



Online threats and risky behaviour from the perspective of Malaysian youths

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ABSTRACT

The usage of the internet has become inevitable in this day and age. While there are many benefits that come with its usage, there is also a lot of harm, particularly for adolescents. While there are ample studies proving this, there are no known studies which explain the indulgence of online risky behaviour from the perspective of the youth. Therefore, the main aim of this study is to understand the issue of online threats from the Malaysian youths' perspective. Findings from four focus group discussions consisting of 32 adolescents from urban and rural secondary schools in Malaysia show that despite displaying an understanding of the meaning of online threats, adolescents still indulge in risky behaviour online. They are found to treat the online space as a socializing platform where social prestige is sought. Additionally, some youths from the rural area are found to be victims of cyberbullying, while some from the urban area are the culprits who commit the act. Findings also show that "befriending strangers online" and "cyberbullying" are hot topics discussed among the youth. Hence, these topic areas should receive sufficient attention in future policymaking and practices undertaken by the relevant agencies in Malaysia.

Keywords: ***adolescents, cyberbullying, online threats, risky behaviour, youth***

INTRODUCTION

It seems that every time a new media is introduced to the world, new concerns tend to surface. This was the case for television and radio, which we now refer to as “traditional media”. When the radio was newly introduced, Eisenberg (1936) noted that it was the “new invader of privacy”. This is what many would think of the internet in this day and age.

Many people are affected by the introduction of new media. According to Smith (2014), the digital divide is prevalent across age groups. The youth tends to gain substantial attention in academic research, particularly in investigations pertaining to the impacts of social media use (e.g. Ahadzadeh, Sharif, & Ong, 2017). Perhaps this is due to the fact that adolescents¹ are known to engage in risky behaviour (Dahl, 2004; Steinberg, 2007). Adolescence is known as the period where they seek attention and validation from their peers (Crosnoe, 2011; Eccles & Roesser, 2011).

The introduction of the internet has brought many benefits to the society (e.g. easy access to information). However, it is also a medium that causes concerns for exactly that same reason. Information sharing capabilities are linked to information security and privacy issues (Hajli & Lin, 2016). Furthermore, unlike traditional media, the internet as the current new medium is interactive in nature. The youth can participate in creating and disseminating information (Madden, Cortesi, Gasser, Lenhart, & Duggan, 2012). It also serves as a platform for connecting with people, both friends and strangers alike. Understanding the usefulness of this medium and the dangers it presents to the youth, various agencies all around the world have organized many safeguarding programmes (e.g., UNICEF, the British Council, Child Hope). Despite this, there are still reported cases of people falling victim to various types of dangers online. According to Mitchell, Jones, Finkelhor, and Wolak (2014), every year, a large number of youths experience unwanted sexual solicitation, harassment, and unwanted sexual materials online.

Most studies on youth behaviour online have been conducted in the Western countries (e.g., Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013; Mitchell, Ybarra, Jones, & Espelages, 2015). However, the concern is the same for all countries around the world, including Malaysia. In 2019, Malaysia was ranked top five globally for mobile social media penetration (Bernama, 2019). The percentage of internet users continues to grow. The popularity of the social media has risen together with its attendant implication of widespread cybercrime in Malaysia. According to the Royal Malaysia Police reports, the younger generation is the most vulnerable to cybercrime. The loss recorded in 2012 alone was 96.1 million. This includes e-commerce fraud, parcel scam and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) scam (Majid, 2012). Another risk that has emerged is the rise of ‘virtual-life’ socializing while “real-life” socializing degenerates. This promotes an unhealthy way of living. Those active in the virtual world tend to assume that their identity remains anonymous. This has given them courage to get involved in unhealthy behaviour. Many international agencies such as UNICEF and local agencies such as the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission continuously conduct programmes to educate the Malaysian society in general and the youths in particular about online safety. However, it is unknown if these programmes are achieving their objectives. Therefore, it is vital that research is done at the grassroots level. Accordingly, the main aim of this study is to understand the issue of online threats from the perspective of the Malaysian youth.

¹ Youths and adolescents are terms used interchangeably in this paper.

As one of the few studies that tries to understand online threats from the perspective of the youth, particularly in Malaysia, this study can be a preliminary step towards aiding various agencies in engineering effective online safety programmes for the youths in the future. The findings provide significant implications for better online safety management in light of increasing internet usage.

Risk-taking among the youth

It is widely known that risk-taking is an integral part of adolescence. The idea that risky behaviour is a part of youth development has been consistent in the findings of both older and newer studies (e.g. Boyer, 2006; Dahl, 2004; Jessor & Jessor, 1997; Lewin-Bizan et al., 2010). Results from previous studies show that the youths are ranked the highest in risk-taking activities such as drug use, alcohol consumption, smoking, skipping school, etc. (Bentlin, Slovic, & Severson, 1993; Boyer, 2006; Steinberg, 2008). Adding to this concern is the fact that the youths are heavily influenced by their peers.

Scholars who studied the concept of peer influence found that the youths' perception of their peers' behaviour is more influential than the peers' actual behaviour (Arnett, 2007; Iannotti & Bush, 1992; Unger & Rohrbach, 2002). This is similar to the findings of scholars who conducted research on Cognitive Developmental Theories, where the interpretation of the environment influences a person's behaviour and not the actual environment itself (Iannotti & Bush, 1992; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). For example, regardless of whether their peers are chatting with strangers online or not, the mere perception that their peers are doing it is enough to be the driving force for them to do so as well. The approval of parents becomes less important compared to the approval of peers. This is in line with the work of Steinberg and Morris (2001) who found that the approval of peers is important during the adolescent years. This means that they try to gain independence from parents and turn to their peers for support. As a result, the behaviour of peers functions as a guide. Hence, adolescents are susceptible to risky behaviour not only because they are programmed to indulge in it, but also because their peers are as well.

The Social Norm theory supports both the peer influence concept and Cognitive Developmental Theories. While focused on the concept of "norms", this theory suggests that peoples' behaviours are strongly influenced by the perception of social group norms, although the perception may be incorrect and the consequences of that behaviour may be negative (Scholly, Katz, Gascoigne, & Holck, 2005). Similar to the example of chatting with strangers online, if the youths perceive that all their friends are doing it, then they will assume that it is an acceptable behaviour, and therefore a social norm. It is therefore reasonable to assume that risk-taking behaviour extends into the online realm considering the internet is currently the most popular media technology.

Adolescents have always been associated with being the most enthusiastic in adopting new technologies compared to any other age groups. In this day and age, we can already see their enthusiasm and capability of using the internet. According to Nickson (2018), it is normal for adolescents to adapt quickly to technological advancements and embrace them because it has been a part of their lives from a young age. What makes the internet even more compelling is its anonymity, accessibility, and asynchrony (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

Among the online risky behaviours that youths could indulge in, or are susceptible to, include hacking, downloading illegal content (Livingstone & Bober, 2004), disclosing personal information (Youn, 2005) and meeting someone, whose first acquaintance was made online, face-to-face (Liau, Khoo & Ang, 2005). Additionally, scholars have also proven that online dangers can extend to risky sexual behaviours (Ybarra, Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007). This entails the exchange of intimate, sexually insinuating information or material

with someone acquainted online. Hence, there are legitimate concerns that spending time on the internet comes with several threats that encourage risky behaviours.

The Malaysian context

Despite Malaysia's developing country status, Socialbakers (2014) stated that the usage of *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Flickr* has grown tremendously in Malaysia. In recent years, it was reported that Facebook is the most popular social media website in some other developing countries such as Somalia (Ahmed Dhaha & Igale, 2014). In fact, it was reported that there are 13 million Facebook users in Malaysia and this figure is steadily increasing year after year. Currently, this equates to 49.83% of the country's population. Naturally, the Malaysian youth are not spared from online risks. There are ample studies that confirm the online danger sentiment. A study conducted by Mak et al. (2014) that surveyed 969 Malaysian youths found that although 96.6% of their respondents attended an internet safety course, 24.8% admitted to giving their password to a friend or someone they know. Additionally, almost 20% reported as having sent an e-mail or instant message to someone they never met before.

A study by Marret and Choo (2017) found that the most common online risky behaviour of Malaysian youth is interacting with strangers. They also found that the majority of the youths sampled had experienced online victimization such as online harassment and unwanted sexual solicitation. Additionally, Teimouri et al. (2014) found that when online, the youths are susceptible to unwanted exposure of pornography and bear the potential risk of seeing violent images. A later study by Teimouri et al. (2016) confirmed this finding. These studies show that the long hours spent on the internet, in general and social media, by the Malaysian youth is something of concern to educators, parents, and policymakers. A study by Soh, Chew, Koay, and Ang (2018) offered a potential solution. They suggested that although peer attachment competes with parent attachment in influencing teenagers' online risky behaviour, nevertheless, parental influences are stronger when they actively mediate their children's online activities.

Besides parental guidance, various other entities around the world have taken the responsibility to safeguard youths online. In Malaysia, agencies that have taken the initiative include UNICEF Malaysia, Cybersecurity Malaysia, and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission. While they have invested a lot of effort in organising various programmes and initiatives, the understanding of online threats and behaviour among the Malaysian youth remains unknown. It is therefore difficult for these agencies to gauge whether or not their messages are indeed tackling online safety among youths. Based on the discussion above, the following research questions are posed:

Research question 1 (RQ1):

What do the Malaysian youth understand about online threats?

Research question 2 (RQ2):

To what extent do Malaysian youth engage in risky online behaviour?

METHOD

Design and participants

Focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted to achieve the main objective of this study. Four FGDs ($n = 32$) were conducted with adolescents aged 13 and 14 years old. Students from this age group were able to participate in the FGDs because those outside this age group were busy preparing for Malaysian government exams. Further, schools would not allow activities that were considered as distractions from their studies.

Participants for the focus group were selected from urban and rural secondary schools in Peninsular Malaysia. The selection was done by the school teachers who chose students who were more proactive in class and would be willing to share their experiences and opinions. Details of the participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information

Focus Group	Location	Female	Male	Age	Duration (mins)
1	Urban	5	3	13	46
2	Urban	5	3	13	48
3	Rural	5	3	13–14	57
4	Rural	5	3	13–14	55
Sub-total		20	12		
Total		32			

The FGD format was chosen rather than individual interviews because adolescents' risky behaviour are strongly influenced by their peers (Knoll, Magis-Weinberg, Speekenbrink, & Blakemore, 2015). Therefore, FGD is suitable for examining the shared meaning that young people construct when evaluating online risk and behavioural choices they make. FGD is also known to provide less focused interaction with the researcher and reduce any associated biases in responding (Heary & Hennessey, 2002; Lewis, 1992).

Instruments

The FGD employed a semi-structured order to allow for sufficient flexibility within the pre-set questions. A FGD guide was designed along the lines of the research objectives of this study. Some of the questions posed by the researchers include: "Do you have friends who are specifically 'online friends'?" and "You were chatting with your friends online one night and suddenly a person you do not know sends you a friend request. What would you do?" (The full list of questions is listed in the Appendix). In order to avoid one word or one-line responses (such as "yes" or "no"), prompting questions were also prepared: "How did you meet your online friends?" and "Why do you keep them as friends?"

The language used in the FGDs depended on the language of preference of the participants. All of those from rural schools chose to converse in Malay, while some from the urban areas used bilingual (English and Malay) and some were comfortable conversing in English.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, permission to enter schools for this research was first obtained from the Ministry of Education. Then, permission from the individual principals of participating schools were procured. The principals then referred the researcher to their respective counselling teachers. These teachers handled participant recruitment, setting of the time and date, as well as preparation of the venue for the FGD sessions.

Each session was administered by two trained research assistants who were undergraduate students. They were deemed to be appropriate for the data collection process due to the smaller age gap between themselves and the secondary school students (as compared to graduate students or the researcher). Using this approach, the school students were hoped to be more open in sharing their experiences. The research assistants were briefed on the objectives of the study and taught ways to prompt the students into talking more. The FGDs started off by first guaranteeing the confidentiality of the exercise to the participants. The discussions were recorded and each lasted from 46 to 57 minutes. The recordings were then transcribed and anonymised by the research assistants. Next, the transcriptions were analysed by the researcher.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of the data essentially examined the links between demographic information and the themes that emerged from participants’ responses. The two main themes that were coded in the FGD responses were:

- 1) understanding of online threats, and
- 2) indulgence in risky behaviour online

These categories were derived from the research questions of this study. In other words, they were created inductively. Excerpts for the coding instructions are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Excerpts of the coding scheme

No	Categories	Definition	Examples	Coding Rules
1	Understanding of "online threats"	Giving a direct response to the question on their understanding of the term "online threats" when asked	"I feel threatened online when someone says mean things to me" "Online threat is when a person makes me feel uncomfortable"	This can refer to any of the issues highlighted in the KDB programme such as oversharing, cyberbullying, etc. Responses can be in the form of definition, explanation, or examples

2	Indulging in risky behaviour online	When the response shows that the participant has in the past, or is still involved in behaviours that are considered risky (e.g., online gambling, cyberbullying, oversharing)	"Sometimes I like to speak to strangers online to share my problems with them"	This refers to online behaviour action) that is also dangerous in real life. Refers to behaviour and action online. Thoughts alone do not count.
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In this study, some themes emerged deductively. This means they were derived through the careful reading and analysis of the data. Although the themes were dissimilar to the ones created inductively, nevertheless, they provided useful insights to the objective of the study (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). For example, after examining the transcripts, it was found that victims and culprits of cyberbullying was a recurring theme. Therefore, this was added as a theme.

The verification of the identified themes was conducted between the researcher and the assistants. This was to ensure consistency and to reduce biasness in the coding process. Any discrepancies in the understanding of the themes were solved through discussions.

RESULTS

General findings

From the FGDs conducted, it was found that all participants from the urban area had access to smartphones and computers with internet connection. This accessibility enabled them to participate in online chats on a daily basis. The situation was a little different for those from the rural area, where fewer students had smartphones or computers with internet connection. Across all demographics, it was revealed that most of the students' online friends is someone they know from school. However, some students were found keeping strangers as their online friends.

Motivation for going online

The main reasons identified as motivation for going online and/or social media are (not in order of importance): First, to overcome boredom. A female student from an urban school shared "I am bored and I don't have a life". A male student from a rural school stated "I go online to play games. I play Clash Royal an hour a day". His FGD group members, particularly other males, showed strong agreement to this need for entertainment on a daily basis. Second, going online helps the youth to build a positive image of themselves. A female student from an urban school divulged "having an online profile on a social media platform such as Facebook helps me look friendly to others". Another female student from a rural school stated "I accept many friend requests even from those I don't know because I want to increase the number of likes for my Facebook posts". The number of likes is somewhat akin to popularity. Third, going online helps them to find "real" friends. A female student from an urban school claimed that "real life" people are fake, insinuating that those she meets online are more genuine. Another girl from the same school concurred: "my online friends always comment and like my posts. They actually care for me". These responses generally show that

the main motivation for going online are for socialization purposes—whether to ease boredom, to increase the appearance of popularity, or to seek emotional support.

Youth's understanding of online threats

The first research question inquired on the understanding of the youth concerning online threats. Some of the participants from both urban and rural schools displayed a rather vague understanding. For instance, these students claimed that they knew what constitutes as online threats. However, they also said that they accepted all invitations to befriend others online and only decided later if these people should be blocked. A female student from an urban school conveyed that “if a stranger asks for my picture, I will not give it to him, but if I know the person, then there’s no problem”. A female student from an urban school shared: “I accept certain people’s friend requests. I will accept friend requests from boys, but maybe not from girls because I find them annoying”. These students presumably did not give much thought to the potential harm that may arise by allowing others into their social media circle. When asked to rate the safety level of their social media accounts on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 representing extremely dangerous and 10 representing extremely safe, students rated their accounts ranging from 5 to 10. This implies that they believe there are sufficient safety measures in effect that protects them from online dangers.

In general, most students seem to have a similar understanding as the adults who develop online safety initiatives concerning what constitutes as online risks. Students from both urban and rural schools listed the following as online risks: Sharing personal information online with strangers (including photographs), false advertising, hacking, stalking, scams, pornography, and cyberbullying. Despite the similarities in responses, it must be noted that the explanation of the youths from the urban area seemed more sophisticated (in-depth) while those from the rural area provided short responses without much explanation.

Based on these responses, the response to RQ1 is: online threats include sharing personal information online with strangers (including photographs), false advertising, hacking, stalking, scams, pornography, and cyberbullying. Although they were able to correctly identify the threats, this did not mean that they were safe from them. The following section provides evidences that despite knowing what online risks are, the youths continue to indulge in them.

Indulging in risky behaviour online

The second research question inquired the extent to which the youths indulge in risky behaviour online. There were many instances where the students spoke about their own actions and/or behaviours online without showing any sign of acknowledgement that their actions/behaviour could bring harm unto themselves. Youths from an urban school reported that they will add or accept friend requests in order to add to the number of followers they have on social media. “The chances of getting more ‘likes’ on my postings are higher when I have more followers” admitted a female student from an urban school. Another student shared that those who comment or “like” her posts are seen as those who “actually care for her”. This shows that the number of “likes” and positive comments are social prestige indicators, which are of high importance to them.

Further, students from both urban and rural schools admitted that people who look physically attractive will have a higher chance of getting their friend request accepted. A female student from an urban school said she accepted a friend request from a stranger because “he has a well-defined jawline and looks handsome”. Her classmate, a male student from the same urban school agreed that “if I don’t know the person, of course I will not accept. But if it is a pretty girl, then I will definitely pay attention to her!” Perhaps having

more attractive people in their social media account or as their followers is also another form of social prestige. Accepting friend requests based on looks brings to the fore a major concern—the ease with which online predators can approach young online victims; all they have to do is upload a picture of an attractive person as their profile picture.

Without realizing the potential harm of their actions, a female student from a rural school openly admitted she befriended a Bangladeshi (in Bangladesh) who is possibly 10 years older than her while her close friend befriended a Nepali worker in Malaysia. The latter gave the Nepali man a photo of herself which he shared with his friends. He then asked his other friends to befriend her on Facebook as well. When asked whether their behaviour online is dangerous or not, they replied “we lie when chatting with older people...we don’t tell the truth about ourselves. But if the other person is the same age, then it is ok to be truthful”. Similarly, a female student from an urban school with many overseas online friends who are older stated “I don’t reveal everything to them in one go. They don’t either. Every time we chat, we will reveal something new, so the exchange (of information) is fair”. While it may seem harmless to these students, this act is in fact risky as these strangers’ intentions are not known. Also, the age gap between the students and their international online friends is alarming. Additionally, they are not able to verify the real age of the strangers they meet online which means their own safeguarding techniques are ineffective.

Based on these responses, the answer to RQ2 is: The students indulge in risky behaviour online to a large extent. They show some signs of understanding that their actions may bring harm. Therefore, they have set up their own safety measures to protect themselves. Unfortunately, their own measures are not fullproof.

Victims of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying emerged as a hot topic among the participants. Interestingly enough, those from the rural school had stories to share while those from the urban school had none. Students from the rural school shared that they have been victims of cyberbullying or know of people who have suffered from it. The most prominent act of cyberbullying is when others share information about them without consent. Particularly, when this information portrays the victims in a negative manner. A female student shared that “one of my online friend has taken screenshots of my social media page and made it viral.... I have also been insulted for my online status updates and shared posts”. Her male classmate, reported that “my cousin who goes to the same school as I shared a picture of me when I was 3 years old in a water park, in my bathing attire and there was nothing I could do about it!”. Although these examples did not pose direct threats, their privacy was violated and their social prestige suffered as a result; both of which are perceived as problems by these youths.

Handling online threats

Participants were also asked how they handle situations that they may encounter online (e.g. friend requests from strangers, etc.). They were found to either take matters into their own hands or consult their parents. In this case, the approach taken by those from urban and rural areas were different. Students from the urban school tended to take matters into their own hands. A female student from an urban school shared that “I had an online friend who asked me who is at my house? Am I alone? So, I told him it is none of your business. Then I blocked him.” Several of her classmates revealed that they accepted all requests but blocked them later, if they were found to misbehave. The term “misbehave” here refers to others reacting negatively towards their posts. Some students from the urban schools also admitted that they will try to obtain more information of the stranger by checking the person’s profile before making decision whether to accept or deny his/her request. A male student admitted that “stalking someone’s profile is a standard procedure”. However, based on their previous

responses, we can assume that if the person is physically attractive, the chances of them being accepted as an online friend is high.

Participants from the rural school seemed to give more thought towards the opinion of others when posting a certain post online compared to the youths from the urban area. Some reported that they consult their parents before adding a new friend or accepting a friend request. One female student from the rural school revealed that “my mother will read all my messages and she does not allow me to delete them”. Another said “if someone I meet online asks for my phone number or where I live, I will ask (consult) my mother first”.

Culprits of cyberbullying

It is interesting to note that while the study was conducted with the intention of safeguarding youths online, it did not expect to find that the youths themselves are a source of cyberbullying. The participants who were found to be cyberbullies or have the potential of doing so were from the urban area. A male student from the urban school admitted to insulting others online because he was challenged by his cousins. He confessed that “they told me to do it. I wanted them to stop bothering me. That’s why I did it. I felt bad about it afterwards”. As a matter of social prestige, this student did not think he had a choice and therefore committed the act.

A female student from the urban school confessed that she was insecure about herself and felt that others judged her by her appearance. To counter this problem, she created a fake Facebook account (alter ego). Besides making friends online with this alter ego, she felt brave enough to create and post threatening statuses. The example she gave was “I want to slit your fu*king throat you little bi*ch and I wish I could feed you to a pack of hyenas”. This student also confessed to hacking into her mother’s Instagram account. She said “my mother’s password was easy to guess”. Of all the FGD participants from the urban schools, she was the only one who has heard of online safety programmes.

Differences between youths in urban and rural areas

There are some notable differences between the responses of youth in urban and rural areas: First, youths from the urban area were more vocal about their opinions and were not as inhibited by social acceptance. For instance, they were honest in sharing their motivation for using social media and their experiences that did not portray themselves in a positive manner. Second, while youths from both locations understood online risks, the elaboration given by the youths from the urban area seemed more sophisticated and in-depth. Third, youths from the urban area seemed to take matters into their own hands while those from the rural area consulted with their parents. Finally, youths from the rural area reported to have been victims of cyberbullying or know of people who have been subjected to bullying online. In contrast, youths from the urban area confessed to being culprits who carried out this act.

DISCUSSION

The main aim of this study was to understand the issue of online threats from the perspective of the youth. To achieve this objective, two research questions were posed: RQ1 asked “what do the Malaysian youth understand about online threats?” while RQ2 asked “to what extent do Malaysian youths engage in risky online behaviour?” Interestingly, responses received from the FGDs also managed to reveal additional insights.

First and foremost, general findings showed that all youths from urban areas have access to smartphones and participated in online chats every day, while the youths from the rural areas did not have as much accessibility to technology. As a whole, most of the students’ online friends were people they already know from school with some exceptions, who were strangers. Their motivation for going online were solely for socialization purposes. In a way, this supports the work of other scholars who claimed that adolescence is a period where youths will try to seek attention from their peers (Crosnoe, 2011; Eccles & Roesser, 2011; Knoll et al., 2015).

The analysis of RQ1 responses found that the youths demonstrated an understanding concerning online threats. These threats include sharing personal information online with strangers (including photographs), false advertising, hacking, stalking, scams, pornography, and cyberbullying. However, this did not mean that their understanding of the concept translated into safe behaviour online. They also did not seem to give their actions much thought and to a certain extent, underestimated the potential harm of their actions. This is in line with the idea that risky behaviour is a part of youth development as suggested by previous scholars (e.g., Boyer, 2006; Dahl, 2004; Jessor & Jessor, 1997; Lewin-Bizan et al., 2010).

Further, the analysis of responses for RQ2 found that the youths indulged in risky behaviour online to a large extent despite displaying only some signs of understanding that their behaviour may bring harm. This supports the findings of previous studies that notes the importance of social acceptance during adolescent years (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). However, it is plausible that they seek more than merely acceptance. For instance, the number of likes they gain and having attractive people on their social media seemed to be important to the youths. There were many instances which indicate that they wanted social prestige (e.g., increasing the number of likes on their social media page). They wanted to be visible and popular, not merely accepted. Perhaps to them, having many attractive people on their friend list and a large number of likes communicates a positive attribute of themselves to their peers. Therefore it should be a desirable goal to strive towards. This behaviour is akin to those explained in Cognitive Developmental Theories where the youths’ interpretation of the environment influences their behaviour (Ianotti & Bush, 1992; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958).

Additionally, they also seem to have set up their own safety measures to protect themselves from harm, giving themselves the impression that they have everything under control. They also perceive that they can handle problematic situations encountered online independently, without the involvement of their parents. Several differences between adolescents from urban and rural areas were also observed and discussed.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Similar to other studies, the current study too had some limitations. First, most of the FGD participants provided very brief responses. They had to be repeatedly prompted by the research assistants to provide more elaborate responses. Second, those who are naturally more dominant tended to speak substantially more than those who are soft-spoken. Often times, these vocal participants would drift off-topic when sharing their stories. Third, there is a possibility that groupthink may have affected the responses of the FGD participants. To increase social desirability, some may have agreed with their friends' opinions, although they may have different opinions of their own. Finally, this study is exploratory in nature. Although obeying the parameters of qualitative research, these results may not necessarily be representative of all youths in Malaysia. Furthermore, this study only included those from Peninsular Malaysia. The representations of youths from Sabah and Sarawak were absent here.

Despite these challenges, findings from this study provide useful insights to the understanding of the youth concerning online threats in Malaysia. The broad implication of the present study is that agencies that develop and conduct programmes to safeguard youths online should emphasise more on the types of online threats and the consequences of online risky behaviour complete with sufficient explanation on why they are harmful. Second, since befriending strangers online and cyberbullying were the most discussed topics among the youths, these areas should be prioritised in future programmes. Third, besides the dangers of cyberbullying, future programmes should also emphasise on why one should not bully others online (i.e., how they can harm themselves and others). Future research can replicate this study in other parts of Malaysia, with different age groups to obtain empirical data that can holistically represent the understanding of online risks among the Malaysian youth. Perhaps other research methodologies could be employed such as surveys and experiments to validate these FGD findings. Besides that, a cross-cultural comparison could be carried out to test for cultural factors that influence the responses of Malaysian youths and youths of a different nation. This could help to build a better understanding of culture-specific factors in online safety education.

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Appendix

Questions for focus group discussions

- 1) Do you have friends who are specifically “online friends”?
 - 1a) If yes, how did you meet them?
 - 1b) Why do you keep them as friends?
 - 1c) Do you know a lot about them?
 - 1d) Do they know a lot about you?

- 2) You were chatting with your friends online one night and suddenly a person you do not know sends you a friend request. What would you do?
 - 2a) Has this ever happened to you before?
 - 2b) If yes, did this person ask you for your personal information?
 - 2c) If yes, what did they ask for?

Prompting questions

- Where do you live
 - Your phone number
 - A photo of yourself
-
- 2d) did you give them the information they asked for?
 - 2e) If yes, why? If no, why?
-
- 3) You had a bad day at school, you feel there is nobody (not even family or friends) would understand how you feel. Would you consider looking for someone online who doesn't know you to talk to?
 - 3a) Has this ever happened to you?
 - 3b) If yes, did you talk about the specific problem you had or did you talk about other things?
 - 3c) What other things did you talk about?
 - 3d) Did the other person share as much information with you as you did with them?
 - 3e) Did this result in a positive or negative experience?
 - 3f) If positive, would you recommend that your friends do this if they needed someone to talk to?

 - 4) Has someone ever sent information about you to another person without your permission online?
 - 4a) If yes, how did this make you feel?
 - 4b) Would you seek revenge and do it to the person who did this to you?

 - 5) Most young people your age consider themselves adventurous and a risk-taker. Do you see yourself the same way?
 - 5b) What do you understand by the words “adventurous” and “risk-taker”?
 - 5c) Please provide some examples.

 - 6) Can you tell us some of the risks that people face online?
 - 6a) Are you prone to these risks?
 - 6b) Are your friends prone to these risks?

Prompting questions

- Do you think it is dangerous to speak to a stranger online?
- Do you think it is dangerous to send pictures of yourself to someone you meet online?
- Do you think it is dangerous to give your phone number and/or address to someone you meet online?