. This study, therefore, seeks to identify and analyse the factors contributing to student interpersonal conflicts, particularly in the areas of social relations, academic expectations, cultural disparities, and communication barriers. By examining these variables, the research aims to provide insights for developing effective interpersonal conflict resolution strategies and fostering a more positive academic climate.

Interpersonal conflicts may emerge in various contexts, including small groups, classrooms, or workplaces, and often revolve around differences in goals, resources, decisions, or behaviors (Mukherji & Jakhar, 2024). For instance, conflicts may arise when parents disagree with their child’s career choices, group members debate how to allocate resources, or individuals differ on acceptable behaviors within a shared

setting. In such situations, conflict is viewed as a state of incompatibility between individuals working within a shared environment (Szamburski & Bodarski, 2023).

In recent years, the prevalence of interpersonal conflict has shown an increasing trend, making it a pressing issue in communication studies. Omodan, B. I. (2023). *Addressing potential conflict among university students during collaborative tasks* — shows how identity and difference and task design trigger collaboration conflicts and offers classroom strategies to reduce them. Interpersonal conflict is not merely a matter of negotiation or debate, but rather an escalation of everyday disagreements into emotionally charged encounters that disrupt personal or interpersonal harmony (Allee, 2023). It can stem from differences in opinions, needs, values, interests, lifestyles, or personalities. As such, understanding interpersonal conflict as a multifaceted and evolving phenomenon is essential for addressing its impact on academic environments and for promoting healthier communication practices.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to:

1. To find out what causes disagreements in interpersonal communication conflicts among students in Han Chiang University College of Communication.
2. To find out what causes interference in interpersonal communication conflicts among students in Han Chiang University College of Communication.
3. To find out what causes negative emotions in interpersonal communication conflicts among students in Han Chiang University College of Communication.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What factors contribute to disagreements during interpersonal communication conflicts among students in Han Chiang University College of Communication?
2. What factors lead to interference in interpersonal communication conflicts among students in Han Chiang University College of Communication?
3. What factors influence the experience of negative emotions in interpersonal communication conflicts among students in Han Chiang University College of Communication?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study, a Venn diagram is adopted to illustrate the relationship between the three key factors of interpersonal communication conflict—disagreement, interference, and negative emotions—among students in Han Chiang University College of Communication. The Venn diagram is chosen because it effectively demonstrates the areas of overlap and distinction among these three variables. By visualizing how disagreement, interference, and negative emotions intersect, the diagram helps to clarify how these elements are interrelated in contributing to interpersonal communication conflicts. This visual approach allows readers to better understand the complexity of the interactions between these factors and provides a clearer representation of how they jointly influence communication outcomes among students.

Disagreements in interpersonal communication conflicts at the university and college-level studies consistently show that disagreements among students often arise from (a) differences in opinions or goals during group work, (b) cultural/ethnic or value differences, and (c) misaligned expectations about roles and workload. Empirical work across contexts finds that these sources show up repeatedly in student samples and predict both more frequent conflicts and more destructive conflict styles (avoiding, competing) when unresolved. For example, a mixed-methods study of undergraduate students found that ethnic/religious diversity, insults, thefts, and competing interests were leading sources of

interpersonal conflicts and strongly influenced the conflict-management style students used.

Interference in communication (“noise”), interference — often called noise — includes physical noise (room, campus environment), physiological/internal noise (fatigue, distraction), and semantic/technical interference (unclear messages, texting/social media). Studies specifically sampling students show that campus/community noise and environmental distractions reduce effective communication and increase misunderstanding during lectures, group meetings and phone/personal communications. Qualitative work also identifies partner attitudes (eg. not listening), crowded/noisy spaces and technology interruptions as common barriers reported by learners.

Negative emotions linked to interpersonal conflict, negative affects such as anger, anxiety, nervousness and sadness are both outcomes of interpersonal conflicts and drivers of conflict escalation. Daily diary and field studies with student and young-adult samples report that interpersonal conflicts reliably increase short-term negative emotional states; poorly regulated expression of these emotions tends to prolong or intensify conflict episodes. Research on educational settings and collaborative learning groups shows that when negative emotions are expressed during conflict (rather than regulated or reappraised) the conflict is more likely to spiral and harm relationships and academic functioning.

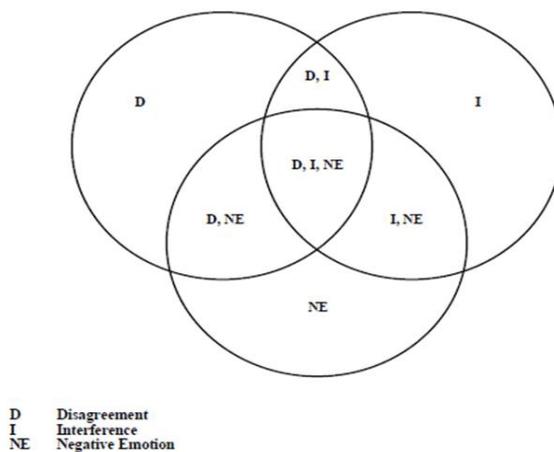


Figure 1: Venn diagram for the component of interpersonal conflict by John Hartwick & Henri Barki model

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BARKI AND HARTWICK'S MODEL OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

This research adopts the model of interpersonal conflict proposed by Barki and Hartwick (2001), which identifies three key elements that constructs conflict in interpersonal communication: disagreement, interference, and negative emotions. Disagreement arises when individuals hold divergent needs, values, or opinions, often manifested in arguments or differing goals (Lyubykh et al., 2022). For instance, financial constraints may lead to recurring disagreements among young married couples. Interference, meanwhile, refers to behaviors that obstruct the attainment of goals, such as argumentation, competition, or hostility. Finally, negative emotions including anger, frustration, jealousy, anxiety, and fear are integral components of conflict that influence its intensity and outcomes (Klok et al., 2022).

NATURE OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Conflict is an inevitable part of human interaction, occurring in contexts such as family, friendships, workplaces, and communities (Pembi et al., 2023; Folger et al., 2021). Pembi et al., (2023) categorises conflict into group, occupational, and interpersonal forms, all shaped by interdependence between individuals. Conflict typically emerges when individuals perceive irreconcilable goals or interference in achieving objectives, such as competing financial priorities or conflicting social activities. Belgasm et al., (2025) further highlights that interpersonal conflict may range from subtle nonverbal cues, like the “cold shoulder,” to overt emotional outbursts. While distinct from interpersonal violence, poorly managed conflict can have detrimental emotional and relational consequences.

CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE ASPECTS OF CONFLICT

Although often associated with negative outcomes, conflict is not inherently destructive. Research shows that well-managed conflict can foster mutual understanding, generate new ideas, and strengthen relationships (Mishra, 2023; Folger et al., 2021). For example, the conflict in long-term relationships encouraged deeper understanding between partners. However, unmanaged conflict can contribute to stress,

impaired well-being, and physiological issues such as elevated blood pressure or weakened immune responses (Belgasm et al., 2025).

NEEDS, INTERESTS, AND CONFLICT INTENSITY

The intensity of conflict is influenced by whether disputes are centered on needs or interests (Karakayali, 2021). Needs, such as autonomy, dignity, respect, and self-worth, are deeply tied to self-concept. Conflicts that challenge these fundamental needs are often more intense and resistant to resolution. By contrast, interests such as financial security or occupational preferences are less tied to self-identity and therefore more negotiable. Needs-based disputes are more likely to escalate and create deadlocks, as they require individuals to defend their core sense of self.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT

Conflict is embedded within the broader process of interpersonal communication. Defined as the exchange of ideas, information, and emotions between two or more individuals, interpersonal communication occurs both face-to-face and in digital contexts, encompassing verbal and nonverbal cues such as gestures and facial expressions (Jouany & Martic, 2023). Communication is inherently interactive, involving both message transmission and feedback (Singhal et al., 2024). Feedback whether verbal or nonverbal plays a crucial role in clarifying messages, correcting misunderstandings, and adapting communication strategies (Jouany & Martic, 2023). When conflicts emerge, effective interpersonal communication and feedback mechanisms are essential to resolving disagreements and reducing negative emotional responses.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative research approach using a descriptive survey design, which enables the collection and interpretation of numerical data without manipulation (Creswell, 2021). The design was deemed appropriate as it allows for the identification and reporting of factors contributing to interpersonal conflict among students.

The population comprised Bachelor of Communication students at Han Chiang University College of Communication, Penang. Given the relevance of communication studies to the research topic, this group was considered suitable. Respondents represented diverse backgrounds from Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak with the age of 18-25 years old.

A simple random sampling technique was employed in this study, involving a total of 101 students from Han Chiang University College of Communication. This technique was chosen because it ensures that every individual within the population has an equal and independent probability of being selected, thereby minimizing selection bias and enhancing the representativeness of the sample. The sample size was determined based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula, which provides a systematic approach to estimating an appropriate sample size relative to the population. The researcher referred to the tabulated values derived from the formula and adjusted them accordingly to align with the actual population size of the study.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, adapted from previous studies on interpersonal conflict. Questionnaires were designed to capture students' experiences, attitudes, and perceptions, ensuring reliability and validity of responses. There are four parts of the survey question including demographics, factor of disagreement with the interpersonal communication conflict, factor of interference with the interpersonal communication conflict, and factor of negative emotion with the interpersonal communication conflict. This questionnaire was distributed online through platforms such as email and whatsapp and this questionnaire was made using Google Form.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis is the process of examining, cleaning, transforming, and interpreting data to discover useful insights, patterns, and trends. It helps researchers answer research questions, test hypotheses, and support conclusions.

To analyse the data in this study, the researcher chose to use Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to examine the frequency, descriptive statistics which has been selected by the researcher

like Correlations and Anova. Quantitative data is usually used to collect, summarize and reach the nominal conclusion about the relationships between the two types of variable whether it is related or not.

RELIABILITY TEST

Reliability refers to the consistency and accuracy of a measurement instrument in assessing a particular construct. A reliable test produces stable results across different contexts and minimizes measurement errors (Pandey, 2018). In this study, the reliability of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's Alpha, a widely used coefficient that measures internal consistency among items. A Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.70 or higher is generally considered acceptable for social science research (Adeniran, 2025). This assessment ensured that the questionnaire consistently captured the intended constructs, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings.

The table presents a case processing summary, showing that a total of 101 cases were included in the analysis, with all of them being valid (100%). No cases were excluded, indicating complete data for all variables in the procedure. The footnote mentions "listwise deletion," meaning that if there had been any missing data across variables, entire case would have been excluded. However, in this instance, no exclusions were necessary, as all cases were complete.

Table 1: Case Processing Summary

| | Items | N | % |
|-------|--------------|----------|----------|
| Cases | Valid | 101 | 100.0 |
| | Excluded | 0 | 0.0 |
| | Total | 101 | 100.0 |

a. List wise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics

| Cronbach's Alpha | N of items |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| 0.882 | 19 |

The table displays reliability statistics, specifically Cronbach's Alpha, which measures internal consistency or reliability of a set of items in a scale. In this case, Cronbach's Alpha is 0.882 for a set of 19 items. A value of 0.882 indicates a high level of internal consistency, suggesting that the items are reliably measuring the same underlying construct.

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Descriptive analysis is a fundamental step in statistical data analysis that involves summarizing and presenting data to identify patterns, trends, and distributions (Cote, 2021). It also assists in detecting errors or outliers and prepares the data for further statistical testing. Common descriptive techniques include quantile and mean tables, measures of dispersion such as variance and standard deviation, and cross-tabulations, which highlight differences between groups and support hypothesis testing (Rawat, 2021).

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

| Items | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|----------|----------------|----------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| What is your age | 101 | 1 | 5 | 2.67 | 1.767 |
| What is your gender | 101 | 1 | 4 | 1.47 | 0.831 |
| What year of study are you currently in | 101 | 1 | 4 | 2.47 | 1.006 |

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| | | | | | |
|---|-----|---|---|------|-------|
| What is your ethnicity | 101 | 1 | 4 | 1.45 | 0.943 |
| How often do you experience interpersonal conflict with other students | 101 | 1 | 5 | 2.29 | 0.887 |
| How often do you experience conflicts related to group projects or teamwork | 101 | 1 | 5 | 2.56 | 1.034 |
| How often do you experience conflicts with classmates over differing opinions during discussions or debates | 101 | 1 | 5 | 2.42 | 1.116 |
| I often experience disagreements with my peers during academic or group discussions. | 101 | 1 | 5 | 2.56 | 1.043 |
| Disagreements in group discussions often lead to misunderstandings between me and others. | 101 | 1 | 5 | 2.92 | 1.102 |
| Disagreements in academic tasks frequently | 101 | 1 | 5 | 3.17 | 1.233 |

| | | | | | |
|--|-----|---|---|------|-------|
| create tension among students in my class. | | | | | |
| Other students often interfere with my work or ideas during group projects | 101 | 1 | 5 | 2.85 | 1.252 |
| Interference from others negatively affects my ability to collaborate effectively with my peers. | 101 | 1 | 5 | 3.01 | 1.153 |
| I find that interference from peers significantly impacts my concentration during group activities. | 101 | 1 | 5 | 3.23 | 1.199 |
| I frequently feel frustrated or upset when collaborating with other students. | 101 | 1 | 5 | 2.82 | 1.170 |
| Negative emotions such as stress or frustration hinder my communication with classmates during group work. | 101 | 1 | 5 | 3.09 | 1.150 |

| | | | | | |
|--|-----|---|---|------|-------|
| I am likely to experience negative emotions when my ideas are challenged by my peers. | 101 | 1 | 5 | 3.00 | 1.304 |
| Conflicts often arise between me and other students due to differences in opinions or ideas. | 101 | 1 | 5 | 2.88 | 1.227 |
| Interpersonal conflicts significantly affect my ability to complete group assignments. | 101 | 1 | 5 | 3.13 | 1.222 |
| I believe interpersonal conflicts among students are common in my academic environment. | 101 | 1 | 5 | 3.27 | 1.029 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 101 | | | | |

The table provides descriptive statistics for a survey of 101 students regarding various aspects of interpersonal conflict and group work in an academic setting. Key variables include age, gender, year of study, and ethnicity, alongside questions related to experiences with interpersonal conflicts, disagreements, and emotions during group projects and discussions. The mean values for most conflict-related items range from 2.29 to 3.27, suggesting moderate frequencies of conflict and negative

emotional experiences. For example, students report that interference from peers and negative emotions, such as frustration, frequently hinder collaboration and concentration. Interpersonal conflicts are seen as common in academic environments, with many students feeling that these issues affect their ability to complete group assignments effectively. Overall, the data points to significant challenges in group interactions, with interpersonal tensions affecting both academic performance and group dynamics.

FACTOR ANALYSIS

Factor analysis is a statistical technique used to reduce a large number of variables into a smaller set of factors by extracting common variance across items (Qualtrics, 2018). It relies on assumptions of the general linear model, including linearity, non-multicollinearity, and the presence of meaningful relationships between variables and factors (Statistics Solutions, 2024). By examining underlying dimensions, factor analysis simplifies complex inter-item correlations, making it easier to identify shared structures among items (Tavakol & Wetzel, 2020). This method is widely applied to enhance measurement tools and establish construct validity, particularly in research and clinical assessments.

Table 4: Communalities

| Items | Initial | Extraction |
|---|---------|------------|
| What is your age | 1.000 | 0.662 |
| What is your gender | 1.000 | 0.495 |
| What year of study are you currently in | 1.000 | 0.771 |
| What is your ethnicity | 1.000 | 0.702 |
| How often do you experience interpersonal conflict with other students | 1.000 | 0.583 |
| How often do you experience conflicts related to group projects or teamwork | 1.000 | 0.716 |

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| | | |
|---|-------|-------|
| How often do you experience conflicts with classmates over differing opinions during discussions or debates | 1.000 | 0.678 |
| I often experience disagreements with my peers during academic or group discussions. | 1.000 | 0.706 |
| Disagreements in group discussions often lead to misunderstandings between me and others. | 1.000 | 0.718 |
| Disagreements in academic tasks frequently create tension among students in my class. | 1.000 | 0.713 |
| Other students often interfere with my work or ideas during group projects | 1.000 | 0.685 |
| Interference from others negatively affects my ability to collaborate effectively with my peers. | 1.000 | 0.627 |
| I find that interference from peers significantly impacts my concentration during group activities. | 1.000 | 0.526 |
| I frequently feel frustrated or upset when collaborating with other students. | 1.000 | 0.612 |
| Negative emotions such as stress or frustration hinder my communication with classmates during group work. | 1.000 | 0.607 |
| I am likely to experience negative emotions when my ideas are challenged by my peers. | 1.000 | 0.600 |
| Conflicts often arise between me and other students due to differences in opinions or ideas. | 1.000 | 0.699 |

| | | |
|---|-------|-------|
| Interpersonal conflicts significantly affect my ability to complete group assignments. | 1.000 | 0.724 |
| I believe interpersonal conflicts among students are common in my academic environment. | 1.000 | 0.635 |

The table presents communalities from a principal component analysis (PCA), which measure the proportion of each variable’s variance explained by the extracted components. The variables pertain to demographic factors (age, gender, ethnicity, year of study) and experiences of interpersonal conflict, especially in academic or group project settings. The communalities after extraction show how much variance is retained for each variable in the factor solution. Notable values include high communalities for “year of study” (0.771), “ethnicity” (0.702), and several conflict-related variables, such as “disagreements in group discussions” (0.718) and “conflicts affecting task completion” (0.724). This suggests that these variables contribute strongly to the underlying components identified in the analysis.

FREQUENCIES

In statistics, frequency refers to the number of times an event or observation occurs within a dataset (Wilhelm & Andress, 2011). It represents a simple count that can be used to evaluate the reliability of predictions and estimate the likelihood of a variable phenomenon (Oosterbaan, 1994). Frequency analysis is particularly applied in forecasting, such as predicting rainfall or runoff rates, to ensure accuracy and avoid errors in hydrologic or design-related assessments (Oosterbaan, 1994).

Table 5: Statistics

| Items | What is your age | What is your gender | What year of study are you currently in | What is your ethnicity |
|--------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| N Valid | 101 | 101 | 101 | 101 |
| Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

The dataset contains responses from 101 individuals, with complete data for the demographic variables: age, gender, year of study, and ethnicity. There are no missing values for any of these variables, ensuring that the sample provides a full representation of these demographic characteristics. This completeness allows for reliable analysis of the relationships between these demographic factors and the experiences of interpersonal or group conflicts within the context of the study.

Table 6: Experiences of interpersonal conflicts

| Items | How often do you experience interpersonal conflict with other students | How often do you experience conflicts related to group projects or teamwork | How often do you experience conflicts with classmates over differing opinions during discussions or debates |
|--------------|---|--|--|
| N Valid | 101 | 101 | 101 |
| Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 |

The dataset includes complete responses from 101 individuals regarding their experiences of interpersonal conflicts with other students, conflicts related to group projects or teamwork, and conflicts with classmates over differing opinions during discussions or debates. There are no missing values for any of these questions, providing a full dataset for analysing the frequency and nature of conflicts in academic settings.

This allows for a thorough investigation of how often students encounter these types of conflicts and how they impact their collaborative experiences.

Table 7: Experiences of interpersonal conflicts

| Items | I often experience disagreements with my peers during academic or group discussions. | Disagreements in group discussions often lead to misunderstandings between me and others. | Disagreements in academic tasks frequently create tension among students in my class. |
|--------------|---|--|--|
| N Valid | 101 | 101 | 101 |
| Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 |

The dataset shows that all 101 respondents provided complete answers to questions regarding their experiences with disagreements and misunderstandings during academic or group discussions. Specifically, the items capture how often disagreements occur, whether they lead to misunderstandings, and if they create tension among students in the class. With no missing values for these variables, the data allows for an in-depth examination of how disagreements impact the dynamics of student interactions during academic tasks and group discussions.

Table 8: Disagreements and Misunderstandings Among Students

| Items | Other students often interfere with my work or ideas during group projects | Interference from others negatively affects my ability to collaborate effectively with my peers. | I find that interference from peers significantly impacts my concentration during group activities. |
|--------------|---|---|--|
| N Valid | 101 | 101 | 101 |
| Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 |

The dataset contains responses from all 101 participants regarding their experiences with interference from other students during group projects. Specifically, the questions explore whether others interfere with their work or ideas, how this interference affects their ability to collaborate effectively, and whether it significantly impacts their concentration during group activities. With no missing values, the data provides a complete basis for analysing how peer interference influences students' performance and collaboration in group settings.

Table 9: Emotional Responses

| Items | I frequently feel frustrated or upset when collaborating with other students. | Negative emotions such as stress or frustration hinder my communication with classmates during group work. | I am likely to experience negative emotions when my ideas are challenged by my peers. |
|--------------|--|---|--|
| N Valid | 101 | 101 | 101 |
| Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 |

The dataset shows that all 101 respondents provided complete answers to questions related to their emotional responses during group work and collaboration with peers. The questions explore the frequency of frustration or upset feelings, the impact of negative emotions like stress or frustration on communication during group work, and the likelihood of experiencing negative emotions when their ideas are challenged by peers. With no missing values, this data offers a comprehensive view of how emotional reactions influence students' interactions and communication in academic and collaborative settings.

Table 10: Interpersonal Conflicts in Academic Settings

| Items | Conflicts often arise between me and other students due to differences in opinions or ideas. | Interpersonal conflicts significantly affect my ability to complete group assignments. | I believe interpersonal conflicts among students are common in my academic environment. |
|--------------|---|---|--|
| N Valid | 101 | 101 | 101 |
| Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 |

The dataset reveals that all 101 respondents answered questions about interpersonal conflicts in academic settings. The items focus on how often conflicts arise due to differing opinions or ideas, how significantly these conflicts affect the ability to complete group assignments, and the perceived prevalence of interpersonal conflicts among students in the academic environment. With no missing values, the data provides a full picture of how conflicts impact both the completion of group tasks and the overall academic environment.

Table 11: Age

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Valid 18-20 | 49 | 48.5 | 48.5 | 48.5 |
| Under 18 | 2 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 50.5 |
| 24-26 | 12 | 11.9 | 11.9 | 62.4 |
| 27 and above | 9 | 8.9 | 8.9 | 71.3 |
| 21-23 | 29 | 28.7 | 28.7 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data represents the age distribution of 101 respondents. The majority, 48.5%, are between 18 and 20 years old, followed by 28.7% who fall within the 21 to 23 age group. A smaller portion, 11.9%, are aged 24 to 26, and 8.9% are 27 years old or above. Only 2% of respondents are under 18. Overall, the dataset shows a higher concentration of individuals in their early adulthood, particularly between 18 and 23 years old.

Table 12: Gender

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Valid Female | 69 | 68.3 | 68.3 | 68.3 |
| Male | 24 | 23.8 | 23.8 | 92.1 |
| Non-binary | 1 | 1.0 | 1.0 | 93.1 |
| Prefer not to say | 7 | 6.9 | 6.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data shows the gender distribution of 101 respondents. A majority, 68.3%, identify as female, while 23.8% identify as male. A small percentage, 1%, identify as non-binary, and 6.9% prefer not to disclose their gender. This indicates that females make up the largest group in the dataset, with a smaller but notable representation of other genders.

Table 13: Year of Study

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Valid First year | 18 | 17.8 | 17.8 | 17.8 |

| | | | | |
|--------------|-----|-------|-------|-------|
| Second year | 38 | 37.6 | 37.6 | 55.4 |
| Third year | 25 | 24.8 | 24.8 | 80.2 |
| Postgraduate | 20 | 19.8 | 19.8 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data presents the year of study distribution among 101 respondents. The largest group, 37.6%, are in their second year, followed by 24.8% in their third year. Postgraduate students make up 19.8% of the sample, while 17.8% are in their first year. This indicates a broad range of study levels, with second-year students forming the largest segment, and a significant representation of both undergraduates and postgraduates.

Table 14: Ethnicity

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid Chinese | 79 | 78.2 | 78.2 | 78.2 |
| Malay | 8 | 7.9 | 7.9 | 86.1 |
| Indian | 5 | 5.0 | 5.0 | 91.1 |
| Indigenous | 9 | 8.9 | 8.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data shows the ethnic distribution of 101 respondents. The majority, 78.2%, identify as Chinese, followed by 8.9% who identify as Indigenous. Malay individuals make up 7.9% of the respondents, while 5% identify as Indian. This indicates that Chinese respondents are the predominant group, with smaller yet notable representations from Malay, Indian, and Indigenous communities.

Table 15: Experienced interpersonal conflict with other students

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|----------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Valid Never | 16 | 15.8 | 15.8 | 15.8 |
| Rarely | 51 | 50.5 | 50.5 | 66.3 |
| Sometimes | 25 | 24.8 | 24.8 | 91.1 |
| Often | 7 | 6.9 | 6.9 | 98.0 |
| Very Often | 2 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data indicates how often respondents experience interpersonal conflict with other students. Half of the respondents, 50.5%, report rarely experiencing conflict, while 24.8% experience it sometimes. About 15.8% say they never have conflicts, while smaller portions, 6.9% and 2%, report often and very often experiencing interpersonal conflicts, respectively. This suggests that most respondents either rarely or only occasionally face conflicts with other students.

Table 16: Experienced conflicts related to group projects or teamwork

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|----------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Valid Never | 16 | 15.8 | 15.8 | 15.8 |
| Rarely | 34 | 33.7 | 33.7 | 49.5 |
| Sometimes | 32 | 31.7 | 31.7 | 81.2 |
| Often | 16 | 15.8 | 15.8 | 97.0 |

| | | | | |
|------------|-----|-------|-------|-------|
| Very Often | 3 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data illustrates how often respondents experience conflicts related to group projects or teamwork. A third of respondents, 33.7%, report rarely encountering such conflicts, while 31.7% experience them sometimes. About 15.8% say they never or often face group-related conflicts, and 3% report very often experiencing them. This indicates that while a significant portion of respondents encounters group project conflicts occasionally, a smaller but notable percentage faces these conflicts more frequently.

Table 17: Experienced conflicts during discussions or debates

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|----------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Valid Never | 21 | 20.8 | 20.8 | 20.8 |
| Rarely | 39 | 38.6 | 38.6 | 59.4 |
| Sometimes | 26 | 25.7 | 25.7 | 85.1 |
| Often | 8 | 7.9 | 7.9 | 93.1 |
| Very Often | 7 | 6.9 | 6.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data represents how often respondents experience conflicts with classmates over differing opinions during discussions or debates. The largest portion, 38.6%, rarely face such conflicts, while 25.7% experience them sometimes. About 20.8% report never having these conflicts, while smaller groups, 7.9% and 6.9%, experience them often and very often, respectively. This suggests that most respondents encounter conflicts over

differing opinions infrequently, with only a minority facing them regularly.

Table 18: Experienced Disagreements

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Valid Strongly Disagree | 17 | 16.8 | 16.8 | 16.8 |
| Disagree | 32 | 31.7 | 31.7 | 48.5 |
| Neutral | 33 | 32.7 | 32.7 | 81.2 |
| Agree | 16 | 15.8 | 15.8 | 97.0 |
| Strongly Agree | 3 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data shows respondents' agreement with the statement "I often experience disagreements with my peers during academic or group discussions." About 31.7% disagree, and 16.8% strongly disagree, meaning nearly half do not frequently experience such disagreements. On the other hand, 32.7% are neutral, while 15.8% agree and 3% strongly agree. This indicates that most respondents either do not or are undecided about frequently encountering disagreements, with a smaller portion agreeing that they do.

Table 19: Disagreements in group discussions

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Strongly Disagree | 9 | 8.9 | 8.9 | 8.9 |
| Disagree | 29 | 28.7 | 28.7 | 37.6 |

| | | | | |
|----------------|-----|-------|-------|-------|
| Neutral | 33 | 32.7 | 32.7 | 70.3 |
| Agree | 21 | 20.8 | 20.8 | 91.1 |
| Strongly Agree | 9 | 8.9 | 8.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data illustrate respondents' views on whether disagreements in group discussions often lead to misunderstandings. A significant portion, 28.7%, disagrees with this statement, and 8.9% strongly disagree. However, 32.7% are neutral on the matter. Meanwhile, 20.8% agree, and 8.9% strongly agree. This suggests that while many respondents do not see disagreements as leading to misunderstandings, a considerable group remains neutral, with a smaller portion acknowledging that disagreements often cause misunderstandings.

Table 20: Disagreements in academic

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid Strongly Disagree | 12 | 11.9 | 11.9 | 11.9 |
| Disagree | 18 | 17.8 | 17.8 | 29.7 |
| Neutral | 27 | 26.7 | 26.7 | 56.4 |
| Agree | 29 | 28.7 | 28.7 | 85.1 |
| Strongly Agree | 15 | 14.9 | 14.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data reflects respondents' perceptions of whether disagreements in academic tasks frequently create tension among students in their class. A combined total of 29.7% (11.9% strongly disagree and 17.8% disagree) do not believe that disagreements lead to tension. In contrast, 28.7%

agree and 14.9% strongly agree that such tensions do arise from disagreements, indicating a significant portion acknowledges the impact of disagreements on class dynamics. Additionally, 26.7% remain neutral on this issue. Overall, while there is a notable belief that academic disagreements contribute to tension, a substantial minority do not share this perspective.

Table 21: Students often interfere during group projects

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid Strongly Disagree | 19 | 18.8 | 18.8 | 18.8 |
| Disagree | 20 | 19.8 | 19.8 | 38.6 |
| Neutral | 29 | 28.7 | 28.7 | 67.3 |
| Agree | 23 | 22.8 | 22.8 | 90.1 |
| Strongly Agree | 10 | 9.9 | 9.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data presents respondents' views on whether other students often interfere with their work or ideas during group projects. A majority, 38.6%, do not believe that interference occurs frequently, with 18.8% strongly disagreeing and 19.8% disagreeing with the statement. However, 28.7% remain neutral. Conversely, 22.8% agree that interference happens, and 9.9% strongly agree. This suggests that while many respondents feel that their work is not often interfered with, a notable portion acknowledges some level of interference from peers during group projects.

Table 22: Interference from negatively affects

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Valid Strongly Disagree | 9 | 8.9 | 8.9 | 8.9 |
| Disagree | 27 | 26.7 | 26.7 | 35.6 |
| Neutral | 31 | 30.7 | 30.7 | 66.3 |
| Agree | 22 | 21.8 | 21.8 | 88.1 |
| Strongly Agree | 12 | 11.9 | 11.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data reflects respondents' beliefs about whether interference from others negatively affects their ability to collaborate effectively with peers. A total of 35.6% do not feel that interference has a negative impact, with 8.9% strongly disagreeing and 26.7% disagreeing. However, a significant portion, 30.7%, remains neutral on the issue. In contrast, 21.8% agree that such interference affects their collaboration, and 11.9% strongly agree. This suggests that while some respondents do not perceive a negative impact on their collaboration due to interference, a noteworthy percentage acknowledge that it does hinder their ability to work effectively with others.

Table 23: Significantly impacts during group activities

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Valid Strongly Disagree | 10 | 9.9 | 9.9 | 9.9 |
| Disagree | 16 | 15.8 | 15.8 | 25.7 |
| Neutral | 33 | 32.7 | 32.7 | 58.4 |

| | | | | |
|----------------|-----|-------|-------|-------|
| Agree | 25 | 24.8 | 24.8 | 83.2 |
| Strongly Agree | 17 | 16.8 | 16.8 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data shows respondents' perceptions of how interference from peers impacts their concentration during group activities. A total of 25.7% do not believe that such interference significantly affects their concentration, with 9.9% strongly disagreeing and 15.8% disagreeing. Meanwhile, 32.7% are neutral regarding this impact. In contrast, a combined 41.6% (24.8% agree and 16.8% strongly agree) acknowledge that interference from peers does significantly affect their concentration. This indicates that while some respondents feel that peer interference is not a major issue, a substantial portion recognizes its negative effect on their focus during group activities.

Table 24: Feeling frustrated or upset

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid Strongly Disagree | 14 | 13.9 | 13.9 | 13.9 |
| Disagree | 28 | 27.7 | 27.7 | 41.6 |
| Neutral | 30 | 29.7 | 29.7 | 71.3 |
| Agree | 20 | 19.8 | 19.8 | 91.1 |
| Strongly Agree | 9 | 8.9 | 8.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data reflects respondents' feelings about collaboration with other students, specifically regarding frustration or upset. A total of 41.6% do not feel frustrated or upset when working with others, with 13.9% strongly disagreeing and 27.7% disagreeing with the statement.

Meanwhile, 29.7% are neutral on this issue. In contrast, 28.7% (19.8% agree and 8.9% strongly agree) express that they frequently feel frustrated or upset during collaboration. This suggests that while a significant portion of respondents do not experience negative emotions when collaborating, a notable percentage acknowledges feelings of frustration in such situations.

Table 25: Negative emotions

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Valid Strongly Disagree | 10 | 9.9 | 9.9 | 9.9 |
| Disagree | 22 | 21.8 | 21.8 | 31.7 |
| Neutral | 28 | 27.7 | 27.7 | 59.4 |
| Agree | 31 | 30.7 | 30.7 | 90.1 |
| Strongly Agree | 10 | 9.9 | 9.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data illustrates respondents' beliefs about whether negative emotions, such as stress or frustration, hinder their communication with classmates during group work. A total of 31.7% do not feel that these emotions negatively affect their communication, with 9.9% strongly disagreeing and 21.8% disagreeing. Additionally, 27.7% remain neutral on the issue. In contrast, 40.6% (30.7% agree and 9.9% strongly agree) acknowledge that negative emotions do hinder their communication with peers. This indicates that while many respondents feel their communication is not significantly impacted, a considerable portion recognizes that stress and frustration can interfere with effective collaboration.

Table 26: Experienced negative emotions

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Strongly Disagree | 14 | 13.9 | 13.9 | 13.9 |
| Disagree | 25 | 24.8 | 24.8 | 38.6 |
| Neutral | 27 | 26.7 | 26.7 | 65.3 |
| Agree | 17 | 16.8 | 16.8 | 82.2 |
| Strongly Agree | 18 | 17.8 | 17.8 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data shows respondents' likelihood of experiencing negative emotions when their ideas are challenged by peers. A total of 38.6% do not feel likely to experience negative emotions, with 13.9% strongly disagreeing and 24.8% disagreeing with the statement. Meanwhile, 26.7% are neutral on the issue. In contrast, a combined 34.6% (16.8% agree and 17.8% strongly agree) indicate that they are likely to experience negative emotions when their ideas are challenged. This suggests that while a significant portion of respondents do not perceive such challenges as emotionally impactful, a noteworthy percentage acknowledges that they can provoke negative feelings.

Table 27: Student Conflicts Arising from Differences in Opinions or Ideas

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Valid Strongly Disagree | 16 | 15.8 | 15.8 | 15.8 |
| Disagree | 24 | 23.8 | 23.8 | 39.6 |
| Neutral | 27 | 26.7 | 26.7 | 66.3 |

| | | | | |
|----------------|-----|-------|-------|-------|
| Agree | 24 | 23.8 | 23.8 | 90.1 |
| Strongly Agree | 10 | 9.9 | 9.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data reflects respondents' experiences regarding conflicts arising from differences in opinions or ideas with other students. A total of 39.6% do not believe that conflicts often occur, with 15.8% strongly disagreeing and 23.8% disagreeing. Meanwhile, 26.7% remain neutral on the matter. In contrast, 33.7% (23.8% agree and 9.9% strongly agree) acknowledge that conflicts do frequently arise due to differing opinions. This indicates that while many respondents do not perceive frequent conflicts stemming from differing ideas, a significant portion recognizes that such differences can lead to disagreements.

Table 28: Effect of Interpersonal Conflicts on Academic Task Performance

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid Strongly Disagree | 10 | 9.9 | 9.9 | 9.9 |
| Disagree | 26 | 25.7 | 25.7 | 35.6 |
| Neutral | 19 | 18.8 | 18.8 | 54.5 |
| Agree | 33 | 32.7 | 32.7 | 87.1 |
| Strongly Agree | 13 | 12.9 | 12.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data indicates respondents' beliefs about the impact of interpersonal conflicts on their ability to complete group assignments. A total of 35.6% do not feel that these conflicts significantly affect their work, with 9.9% strongly disagreeing and 25.7% disagreeing with the statement. Additionally, 18.8% remain neutral. In contrast, a combined

45.6% (32.7% agree and 12.9% strongly agree) believe that interpersonal conflicts do hinder their ability to effectively complete group assignments. This suggests that while a notable portion of respondents does not perceive a significant impact from conflicts, a considerable number acknowledge that such issues can affect their collaborative efforts.

Table 29: Frequency of Interpersonal Conflicts in the Academic Environment

| Items | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Strongly Disagree | 5 | 5.0 | 5.0 | 5.0 |
| Disagree | 16 | 15.8 | 15.8 | 20.8 |
| Neutral | 39 | 38.6 | 38.6 | 59.4 |
| Agree | 29 | 28.7 | 28.7 | 88.1 |
| Strongly Agree | 12 | 11.9 | 11.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 101 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The data shows respondents' beliefs about the prevalence of interpersonal conflicts among students in their academic environment. A total of 20.8% do not believe that such conflicts are common, with 5% strongly disagreeing and 15.8% disagreeing. Meanwhile, 38.6% are neutral on the issue. In contrast, a combined 40.6% (28.7% agree and 11.9% strongly agree) acknowledge that they believe interpersonal conflicts are indeed common among students. This suggests that while a significant portion of respondents do not perceive conflicts as prevalent, a considerable number recognize their occurrence in the academic setting.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings it is possible to offer several recommendations as to how to minimise negative effects of the interpersonal conflicts and optimize group processes in academic settings (Allee, 2023). To begin with, a number of academic institutions should consider incorporating subject matters on dispute resolution. Such kinds of programmes would equip students with the ability to handle conflict in a better way, so that the conflict which hampers the learning process would be resolved amicably. Teachers should also help students define a set of communication rules and establish an environment where each student would like to share his or her opinion with others during group projects. This could have helped to prevent quarrels arising from misunderstandings of what the other person said (Jouany & Martic, 2023).

The second recommendation to be implemented is to foster children's emotional responsibility. For this reason universities should provide training on emotional intelligence; in the sense, they should inform students on how to cope with stress and dissatisfaction during teamwork, as the negative feelings play a significant role in escalating conflicts within the group (Belgasm et al., 2025). Perhaps providing students with opportunities to meet with counselors may also help them manage the feeling of stress that confrontations bring. Also, promoting multicultural understanding within learning environments can reduce conflicts that arise from differential backgrounds or perspectives. The following are ways that universities can support students to overcome interpersonal problems in the course of group projects: This includes respect for diversity. The university can play a major role in advocating for diversity and sectional training (Mukherji & Jakhar 2024).

Secondly, intervention by educators should be frequent and active in order to solve emerging conflicts or manage group processes. As viewed earlier, group work provides the peers with the opportunities to engage in activities where others are involved. Students need to be supervised during their cooperation in groups, particularly during the intensive or prolonged tasks, so that the teacher can intervene and stop the conflicts. Reporting to work in mediation sessions or allowing changes in the group formation can try to save a productive workplace when conflicts escalate.

Finally, colleges should consider the establishment of Peer mediation where students with appropriate personalities act as third parties to help in solving disputes among youthful fellow students. Peer mediation can enable students to resolve conflicts before they affect the group performance in one way or the other. It may also present a less professional and therefore more accessible way of resolving conflict.

In addition, although personal conflicts are not something all students face on a day to day basis they are a threat to academic success especially in group projects. These conflicts not only interfere with cooperation but also trigger aggravating emotions, which worsens communication and academic performances. Because conflicts are a fundamental part of human nature and the growth of moral and emotional intelligence, they will always arise (Valente et al., 2020). Every school has these as well (Valente et al., 2020). Conflict arises frequently and takes on more relevance in the school context because of the multitude of interpersonal relationships that occur there (Valente et al., 2020). Since conflict arises frequently in schools, educators need to be equipped with constructive conflict resolution techniques (Valente et al., 2020). This chapter sought to address the variety of reasons for school conflicts by emphasising the ones that mostly stem from the teacher-student dynamic in the classroom (Valente et al., 2020). It is necessary to confront and resolve it with skills to manage it appropriately and constructively, developing cooperative connections, and producing integrative solutions (Valente et al., 2020). In a classroom setting, harmony and appreciation should coexist, and conflict shouldn't adversely affect the process of teaching and learning (Valente et al., 2020). The need of developing conflict management skills during teachers' initial training is highlighted in this review of the literature (Valente et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

The research question of this study was to determine how interpersonal conflicts impede the academic accomplishments and groups of the university students. A number of important findings were arrived at through data collected from 101 pupils. While 50.5% percent of the respondents indicated they seldom engaged in interpersonal conflict, 24.8 percent indicated that they occasionally did so. This means that

controversy is still quite rife in academic arenas, irrespective of the fact that it does not occur on a daily basis, particularly when work in groups and other assignments are assigned.

The work also highlighted the unproductive effect these conflicts had on group dynamics. One of the impediments to group work that a considerable 45.6% of the respondent students mentioned was a conflict with other students. Interference by fellow group members was another thing that complained of this was due to distraction during group work as noted by 41.6% of the respondents. These findings underscore how conflicts degrade a student's quality of work in groups, which consequently affects his/ her performance. The increased intensity of conflicts was accompanied by clearly elicited emotional responses. Some of the works of pawar and bhatia are as follows: Many students claimed that they had fared, stressed and even had other negative attitudes when they were in group works and all these had a negative impact on communication. In particular, 40.6% showed that such feelings hindered interaction with peers, while 34.6% pointed out that they felt negative emotions when peers questioned their input. It turns out that the existence of certain negative emotions is at the root of the relationship between conflicts and group dynamics.

Furthermore, it was established that many of the students support the idea that conflicts are an inseparable part of the learning environment. Disputes though not pervasive for all students are identified and are a perennial feature as 40.6% of the participants observed that conflicts among students are frequent. It is important to recognize that these areas of disagreement are often toxic for group dynamics, halting the progress of scholarly achievements, causing stress and developing new notions about ways to solve such problems.

By thus introducing intervention techniques such as conflict resolution, emotional recognition sessions and improved methods of grouping of students, interpersonal problems can be addressed efficiently thus improving the collaboration experiences within universities (Ronquillo et al., 2023). Disagreements or differences of opinion between or among individuals give birth to conflict, which may be detrimental to any organisation (Ronquillo et al., 2023). It typically involves having personal goals, ambitions, or convictions that conflict with those of the group or team at work (Ronquillo et al., 2023). Resolving disagreements

or conflicts by coming up with a solution that will satisfy everyone or benefit the group as a whole is the goal of conflict management. Conflict is, nonetheless, typically seen negatively (Ronquillo et al., 2023). When disagreements are handled correctly, positive things can happen (Ronquillo et al., 2023). Conflict may foster critical analysis, original thought, problem-solving techniques, and the development of cohesive teams (Ronquillo et al., 2023). For a group, business, department, or workforce they oversee to succeed, leaders need to be adept at managing conflict (Ronquillo et al., 2023).

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Framing China's Image: Belt and Road Initiative in Malaysian Newspapers Across Languages

Lim Shiang Shiang* & Jayslyn Saw Song Lin**

Abstract: Malaysia recently marked 50 years of diplomatic relations with China, yet Malaysian leaders have adopted varying approaches towards supporting China, particularly in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim currently maintains a positive stance on the BRI, long-term outcomes remain uncertain due to ongoing challenges. This study examines how mainstream Malaysian newspapers in different languages portray the BRI by analysing the types of news coverage across the three highest-circulation outlets. Chi-square results indicate that English, Malay, and Chinese language newspapers employ distinct reporting styles. *The Star* emphasises international collaboration and ASEAN-related topics, whereas *Harian Metro* and *Sin Chew Daily* focus primarily on economic issues, with coverage largely oriented towards local contexts and needs. Notably, *Sin Chew Daily* highlights cultural aspects due to ancestral ties, a feature less emphasised in Malay or English newspapers. These findings are significant in a multiethnic country such as Malaysia, where newspapers in different languages represent the voices of various ethnic groups. Such variations in reporting may shape how different groups perceive Malaysia's collaboration with China, underscoring the critical role of language and media in framing public understanding of international relations.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Ethnic, Malaysia, Media Framing, Newspapers

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia and China are celebrating 50 years of diplomatic relations, a partnership that has strengthened significantly over the years, particularly in economic cooperation. According to Voon (2024), trade between the two nations reached RM450.84 billion in 2023, solidifying China's position as Malaysia's largest trading partner for 15 consecutive years. This economic collaboration has been supported by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who has emphasised the importance of maintaining China as Malaysia's main export destination. By 2024, trade volume between the two countries had reached US\$15.52 billion, reflecting deepening ties through mutual investments.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's global infrastructure project, plays a central role in enhancing economic, infrastructural, and cultural connections across Asia, Africa, and Europe (Weng et al., 2021; Ni, 2024). Malaysia, as the first Southeast Asian country to establish diplomatic relations with China, has embraced the BRI, evident in the substantial inflow of BRI-related funds and infrastructure projects (Elina Noor & Qistina, 2017). However, the country's stance on the BRI has shifted under different Malaysian governments, as seen in Mahathir Mohamad's renegotiation of key projects, and the current administration under Anwar Ibrahim may further alter the approach (Jamil, 2023; Voon, 2024).

Various past and ongoing studies have sought to understand how the media shapes China's image and the portrayal of the BRI. Some research examines how Malaysian Malay newspapers depict China (Nor Azlili, 2020), while others focus on television news coverage of significant events, such as Najib's visit to China (Ng, 2022), or the portrayal of Chinese investments in projects like the Forest City Project (Wang & Reagan, 2020). Additional studies explore how Western newspapers represent the BRI (Bahoo & Alon, 2020) and conduct framing analysis across different countries (Anunne, 2019). Research has also examined the perspectives of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) regarding China's global influence on technology and development (Chin et al., 2020). Despite these efforts, there is limited investigation into how Malaysia's mainstream newspapers in different languages represent China and the BRI. While some studies exist, the portrayal of China's

image across Malay, English, and Chinese newspapers remains underexplored. English newspapers primarily target urban, educated Malaysians, Malay newspapers cater to the Malay-speaking population, and Chinese newspapers serve the Chinese demographic.

It is therefore essential to examine how these newspapers, with their distinct audiences, present China's image and the BRI. Understanding these differences in media portrayals can provide valuable insights into how various communities in Malaysia perceive China and its global initiatives.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Research Objective 1: To examine the types of news emphasised by each newspaper in reporting the BRI.

Research Objective 2: To investigate the themes each newspaper employs in framing the BRI and to assess how these frames influence public understanding of the initiative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MALAYSIA-CHINA RELATIONS

China is gaining increasing favour in Southeast Asia. Findings from the State of Southeast Asia 2024 survey conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute illustrate a notable shift in regional preferences, with 50.5% of respondents leaning towards China and 49.5% towards the U.S. in the hypothetical scenario of ASEAN "picking sides." This marks a significant departure from previous years, when 61.1% of respondents preferred the U.S. compared to 38.9% for China (Suruga, 2024). Consequently, there is a growing inclination towards China, reflecting the tangible benefits Southeast Asian countries have derived from their involvement in China's Belt and Road infrastructure initiative and from robust trade relations with China.

From a geopolitical perspective, Malaysia and China have played crucial roles in strengthening China-ASEAN relations since establishing

diplomatic ties in 1974 (Khoong, 2023). Their partnership is characterised by mutual respect and cooperation, extending beyond economic and technological spheres to include cultural and social exchange (Chai, 2023). This relationship was reinforced by former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who highlighted that Malaysia was the first ASEAN country to establish diplomatic relations with China. Additionally, Mahathir's proposal of dialogues between China and ASEAN has facilitated bilateral cooperation. Given these close ties, China is likely to support Malaysia if the country requires assistance (Soon, 2023).

Economically, Malaysia has consistently emerged as a strategic trading partner for China. Media reports often highlight potential benefits such as job creation, improved land and sea connectivity, and increased foreign direct investment. For instance, bilateral trade between Malaysia and China reached RM488 billion in 2022, with RM210.6 billion in exports to China alone. In 2023, the two nations strengthened cooperation through nineteen memorandums of understanding, valued at a combined RM170 billion, dedicated to entrepreneurial endeavours. A notable BRI-linked project in Malaysia is the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), managed by the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), which aims to bridge the railway gap between the East and West Coasts of the Malay Peninsula, thereby improving regional connectivity with operational costs running into billions (Liu & Lim, 2019). Furthermore, progress has been made in advancing green hydrogen technology, strengthening food security measures, and fostering connections across sectors including culture, tourism, education, and science and technology (Khoong, 2023). Malaysia's participation in the BRI thus elevates its status as a significant player in the global economy while fostering national pride and a sense of progress.

The BRI also exerts profound impacts on Malaysia's development across sectors such as tourism and education. The infusion of diverse cultural elements through the BRI enhances the appeal of destinations, attracting tourists interested in rich cultural experiences along BRI routes. Educational programmes integrating BRI themes offer unique learning opportunities, promoting cross-cultural understanding and global awareness among students. While cultural diversity can occasionally lead to misunderstandings and conflict, shared cultural values have the

potential to foster cooperation and intercultural understanding, contributing indirectly to a harmonious and politically stable global landscape (Saaida, 2023). Over the years, the contribution of cultural industries to China's gross domestic product has steadily increased, reaching 4.43% in 2020 and rising to 4.56% in 2021. For instance, Chengdu has promoted awareness of China's civilisation both locally and internationally through its Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li creative hub, which involves] artists, musicians, writers, and other cultural practitioners in planning and organising activities (Chai, 2023). This successful initiative offers a valuable blueprint for Malaysia to enrich its own cultural scene and drive economic growth, particularly in tourism, aligning with Malaysia's National Creative Industry Policy (DIKN), which is geared towards safeguarding, conserving, and sustainably utilising heritage resources through the development of the creative industry.

Hence, Malaysia's deepening involvement in the BRI is not only bolstering economic ties and infrastructure development but also fostering cultural exchange, educational opportunities, and broader development opportunities. This multifaceted engagement underscores Malaysia's pivotal role in regional cooperation and global connectivity. Understanding how Malaysian newspapers across different languages portray the BRI is therefore crucial for comprehending its influence i on public discourse, which in turn significantly shapes future bilateral relations and cooperation.

FRAMING ANALYSIS ACROSS LANGUAGES

Framing has been extensively discussed by past scholars. Generally, framing involves selecting certain elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a specific interpretation (Entman, 2007). Entman (1993) also identified four main functions of framing: defining problems, specifying causes, making moral evaluations, and recommending remedies. These functions can influence how people think about issues through priming (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). In other words, the way Malaysian media frames the BRI affects how Malaysians perceive it, either by introducing or emphasising certain aspects of its importance.

When discussing news reporting, critics often suggest that biased content relates to the angle or perspective from which an article is written. While agenda-setting determines what topics are discussed (Cohen, 1963), framing goes a step further by focusing on how news is presented, the perspective adopted, and the choice of keywords used in reporting. This affects not only “what to think about”, but more importantly “how to think about it,” particularly in terms of positive or negative slant.

According to Entman (2010), bias occurs when a news report emphasises one side’s preferred frame while ignoring another side. This one-sided framing highlights some elements and suppresses others, encouraging the audience to focus on evaluative attributes that support the favoured interpretation. Entman (2007) also noted that content bias refers to *consistently slanted framing of mediated communication that promotes the success of a specific interest, party, or ideology in competitions to control government power*. Slant often relates to one-sided reporting, including the use of specific keywords; for instance, highlighting certain news actors might shift the focus to particular perspectives or angles.

Although journalists influence how news is written, their emphasis can impact the framing of the BRI. Critics argue that reporters and editors may allow their personal ideologies to guide news decisions. Graber (2001) elaborated that journalists help to “tame the information tide,” with news organisations manifesting this through tacit norms and routines. In reporting the BRI, newspapers representing different ethnic communities may convey messages that reflect their journalistic perspectives, potentially affecting the perceived importance of the project and the future of Malaysia-China relations. However, this does not mean that actors who dominate media framing are guaranteed success in controlling public opinion. Multiple factors, such as individuals’ resistance to information that contradicts existing beliefs (Entman et al., 2009), play a role. Nonetheless, media framing can significantly impact those who are less ideologically committed or more neutral in their views.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research utilises a content analysis approach to examine how Malaysian mainstream newspapers in different languages portray the BRI. The selection of English, Malay, and Chinese newspapers is based on their high circulation figures. According to Adqrate's official website, one of the world's first programmatic advertising platforms founded by a team of media and marketing professionals, the top-circulating newspapers in each language are: *The Star* (English), with a circulation of 248,559; *Sin Chew Daily* (Chinese), with a circulation of 251,000; and *Harian Metro* (Malay), the most visited Malay newspaper site with a circulation of 100,000. This justifies the selection of these three newspapers for the study.

The analysis covers the period from October 2023 to December 2023, as Malaysia marked the 10th anniversary of its partnership with China in 2023, and the end of the year typically brings comprehensive reflections on key political, economic, and social events. Newspapers often publish more in-depth articles, analyses, and reports evaluating the year's developments, including the BRI. For instance, the final months may see an increase in bilateral meetings, trade agreements, and events related to Malaysia-China relations, which could heighten media coverage and provide insight into evolving narratives. Therefore, this period likely offers a higher volume and diversity of articles for analysis.

In total, 572 news articles were analysed over the three-month period (*The Star*: 169 articles, *Harian Metro*: 65 articles, and *Sin Chew Daily*: 338 articles). The breakdown by month is shown below:

| Date | Number of News Articles | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| | The Star | Harian Metro | Sin Chew Daily |
| 1 October 2023 - 31 October 2023 | 49 | 21 | 126 |
| 1 November 2023 - 30 November 2023 | 35 | 25 | 133 |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| 1 December 2023 - 31 December 2023 | 85 | 19 | 79 |
| Total | 169 | 65 | 338 |

The news articles were further categorised by segment. *Sin Chew Daily* and *Harian Metro* featured more national news compared to *The Star*, which focus more on international news (see table below):

| News Segment | The Star | Harian Metro | Sin Chew Daily |
|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| National | 26 (15.38%) | 61 (93.85%) | 234 (69.23%) |
| International | 115 (68.05%) | 4 (6.15%) | 78 (23.08%) |
| Opinion Piece | 28 (16.57%) | 0 (0%) | 26 (7.69%) |
| Total | 169 (100%) | 65 (100%) | 338 (100%) |

The search process began by entering key terms such as “Belt and Road,” “China-Malaysia Relations,” “ECRL,” “One-China Policy,” and “Silk Road Economic Belt” into the official websites of each newspaper. The articles were then downloaded and analysed using a coding sheet in Excel, which included columns for segments, dates, headlines, and types of issues.

The main aim of the study is to examine the emphasis and focus each newspaper placed on reporting the BRI, such as whether coverage relied more on ASEAN topics or local-interest topics. These different angles may influence how the BRI is framed and understood, thereby shaping perceptions of China. Each article was carefully read and analysed. A chi-square test was conducted using IBM SPSS 29 to examine differences in the types of news across newspapers in different languages.

CONCEPTUAL OPERATIONALISATION

| Theme | Explanation |
|---|---|
| ASEAN | Issues related to ASEAN countries. (e.g., Thailand-China partnership). |
| Economy | Issues related to economy, business, and investment (e.g., BRI boosts FDI in Malaysia). |
| Politics | Issues related to political matters (e.g., China supporting Palestine during the war with Israel, aligning with Malaysia's stance). |
| Culture | Issues related to Chinese culture (e.g., Chinese temple inheritance linked to Chinese ancestors). |
| Education | Issues related to education (e.g., exchange of knowledge between Chinese and Malaysian scholars). |
| Technology | Issues highlighting China as a high-technology country (e.g., AI and automobile collaborations). |
| Partnership | Issues related to collaboration (e.g., signing MOUs with Chinese industries and government). |
| International Collaboration/ Superpower | Issues regarding collaborations between countries outside ASEAN, highlighting the BRI's intention and China's global influence (e.g., Russia-China cooperation affecting the US). |
| International Criticism | Issues addressing challenges or criticisms of the BRI (e.g., debt traps due to high project costs). |
| Mixed Topics | Articles covering a mixture of topics rather than focusing on one (e.g., columnists' analyses of BRI advantages and drawbacks). |
| ECRL Discussion | Updates on Malaysia's ECRL progress (e.g., cancellations or developments in railway construction). |
| Others | Any other topics not covered by the above themes (e.g., BRI and environmental issues). |

DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1.0: Types of News

| Types of News | The Star | Harian Metro | Sin Chew Daily |
|--|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| ASEAN | 36 (21.30%) | 2 (3.08%) | 11 (3.25%) |
| Economy | 16 (9.47%) | 24 (36.92%) | 106 (31.36%) |
| Politics | 7 (4.14%) | 11 (16.92%) | 10 (2.96%) |
| Culture | 8 (4.73%) | 6 (9.23%) | 92 (27.22%) |
| Education | 1 (0.59%) | 3 (4.62%) | 31 (9.17%) |
| Technology | 15 (8.88%) | 9 (13.85%) | 12 (3.55%) |
| Partnership | 5 (2.96%) | 3 (4.62%) | 47 (13.91%) |
| International Collaboration/ Superpower | 61 (36.09%) | 2 (3.08%) | 25 (7.40%) |
| International Criticism | 3 (1.78%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| Mixed Topics | 5 (2.96%) | 0 (0%) | 3 (0.89%) |
| ECRL's Discussion | 11 (6.51%) | 5 (7.69%) | 1 (0.30%) |
| Others | 1 (0.59%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| Total | 169 (100%) | 65 (100%) | 338 (100%) |

Table 1.0 illustrates that the three newspapers employ different frames in their coverage of the BRI. *The Star* prioritised international news, focusing on international cooperation that could benefit from the initiative. In contrast, *Harian Metro* presented markedly different

coverage, emphasising economic issues and collaboration. Meanwhile, *Sin Chew Daily*, whose target audience is predominantly Chinese and whose reporting reflects cultural ties rooted in y ancestral heritage, explored cultural and social issues extensively, alongside economic themes.

Table 2.0: Chi-Square Tests of Types of News

| | Value | df | Asymptotic Significance (2-sided) |
|---|----------------------|----|-----------------------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 269.646 ^a | 22 | .000 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 270.883 | 22 | .000 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 28.602 | 1 | .000 |
| N of Valid Cases | 572 | | |
| a. 13 cells (36.1%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .11. | | | |

Table 2.0 presents the results of a chi-square test conducted to examine the relationship between 12 different types of news (ASEAN, Economy, Politics, Culture, Education, Technology, Partnership, International Collaboration/Superpower, International Criticism, Mixed Topics, ECRL Discussion, and Others). The p-value of 0.000 indicates a significant difference in the types of news covered by *The Star*, *Harian Metro*, and *Sin Chew Daily*. Specifically, *The Star* emphasised international collaboration, *Harian Metro* focused on economy-related issues, while *Sin Chew Daily* concentrated on both economy- and culture-related news.

DISCUSSION

CHINESE CULTURE INHERITANCE AND ROOTS OF OVERSEA CHINESE

In its coverage of the BRI, *Sin Chew Daily* frequently associates the initiative with the preservation and promotion of Chinese cultural heritage, a link rarely observed in Malay and English newspapers. This connection extends beyond mere references to the Chinese language, ritual practices, and traditional ceremonies; it reflects cultural elements deeply rooted in Chinese identity and upheld by Chinese communities worldwide.

华文教育本身就是传承中华文化的精髓，将优良的价值观念一代一代传承下去。

Translation: Chinese education itself embodies the essence of passing down Chinese culture, transmitting its valuable traditions and values from generation to generation.

(方天兴吁政府..., 30 November 2023)

Sin Chew Daily not only emphasises the crucial role of Chinese education in preserving cultural identity but also highlights its significance within the context of China's emergence as a global power. The BRI's concept of "shared prosperity" is portrayed as an extension of Chinese cultural values, underscoring the importance of culture in China's international engagement.

中国政府通过以中华文化为基础，将“一带一路”和“共存共荣”理念分享到世界各地，彰显了文化的重要性。

Translation: The Chinese government, by grounding the BRI and the idea of "shared prosperity" in Chinese cultural principles, demonstrates the global significance of culture in its outreach efforts.

(方天兴：推动更多元教育..., 30 November 2023)

The terms “Chinese language” and “Chinese Culture” (中华文化) are often highlighted in *Sin Chew Daily*, emphasising the importance of culture, particularly when compared with *The Star* and *Harian Metro*. A One report even noted that Malaysia is the place outside Greater China where Chinese culture is most fully preserved, as people can easily communicate in Chinese and various southern Chinese dialects.

国内随处可看到中文，人们方便用中文、甚至是中国南部的多种方言沟通，马来西亚是除大中华地区以外，保留中华文化最完整的地方，包括国内华小有 30% 的友族就读，可轻易和大中华地区进行接轨。

Translation: Chinese is widely visible throughout the country, and people can comfortably communicate in Chinese, including many dialects from southern China. Malaysia is noted for preserving Chinese culture more completely than anywhere outside Greater China. This preservation is reflected in the fact that 30% of students in Chinese primary schools are from non-Chinese ethnic groups, facilitating strong connections with the Greater China region.

(世林恳亲会千人宴..., 12 November 2023)

In addition to covering Chinese cultural events such as the Chinese Language Recitation Contest organised by the China Overseas Chinese Language and Culture Education Foundation, *Sin Chew Daily* also reports on traditional practices like the 2023 Guan Gong Cultural Festival and other Chinese cultural activities.

2023 年第九届马来西亚国际关公文化节一带一路“威震华夏”柔佛州新山站，昨晚风雨不改举行关公巡城活动。

Translation: The 9th Malaysia International Guan Gong Cultural Festival 2023, under the Belt and Road initiative, held its “Mighty China” event in Johor Bahru, Johor.

(关公巡城风雨不改..., 19 October 2023)

The organisation of various Chinese cultural events, such as the Mid-Autumn Festival and Chinese New Year celebrations, is also highlighted in *Sin Chew Daily*. In addition, Chinese associations in

Malaysia emphasise the community's role in promoting traditional activities and education, keeping Chinese culture on par with that of Greater China. These efforts are a source of pride and underscore the significance of cultural exchanges in strengthening bilateral relations.

泷江会馆的规模在时代的长河里不断地发展壮大，逐步成长为地方上规模甚大的华人华侨团体，此外，泷江会馆也积极参加马来西亚当地的各项经贸活动，配合地方社团主办过多届的中国传统文化活动，如中秋联欢宴会，新春联欢会等。

华团会馆的存在历史证明了华人在大马扮演积极的角色，在马来西亚积极推动传统活动外，华文教育方面也不落后于中港台，中华传统方面也在最前线传扬，一直所付出的努力所创出的成绩，也成为了华社的骄傲。

Translation: The presence of Chinese associations in Malaysia demonstrates their active role in cultural promotion and education, keeping Chinese traditions and education aligned with Greater China, and serving as a source of community pride.

The Long Jiang Association has expanded to become one of the largest Chinese community organizations in the region, actively participating in local economic activities and organizing Chinese cultural events.

(周世扬，走过百年历史..., 29 October 2023)

Cultural exchanges are crucial for deepening national relationships and enhancing people-to-people connections. They are often considered more enduring and impactful than political or economic interactions. Malaysia's substantial Chinese community is expected to continue fostering cooperation with China, reinforcing the foundation for bilateral connectivity.

人文交流可谓深化国家关系的“基础设施”，也是推进民间友好的“民心工程”，而情感和文化更是共建“一带一路”倡议中最有生命力和凝聚力的能量源泉，因此大马凭着广大对乡土挚爱的华裔社群，有望持续推进同中国开展各种内容和形式的合作交流，为双边互联互通夯实社会根基。

因此，乡亲社群无论是以社团、媒体、学校、庙宇甚至企业等平台渠道，都应良好传递中华文化气息，继而作好促进马中关系的重要杠杆。

Translation: Translation: Cultural exchanges are essential infrastructure for deepening national relationships and advancing people-to-people goodwill, playing a vital role in the Belt and Road Initiative. Malaysia's dedicated Chinese community is expected to continue enhancing cooperation with China, strengthening bilateral ties through various platforms

(颜天禄：人文交流... 4 October 2023)

MUTUAL COLLABORATION AND ECONOMIC BOOST

In reporting the BRI, *Harian Metro* and *Sin Chew Daily* emphasise China's rise as a powerful country. However, there are subtle differences in their approaches. While *Harian Metro* focuses primarily on the economic benefits of participating in the BRI, some reporting in *Sin Chew Daily* links the initiative to shared cultural ties between overseas Chinese and China. For example, *Sin Chew Daily* highlights various Chinese non-profit associations and community organisations, such as the China Overseas Chinese Language and Culture Education Foundation, Dong Zong (United Chinese School Committees Associations of Malaysia), Jiao Zong (United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia), the Malaysia Alumni Association of China, the Malaysia Belt and Road Committee, and the Malaysia-China Cultural and Arts Association. This connection underscores a deeper cultural familiarity that extends beyond trade collaborations.

For instance, the term “Fate” (缘分) is used to illustrate the historical and cultural bonds between Malaysia and China. An example from *Sin Chew Daily*:

大马半岛与中国茶的缘分远远比这来得更早，我国与中国茶在近 200 年的发展中都非常密切且连动

(Translation: The connection between the Malay Peninsula and Chinese tea dates back much earlier, with both Malaysia and China

having a close and intertwined relationship over nearly 200 years of development).

(大马茶叶商会... 22 October 2023)

马来西亚和中国都有着丰富的历史和多元的文化，是两个拥有共同价值观的国家。

Translation: Malaysia and China both have rich histories and diverse cultures, and are two countries with shared values.

(法迪拉：了不起成就... 25 October 2023)

这项由中国国务院侨务办公室、中华全国归国华侨联合会以及中华全国工商业联合会联合主办的全球盛会，获得来自全球百余个国家和地区的 400 余名华人华侨领袖参与，本届大会主题为“应对新挑战、把握新机遇、实现新发展”。

Translation: This global event, co-hosted by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, and the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, gathered over 400 leaders from the Chinese diaspora across more than 100 countries and regions. The theme of the conference was "Facing New Challenges, Seizing New Opportunities, and Achieving New Development.

(吴添泉：国力强盛..., 31 October 2023)

In comparison, *Harian Metro* focuses primarily on investments, with China as Malaysia's largest trading partner. Its reporting frequently emphasises investment and business activities in a global context, such as the export of palm oil to China.

Lawatan rasmi Timbalan Perdana Menteri, Datuk Seri Fadillah Yusof ke China mulai Ahad ini akan meningkatkan lagi perdagangan produk komoditi dengan negara tembok besar itu, khususnya pengeksportan minyak sawit. Fadillah berkata, China antara pengimport terbesar produk minyak sawit negara dan lawatannya itu diharapkan akan meningkatkan lagi nilai eksport komoditi berkenaan ke negara itu.....Disamping misi perdagangan,

kita juga membawa misi mengeratkan lagi hubungan Malaysia dan China kerana kita akan meraikan meraikan ulang tahun ke-50 hubungan dua hala, tahun depan....

Translation: The official visit of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Fadillah Yusof to China, starting this Sunday, is expected to further boost the trade of commodity products with the Great Wall country, particularly the export of palm oil. Fadillah said that China is one of the largest importers of the country's palm oil products, and his visit is hoped to increase the export value of the commodity to the country... Besides the trade mission, we are also carrying a mission to strengthen Malaysia-China relations as we will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of bilateral relations next year...

(Fadillah ketua misi..., 7 November 2023)

In addition, the distinctive feature of coverage in the Malay newspaper, setting it apart from the Chinese and English newspapers, is its focus on the expansion of the halal market.

Kami bersetuju mengenai program membabitkan pembangunan industri halal kerana terdapat 14 industri zon halal di Malaysia dan kami menawarkan pelabur dari China untuk membuka kilang mereka di sini.

Translation: We agree with the program involving the development of the halal industry because Malaysia has 14 halal zones, and we offer Chinese investors the opportunity to establish factories here.

(Malaysia, China pakat..., 9 November 2023)

Moreover, both *Harian Metro* and *Sin Chew Daily* emphasise government agendas, particularly in attracting both domestic and international investments. *Harian Metro* highlights China's role as a key trading partner, while *Sin Chew Daily* reports on the mutual benefits of the relationship.

Sejak lebih sedekad lalu, China adalah rakan dagang terbesar Malaysia dengan jumlah dagangan antara Malaysia dan China

mencecah nilai RM487.13 bilion (US\$110.62 bilion) tahun lalu iaitu peningkatan sebanyak 15.6 peratus berbanding 2021.

Selain itu, China juga pelabur langsung asing terbesar di Malaysia untuk 2022, dengan pelaburan berjumlah RM55.4 bilion (US\$12.5 bilion)

Translation: For more than a decade, China has been Malaysia's largest trading partner, with trade between the two nations reaching RM487.13 billion (US\$110.62 billion) last year, a 15.6% increase from 2021. Additionally, China was the largest foreign direct investor in Malaysia in 2022, with investments totaling RM55.4 billion (US\$12.5 billion).

(Agong berkenan terima menghadap...., 9 November, 2023)

Sin Chew Daily also covers initiatives to strengthen bilateral relations and foster economic cooperation.

马来西亚-中国总商会（简称：马中总商会）将带领 100 名官方与企业代表到海南参会，与中国及 RCEP 成员国代表进行交流，致力于推动马中的经贸投资合作……他（中国驻马来西亚大使馆孙淑强）期待马中总商会此行能够把海南自由贸易港的优惠政策带回马来西亚，并与本地企业分享，为两国经济合作和投资搭建更多桥梁。

Translation: The Malaysia-China Chamber of Commerce will lead 100 official and business representatives to Hainan for a conference, engaging with representatives from China and RCEP member countries to promote Malaysia-China economic and trade investment cooperation. One of the Chinese Ambassadors to Malaysia hopes that the MCC's visit will bring back the favourable policies of the Hainan Free Trade Port to Malaysia and share them with local businesses, creating more bridges for economic cooperation and investment between the two countries.

(马中企业家..., 12 October 2023)

The signing of memoranda of understanding (MoUs) also aims to strengthen relations between the two countries, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship.

MoU ini juga dapat memperkuat persahabatan dan menyuburkan hubungan perdagangan antara Malaysia dan China, mencipta peluang perniagaan dan mencapai manfaat bersama.

Translation: This MoU will also strengthen friendship and promote trade relations between Malaysia and China, creating business opportunities and achieving mutual benefits.

Ranhill Utilities Bhd has signed a memorandum of understanding with China Energy International Group Co Ltd to collaborate and jointly pursue public-private partnership projects in the region.

(Ranhill signs MoU..., 31 October 2023)

The collaboration further encompasses artificial intelligence, with China recognised for its advanced capabilities and achievements.

10 年前中国提出“一带一路”倡议，通过“五通”联接世界，构建“人类命运共同体”；如今华为提出“全面智能化”战略，通过人工智能联接万物，构建万物互联的智能世界。他（东盟中国投资促进会会长拿督斯里陈荣立）认为，华为每十年磨一剑，从全面通信协议化、全面云化到全面智能化；从万物互联、万物智联到万智互联，每一剑都开辟科技新纪元。如今随着华为最新宣称的智能化战略，正式开启第四次工业革命，人类社会即将迈向高度智能化时代。

Translation: Ten years ago, China proposed the "Belt and Road" initiative, connecting the world through "five connectivities" and building a "community with a shared future for mankind." Today, Huawei has proposed a "comprehensive intelligentization" strategy, connecting everything through artificial intelligence to build an intelligent world where everything is interconnected. The president of the ASEAN-China Investment Promotion Association believes that Huawei sharpens its sword every ten years, progressing from comprehensive communication protocolization, comprehensive cloudification, to comprehensive intelligentization; from connecting everything, to intelligent interconnection, to all-smart interconnection, each phase opens a new era of technology. Now, with Huawei's latest announcement of its intelligentization strategy,

the fourth industrial revolution is officially underway, and human society is about to enter a highly intelligent era.

(陈荣立: 搭..., 2 October 2023)

INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUES & CONFLICT

The Star prominently features international news compared to *Harian Metro* and *Sin Chew Daily*, with a strong focus on international collaboration, ASEAN relations, and issues arising from the BRI projects. In contrast, *Sin Chew Daily* provides limited coverage of international news, though some reports address international power dynamics and China's expanding influence through the BRI. *Harian Metro*, meanwhile, places less emphasis on these issues; a distinctive feature of its coverage is the focus on the Palestine-Israel conflict within the context of international collaboration, reflecting Malaysia's Islamic perspective and highlighting China's support for Palestine.

China is willing to strengthen development strategies alignment with Mongolia so that mutually beneficial cooperation can benefit the two peoples more.

((BRF 2023) Chinese, Mongolian foreign..., 17 October 2023)

The East African country has witnessed the positive changes brought by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which marks the 10th anniversary this year since its inception.

(Feature: 10 years on..., 18 October 2023)

Additionally, *The Star* emphasises ASEAN collaboration, particularly the bilateral relations among the ten ASEAN member countries. Reporting often includes keywords such as "China-ASEAN". This focus is less common in *Harian Metro* and *Sin Chew Daily*, which concentrate more on domestic news in Malaysia.

Indonesia's first HSR, and the first in Asean, is an Indonesian-Chinese joint venture.

(Indonesian Industry..., 18 October 2023)

The 10th anniversary of the BRI is an appropriate opportunity to align the BRI with Thailand's new development strategies and to implement the Cooperation Plan between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand on Jointly Promoting the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, in order to achieve high-quality and sustainable common development. Both sides agreed to make solid efforts to advance the China-Laos-Thailand Connectivity Development Corridor Outlook, accelerate the construction of the China-Thailand high-speed railway and connect the China-Laos railway with Thailand's railway system at an early date, so as to optimize the logistics chains, industrial chains and supply chains, and create conditions for integrated development of the sub-region.

(Full text: Joint..., 20 October 2023)

Similarly, *Sin Chew Daily* focuses on the mutually beneficial relationships between countries through their participation in the BRI.

俄罗斯总统普汀访华并参加“一带一路”论坛在即，他接受中国官媒采访时说，一带一路倡议与俄罗斯关于发展欧亚经济联盟的设想完全契合，参与国将实现互惠互利，没有强加任何东西给他人。

Translation: With Russian President Putin's upcoming visit to China to attend the “Belt and Road” forum, he stated in an interview with Chinese state media that the Belt and Road initiative completely aligns with Russia's vision for developing the Eurasian Economic Union. Participating countries will achieve mutual benefit without imposing anything on others.

(普汀：提供..., 15 October 2023)

On the other hand, *Harian Metro* provides unique coverage not highlighted by *The Star* or *Sin Chew Daily*, focusing on the Palestine-Israel conflict. The newspaper aligns with China's stance on supporting Palestine, reflecting Malaysia's position:

Perdana Menteri (Anwar) berharap agar China memainkan peranan aktif yang telah disuarakan kepada Han dalam perbincangan tadi. Respons baik dari China agar masalah konflik Palestin-Israel segera diselesaikan.....Zambry berkata China juga menyatakan kekal dengan komitmen yang selama ini mengiktiraf Palestin dari segi kedudukannya.

Translation: Prime Minister Anwar hopes China will play an active role in resolving the conflict, with China reaffirming its commitment to recognizing Palestine.

(PM nyatakan hasrat Bersama..., 9 November 2023)

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that *Sin Chew Daily*, *Harian Metro*, and *The Star* offer distinct perspectives on China's image as a superpower, particularly concerning the BRI connecting Asia and China.

Chinese newspapers primarily focus on economic themes, portraying China as a powerful and influential country. They highlight trade and business collaborations between China and Malaysia, noting that China has been Malaysia's largest trading partner for over ten years. This aligns with Ch'ng (2016), who found that *Sin Chew Daily* presented a positive view of China's rise as a political and economic superpower. Furthermore, these newspapers emphasise Chinese culture, including language, practices, and beliefs, resonating with past studies. For instance, Soon (2023) and Baginda (2016) highlighted the importance of understanding China-Malaysia relations as a political campaign strategy. They noted that former Prime Minister Najib Razak and Barisan Nasional elites perceived a preference among the Chinese community for China, despite many Chinese being born in Malaysia or having Malaysian citizenship. They emphasised that understanding China and Chinese culture was crucial in shaping diplomatic relations as a political campaign strategy. This focus on representation in Chinese newspapers differs from that in Malay and English newspapers. Hall (2005) supports this argument, stating that meaning-giving is a practice rooted in the cultural and political context of society. In this context, Chinese newspapers target an audience with a Chinese background, who, influenced by their

ancestors, inherently maintain a strong connection with China. In contrast, *The Star* and *Harian Metro* offer minimal coverage related to cultural themes.

Regarding the approach adopted by *Harian Metro*, it is evident that it predominantly emphasises economic perspectives, particularly business opportunities and local exports. It employs terms such as “strengthening local currencies” and underscores ASEAN's dependence on China as a primary driver in the global energy sector. This focus is evident in its reporting on the China-Malaysia relationship, such as President Xi Jinping's visit to Malaysia and Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's visit to China, both aimed at strengthening bilateral relations. This resonates with Ng (2022), who found that Malaysian television programmes provided positive coverage of former Prime Minister Najib Razak's visit to China in 2016, indicating concerns about the implications of China's rise. Similarly, David Han (2024) points out that relations with China remain strong and are likely to gain momentum in 2024, given Anwar's two visits to China in 2023 and the upcoming celebration of the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the 50th anniversary of the normalisation of ties.

In contrast, *The Star* offers a distinctly different perspective compared to Chinese and Malay newspapers, focusing more on international news related to the BRI. As an English-language newspaper catering to educated Malaysians, it emphasises ASEAN's role in reducing trade costs and integrating underdeveloped countries into global markets. The newspaper highlights support for the BRI from ASEAN countries, with examples like Vietnam and Brunei, and includes quotes from leaders such as Russian President Vladimir Putin, who sees the BRI as a solution to global challenges.

Overall, understanding how newspapers in different languages portray the BRI is crucial for grasping Malaysian perceptions, which shape future bilateral relations with China. Each newspaper reflects distinct ethnic voices, with English-language outlets offering a broader, more international perspective, while Malay and Chinese newspapers focus on local or economic issues. These diverse approaches highlight the importance of considering multiple viewpoints in Malaysia's multicultural society.

The BRI has greatly expanded China's economic presence in Malaysia through numerous infrastructure and cultural projects. The paper recommends that BRI managers engage more effectively with stakeholders such as the media and policymakers to address concerns about China's intentions and counter narratives of “imperialism and neocolonialism.” While Malaysia has consistently supported the BRI, political instability has slowed some projects. Moving forward, Malaysia is likely to focus less on costly infrastructure projects and more on digital connectivity aligned with its technological development goals. However, challenges to deepening China-Malaysia relations include Malaysia's political instability, ethnic tensions, China's economic slowdown, and the geopolitical dynamics of the South China Sea.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia's multicultural society heavily influences its relationship with China and impacts broader dynamics in ASEAN and Asia. This diversity is reflected in Malaysia's population, comprising Malays, Chinese, Indians, and other ethnic groups, each maintaining distinct identities rooted in language, beliefs, and practices. However, Malaysians are not yet very familiar with the BRI. Many may have heard about it but do not fully understand its scope. In addition, engagement in BRI-related activities remains low. Greater efforts are needed to improve the visibility of the BRI, particularly through social media, to promote public understanding. news coverage in Malay newspapers was rather limited compared with Chinese and English newspapers. Overall, the findings indicate a positive perception of the BRI's benefits, especially in the economic sector, aligning with Cheng et. al. (2019), who noted that the BRI is seen as contributing to Malaysia's economic, cultural, and educational development.

To strengthen Malaysia's relationship with China, it is recommended to enhance public engagement, improve media consistency in reporting on the BRI, and foster inter-ethnic understanding to ensure that all communities are informed, united, and involved in bilateral collaboration. Building strong ties with a country should go beyond political and economic considerations, as understanding its technology

and policies is deeply connected to its historical and cultural foundations. In this regard, the Malaysian Chinese community and Chinese-language media can play a vital role in promoting collaboration among different ethnic groups through cultural exchange programmes that deepen mutual understanding and increase awareness of China and the Chinese community among Malaysians.

Encouraging data-driven journalism and research can help reduce stereotypes and provide a more balanced perspective to the Malaysian public. Moreover, Malaysian media should actively collaborate with relevant government agencies to engage multiple voices in reporting, including ASEAN experts, academics, business leaders, cultural figures, and citizens from both countries, through interviews and dialogue sessions that enrich coverage. Joint reporting projects or newsroom exchanges between Malaysian and Chinese media organisations can also serve as valuable platforms to explore and strengthen China–Malaysia relations from a more comprehensive, human-centred perspective.

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