

Gender Variations in Coping Mechanisms Used after Disagreements in the Home Domain: The Case of Malaysian Youths

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

RECEIVED: 12-Aug-20

REVISED: 08-Oct-20

ACCEPTED: 28-Oct-20

PUBLISHED: 07-Dec-20

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ABSTRACT

Disagreements could lead to conflicts, hence knowing how to cope with them would be of benefit. The current paper aimed to understand if there were gender variations in the coping mechanisms used after disagreements in the home domain. A non-probability sample of 672 Malaysian youths aged between 19–40 years was taken. Of these, 271 were males and 401 were females. Questionnaires were administered face-to-face. SPSS version 16 was used for data analysis. Results showed a significant variation in gender perspectives and the respective coping mechanisms used. Majority of the males claimed to feel 'no difference' after domestic disagreements. Their most sought-after activity or preferred coping mechanism was to 'play games'. In contrast, females often experienced emotions such as unhappiness and sadness after encountering domestic disagreements. Most of them preferred sharing their feelings with others. Some tended to resolve disagreements individually on their own by sleeping, crying, moping, or sulking. Males seemed to cope by participating in an active activity while females coped by indulging in a passive activity. This variation between males and females suggested that males could be more restrained and less expressive; whilst females tended to be more expressive. This outcome illustrates typical male and female behavior in Malaysian society. It is deduced that the male respondents' lack of expressiveness is reminiscent of the typical male attitude and masculine behavioral traits. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, youths who now spend more time at home or work remotely from home, may ponder over how best they can resolve disagreements in the home domain. The findings of this study would thus be particularly useful for families and couples to avoid mental health issues, such as isolation, depression, suicidal acts, and violence at home.

Keywords: Coping mechanisms, domestic disagreements, gender differences, Malaysian youths, mental health.

Introduction

In nation building, one component that can drive a country's economic growth is its people, particularly its younger generation also known as youths. They are the

productive workforce of the country who will be taking on future roles as leaders, economists, strategists, and nation builders. Their input to the country is very important because they have the power to lead their country to greater economic growth and political stability. These

youths need to be future proof, strong, competent, and well equipped with a healthy mind, body, and soul. The healthy state of youths, including mental health, is a prevalent topic worldwide. Many countries are striving to achieve national stability by promoting healthy lifestyles and balanced diets as a measure to encourage their people to stay healthy. Nevertheless, good health, in particular mental health, is not just dependent on a healthy lifestyle and a balanced diet, healthy mental health comes from one's capability of resolving problems and disagreements and the ability to cope with the adversaries of life, as experienced by many in the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic situation.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as the state of wellbeing where every individual realizes his/her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his/her community (WHO, 2020; Heather, 2010; Lynch, 1977). Mental health is regarded by the WHO as a state of having a balanced physical, mental, and social well-being; it is more than being physically healthy, with no illnesses or diseases. The individual with a healthy mental state is one who has a balanced well-being. He/she is resilient, has a sense of security and reality, is able to cope with the challenges of life and can still interact with others, and is sufficiently matured in problem solving. In the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected the world, good mental health also refers to knowing how to cope with such unprecedented life-threatening incidents, knowing how to live life competently and competitively, knowing how to deal and cope with the daily stress of work, having the resilience to bounce back, and being competent enough to adjust to current times, especially when faced with numerous adversaries.

Velu, Gopinathan and Raman (2020) examined organizational resilience among the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) status companies in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found a positive correlation between employees' behavioral streams and their resilience. It appears that in times of physical distancing when people do not necessarily meet face-to-face, the form of communication appears to have changed. The communication had shifted from human-centeredness to technology-centeredness. Due to this state of affairs, it is even more crucial to have a healthy state of mind, equipped with effective coping mechanisms, and being instrumentally positive when dealing with uncertainties during a crisis (Velu *et al.*, 2020, p. 124). Focusing on the productive workforce, Szabó (2020, p.23) contended that such a shift from face to face to remote work styles would continue to accelerate,

and to be the new normal beyond 2020 due to the safety and health measures required to protect employees. The enhancement of the 5G telecommunication networks and software had helped to complement the set-up of the virtual collaboration the world needs presently. This reliance on virtual communication would affect the quality of the face-to-face (unmediated) and computer-mediated communication (Szabó, 2020, p. 23).

Shifting the focus of the communication from the workplace to the home domain involving a family setting, it appears that domestic communication among family members would also need to be examined. A family that provides good support to the family members in times of crisis strengthens its young and prepares them for future challenges. One way to achieve this is to cultivate good values and attitudes as well as to equip the young with survival strategies that can enable them to deal with life's daily stress (Kayumova & Zakirova, 2016). Besides supportive and nurturing families, the social environment also contributes to how people behave, particularly, when conflicts, misunderstandings, or disagreements occur. From their exposure to many different scenarios of adversity, young people can gradually learn to develop important skillsets that can be used to manage their daily lives that may be filled with conflicts, misunderstandings, disagreements, discontentment, and other unpleasant situations. For instance, conflict is about disputes arising from a lack of mutual understanding while misunderstanding is caused by misconceived ideas of others based on incorrect or skewed interpretations. Nevertheless, through experience, trial and error, young adults would be able to find multiple coping mechanisms to deal with these situations, and from these, they would then discover the most suitable strategy or strategies to deal with life's challenges. From these, they would be more likely to manage their emotions, such as dissatisfaction, frustration, stress and anxiety, better.

Disagreement reflects a lack of consensus between two parties and is mostly seen as confrontational when 'the expression of one's view differs from that expressed by another (Sifianou, 2012). However, any disagreement that is not mitigated or adequately managed, may result in the overt (tangible), and covert (intangible) emotional responses of both concerned parties. Serious disagreements may lead to turbulence of emotions, such as the breakdown or breakup of a relationship. Based on this, it is therefore important that when in disagreement, youths have to be mindful of the friction, animosity, hostility, conflict, and misunderstanding created. They also need to know of the repercussions involved. Coping strategies can be learnt, practiced, and mastered to alleviate

feelings of helplessness, distress, pain, hurt, or anger more effectively. This is particularly helpful for introverts who practice avoidance, denial, or withdrawals in such situations, rather than dealing with them strategically.

Benefits of Study

Malaysia is a multiracial, multilingual, and multi-religious developing nation with a total population of 32.6 million, with 29.4 million (90.2%) citizens and 3.2 million (9.8%) non-citizens (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). It is imperative to know how its young people cope and support each other so as to be mentally strong, emotionally stable, and physically healthy. One way to understand how Malaysian youths are mentally and emotionally equipped is to investigate their capacity to cope in an undesirable situation when they disagree with their family members. In particular it would be beneficial to learn how the different genders deal with disagreements in the home domain.

This study is based on the non-probability sample of 672 youths. In that regard, the findings may not be generalized. Nonetheless, the findings would shed light on how Malaysian youths, in a non-crisis home domain setting, cope with disagreements. The outcome would reflect the social reality of the Malaysian context. The findings would also demonstrate how social constructivism and differences in perspectives have affected the way Malaysian youths cope with disagreements.

Definition of key concepts

Some of the concepts used in this study are defined as follows:

- **Youths** refers to young men and women aged between 19 and 40.
- **Disagreement** refers to any instance where two parties do not see eye to eye over an issue; disagreements can occur regardless of small or big issues.
- **Coping mechanism** refers to the strategies used by the respondents in order to dissipate the situation or to overcome the negative feelings they experienced.
- **Home domain** refers to the environment where individuals interact with others who are members of the family.
- **Variation** refers to the gendered difference noted in the use of coping mechanisms.
- **Gender** refers to the two sexes with biological distinction, i.e. male and female, that also denotes a range

of social and cultural attributes constructed based on varied expectations of the society towards the two genders.

Literature Review

Gender Roles

The behaviorist theory in psychology informs us that children mimic the behavior of their role models- either their parents, older siblings, or their caregivers. Learned behavior impacts the daily behavior patterns of children until adulthood. Additionally, the way a society is developing can also affect how its youths behave. For instance, a liberal and a closed society differ in terms of behavior, attire, education, entertainment, food, and forms of entertainment. This implies that a liberal society encourages its young to be liberal whilst a conservative society encourages its young to be more conservative and traditional by following societal norms. Children observe these rules and social norms to become what society expects them to be in terms of behavior and thoughts. Consequently, men and women behave “accordingly” by following the desired manner, and adhering to the perceived expectations of society. While some values are good to follow and practice, other values can be suppressing and restrictive, particularly those related to ‘negative’ emotions. These emotions, such as sadness, anger, pain, hurt, or distress when experienced may be expressed differently, depending on how one is brought up.

In the *Daily Mail Online* (23/09/2015), Fleig wrote that, “One in four 18 to 34-year-olds say showing emotions is a sign of weakness”. Are emotions and feelings to be suppressed? Conner (2000), a clinical and medical psychologist, observes over the years, how men generally avoid showing emotions whilst women tend to share and discuss their problems “to explore, deepen, or strengthen the relationship with the person they are talking to”. Most men perceive that solving a problem is a way to demonstrate their competence, hence they tend to dominate and to assume authority in the problem solving process, instead of attending to the quality of the relationship in resolving interpersonal disagreements.

Gender role is defined as a set of attitudes, behaviors, and self-presentation methods that has been ascribed to members of a certain biological sex. This includes norms for behavior, which some researchers termed as “the rules of masculinity” or the “masculine ideology” (Pleck, Sonenstein & Ku, 1993; Chu & Porsche, 2005). This study contends that men must act tough, stay in control and be

stoic, and not talk too much to others. Men must uphold tough attitudes at work. Women, in comparison, play the role of primary caregivers. The traditional concept of men also insinuates that men should not shed tears and cry like women do, men must be strong and determined, both in physical strength and character. Men should never be emotional, so that they remain rational, calm, in control, authoritative, and decisive. Men are expected to be steadfast in their traditional roles, and to hold fast to such kinds of expectations, men are seldom accepted as stay-at-home fathers. Men seldom feel secure when their wives earn more than they do, and such attitudes have clearly been passed down through their upbringing. Numerous debates have emerged with regards to the nature and nurture of gender roles. In a recent study of a cross-cultural comparison of American and Lithuanian respondents, it was found that female Lithuanians tended to react politely; they also used creative reactions while answering some survey questions. In contrast, Lithuanian male respondents appeared to be less polite, and they used fewer creative reactions (Jakučionytė, 2020, p. 174). Some societies view both genders as a very distinctive cultural construction while modernists believe that these attitudes and behaviors flow from their biological sex traits and personalities. Given the gender perspectives subscribed by a relatively conservative society such as Malaysia, this study aims to focus on the emotional strength of the two genders by comparing their use of coping mechanisms when in disagreement in the home domain.

Gender roles have evolved with the liberation of education, and job opportunities given to women, but perhaps still not rapidly enough to match the current waves of change. Women are capable of doing what men used to do, such as serving in the engineering, astronomy, physics, medicine, and various domains of work today. However, the depictions of women can be biased against women in some parts of the world (Negash, 2006). Asian men still carry the notion that they need to emulate their fathers by being strong and powerful in character. It would be better for men to withhold their emotions, especially those of sadness, pain, and helplessness, regardless of how deep their emotions may hurt them. To some extent, they may even think crying is weak. Clearly, these views about men's behavior have been passed down to them by society, and further accentuated by the media. Consequently, it is not alarming that today's men behave in similar ways. Likewise, the female counterparts have also not escaped from the clutches of society and the media which constantly portray women as weaker than men, feeble-minded and indecisive, emotional, and chatterboxes. Their aim, as stressed by society and

the media, is to look beautiful, be feminine, attract men, and then forever remain dutiful or sacrificial wives and mothers. These roles continue to be accentuated through their upbringing, hence young women today continue to behave in stereotypical ways. Incidents in countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Iraq, Iran, Myanmar and also other parts of Southeast Asia are evidence of such claims. As a result, many of our youths grow up 'following the rules'.

The Malaysian culture, in general, is collectivistic in nature, adhering to social values such as respect for elders and the authority, emphasis on harmony and orderliness, avoidance of conflicts, politeness, and humility (Asrul, 2003; Salleh, 2015; Yaacob, 2009). In the Malaysian context, a child who is well behaved is socially more attractive and acceptable than one who is a 'rebel' or 'out of the norm'. While the former is embraced by the community, the latter is often regarded as an embarrassment because s/he cannot conform. Kuang, Wong and David (2010) studied how Malaysian youths expressed their disagreement by remaining silent instead of a confrontation. This is more pronounced when they disagree with those who were more senior within the family or society.

Distinctive gender differences

John Gray's (2004) book entitled *Men are from Mars and Women from Venus* highlights the major differences between men and women in terms of behavioral and linguistic expressiveness, suggesting that such notions of gender roles are norms that are socially constructed, and these gender roles are often rigid or fixed. Nonetheless, Carothers and Reis (2012) challenged this notion in *Men and Women are from Earth*, justifying that both genders are similar but the society has over-emphasized the differences. These differences have inevitably, become more distinctive when viewed from a cross cultural perspective. This therefore leads to the debate of nature and nurture and whether gender variation exists in our culture, and if it does, then is the variation predominantly biological, physiological, psychological, emotional, or behavioral in nature?

Past research (Rucker, 2010) has shown that men and women are anatomically different with men's brain being larger than women's by 10% and heavier by 1112%. Their larger muscle mass and body also require more neurons to control these muscles (Rucker, 2010). Men are more left-brain dominated, they are good in mathematical skills although poorer in communication (Diamond,

2003). In comparison, their female counterparts have a balanced capacity to use the two hemispheres in their brain, making them good communicators (Rucker, 2010). Diamond (2003) also noted that women were more linguistically inclined, caring, and more affectionate. They were also identified as being more resourceful, with significantly more strategies for resolving workplace conflicts Gwartney-Gibbs and Lach (1992). As natural communicators, women also liked to hold a dialogue with others particularly about their dissatisfactions and disputes. Unlike the women, their male counterparts tend to be more rational and linear with more use of the legalistic language (Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1992). These variations between men and women suggest that they are also likely to differ in the way they deal or cope with disagreements.

Mental health Issues

The Observer (17/08/2008) reported that 75% of all suicides can be attributed to men who were more neurotic, and less fulfilled. Focusing on the 21st century modernity, our paper suggests that men may have changed in their behavior today because times have changed. However, when men do become more expressive in their emotions, society tends to frown on them. Consequently, men revert back to bottling up their feelings. This lack of support from society could cause men to go through various issues of mental health, with the case of depression, constantly highlighted in foreign and local newspapers (*The Star*, 20/06/2012 and 22/09/2012; *The Star Online*, 06/11/2014 and 11/10/2016) becoming an issue.

Thornicroft (*The Guardian*, 02/08/2010) claimed that in general, women are twice at risk of suffering from depression when compared to men. *The Sun Daily* (23/07/2013) reported that 1% of the Malaysian population has mental problems, with 20% having mental health problems like depression, stress, and anxiety. Of these, stress is more commonly identified as it is a term most people use to indicate a physical turmoil. Stress can be caused by an internal thought or an external stimuli and disagreements caused by daily interactions can create stress and anxiety. In this regard, knowing the right coping mechanism to apply during such situations can help to mitigate this phenomenon.

Gen Y

The media has been reporting that the Gen Y people (those born in 1980 or after) are those most depended

on by most countries for economic growth. Unlike their grandparents or parents who were born as baby boomers, the Gen Y generation is not only more technology savvy, but also tougher in their ability to deal with change (Mujtaba, Manyak, Murphy, & Sungkhawan, 2010). Raised by more generous parents who have more disposable incomes, the Gen Y generation is exposed to modern technology, have wider world experiences and bigger access to global mass media. With this exposure, the Gen Y generation is also more updated with information as they resort to modern communicative modes like the internet, SMS, emails, Facebook, twitter and Instagram. They are constantly in the know. The Gen Y people have been described as a generation that is more willing to take on transformation, a step which most nations are currently subscribing to by brain-picking on their expertise. Today's Gen Y youths are expected to transform their countries, as is currently happening in some countries. Nevertheless, with advancement in technology, Gen Y people are also faced with more challenges. In their bid to survive, they compete with more people for a better livelihood whilst accommodating higher costs of living, higher unemployment rate, higher crime rate, higher corruption and cronyism, and more conflicts. They also face more demanding educational needs, family responsibilities, marriage commitment, interpersonal relationships, work stress, and the perpetual problem of financial management. If the Gen Y generation, as a younger set of population can cope with these challenges well, it would mean that they are mentally fit and physically resilient, hence valuable to their respective countries for nation building. In contrast, if they were less mentally fit, more physically vulnerable, and incapable of coping with these challenges, they would have less tenacity to deal with life's challenges thereby, defeating the nation's aspirations. One good way to gauge this tenacity is to analyze how they cope with a hostile situation like disagreements, especially in the home domain.

Coping mechanisms of young Malaysians

Reports (Khadijah et al., 2013; Noorbala et al., 2001) have shown that when youths are unable to cope with challenges in life such as love or affective relationships, debts, or a loss in identity, they may fall into depression or suicide modes. Suicide rate is on the rise in Malaysia. According to a Germany-based market and consumer data provider, Statista (03/07/2020), suicide rate has been on the rise in Malaysia since 2010, with many resorting to taking their own lives over issues like failing in school examinations and loss in love (*The Star*, 02/06/2012). The publicity director of Befrienders Kuala

Lumpur, Ardy Ayadali reported that suicide is the second leading cause of death for youths between the ages of 15 and 29 in Malaysia (*New Strait Times*, 08/05/2017). The common triggers for suicide among the callers of Befrienders are depression, broken relationships, and cyber bullying. Ardy further contends that the solution for suicidal attempts by the youths often depends on the person's coping mechanisms and the family's support system, particularly good relationships. The 'fragility' of the Gen Y youths was traced to the reported case of 1,156 people who had committed suicide over the three-year period between 2009 and 2011. Majority of them were aged between 24 and 44 years old (*The Star*, 02/06/2012). More alarmingly, the same news report indicated a ratio of three men to one woman involved in suicidal acts or attempts, with the Chinese showing the highest number in suicides (48%) followed by the Indians (21%), Malays (18%) and other races (13%).

Claiming that suicide has become an epidemic in Asia, Kok, Gan and Goh (2011) mentioned that suicide rates in several highly populated countries also account for the greater part of the world's suicides, making it an issue that needs to be addressed quickly and swiftly. Their study investigated how Malaysian youths talked about causes of suicide, revealing that suicide was more acute among the young. Participants aged between 15–24 years old were found to be mostly seeking help from friends. The study concluded that several main factors could induce suicide among the young – their ability to cope with interpersonal relationships such as boy-girl relationships, family issues, and stress arising from school work demands. The study also disclosed that more males indicated that relationship with the opposite sex was a contributing factor to the suicide problem. The Chinese students involved in the study further reported that school work was the main factor. A high percentage of the participants also revealed that their life was self-determined, implying that the younger generation make most of their own decisions without consulting others. This admittance shows that issues affecting the younger generation need to be addressed quickly since the stress they experience in relationships and family issues can be of grave concern (Khadijah et al., 2013; Tam & Lim, 2009).

The need to conduct studies involving young Malaysians was echoed by the Ministry of Health, Malaysia (11/10/2012) which reported that young Malaysian students including those 15 years and below were suffering from stress. The report blamed parents for their lack of interaction with their children due to work. Apparently, the number has risen from 13% in 1996 to 20% in 2011 (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 11/10/2012). The Ministry

stated that it would be making efforts to tackle the problem including preparing a national strategic plan on mental health and increasing the number of Community Health Centres within the country.

Depression, anxiety and stress among Malaysian university students

Khadijah et al. (2013) examined Malaysian students and their stress level. It was found that older Malaysian students (18–24) had higher stress levels with the greatest stress showing up during the latter years of tertiary education. The fear of failure was stated as the most stressful. The study revealed that females had higher stress levels which supported the findings of Vrana and Lauterbach (1994). Both sets of reports also perceived females as overreacting, such as over-reporting on medical and psychological symptoms. Consequently, it appears that female participants had coped with stressful events by being expressive with their feelings.

Traditional female traits have also been studied by Conner (2000) who verified that women dealt with their emotions through sharing and discussing. This seemed to be women's way of exploring and deepening their relationship with others. Women were more concerned with the way the problem was solved. Men, in comparison, were more concerned only about solving the problem. Men often view their ability to solve problems as a personal strength (Conner, 2000). This suggests the prevalence of gender differences.

Emotions

Emotions are strong feelings, such as joy or fear (Collins Dictionary, 2006) which can move a person to act in exceptional ways. From the psychological perspective, strong emotions may lead to a complex state of feeling which includes physical and psychological changes that can affect the person's thoughts. These changes then influence the individual's behavior. Meyers (2007) stated that human emotions can involve changes such as physiological arousal, expressive behaviors, and conscious experience.

Disagreements are not emotions, but disagreements can create emotional experiences which can lead to a change in behavior, feelings, and thoughts. It is these changes that can offset the individual's behavior. Some people argue openly when disagreeing; others may resort to silence or sulking. Disagreements are common

in our daily interaction with others. They are inevitable because people have personal orientations towards certain issues. While the western society may appreciate direct confrontations during disagreements, Malaysians tend to avoid confrontations. This is more notably visible among certain ethnic groups (Asrul, 2003). Such traits can be attributed to the Malaysian behavior that has been described as a 'high-ambiguity-tolerant culture' where people 'don't feel threatened by unknown situations' (DeVito, 2008, p. 39). Such a community, according to DeVito (2008), accepts that uncertainty is a way of life and that rules which dictate communication and relationships may not always be the same for others. Since most Malaysians are tolerant of such uncertainties, it would seem that maintaining social harmony is their priority (Asrul, 2003). Some communication strategies among Malaysians (Jawakhir, 2006; Kuang & Jawakhir, 2010) have been identified. One among these is indirectness in speaking (Asmah, 1995; Jamaliah, 2000; David & Kuang, 1999, 2005; Shanmuganathan, 2003). Kuang, Wong and David (2010) also found that Malaysians tend to avoid confrontations by resorting to silence. However, this only applies in the context of specific issues like money. The use of indirectness and silence may be interpreted as attempts to maintain social harmony. These strategies could imply that participants do not know any other way of communicating effectively. A person's poor ability to express him/herself during conflicts is also an indication that negative feelings are being suppressed. With the right strategy, these negative feelings can be diffused gradually.

Disagreements can occur at all levels of communication: between family members, superiors and subordinates, people of equal status, and also strangers. Disagreements between a superior and a subordinate (including parents and children) are expressions of power and hierarchy where those with the power assert themselves through disagreements and those without or with lesser power, succumb by suppressing their feelings. The more outspoken subordinate may react to the disagreements explicitly, but such a behavior is risky as it bears negative consequences. In that regard, people do need to have varied mechanisms for coping with disagreements. Some of these coping mechanisms will be discussed in this paper.

Habermas (1984) mentioned that every day communication is about an exchange of rational ideas between people who are equal and devoid of power. Everyday communication is communicatively achieved through agreement. Neither party can impose on the other, whether instrumentally or through intervention, and whether directly or indirectly. Agreements can be

obtained by force, 'but what comes to manifest through outside influence, or the use of violence, cannot count subjectively, as agreement because agreement rests on common convictions' (Habermas, 1984, p. 287).

Hovatter (1996) noted that disagreements are induced by one's personal orientation system (values, needs, interests, and intentions). Depending on one's personality and tolerance level, disagreements can be subtle, quiet or vehement. As long as the tolerance level is not overstressed, a disagreement may or may not be conveyed. If it is conveyed, it may be done so in a non-verbal manner, suggesting that the individual's emotion is within control (Hovatter, 1996).

Emotional intelligence and gender differences

Emotional intelligence is an important aspect of development that can enhance successful social interactions. A good level of emotional intelligence can help individuals alleviate conflicts. Investigating how males and females perceive their own emotional intelligence (EQ) levels, Lim (2011) found no significant gender difference in actual and self-estimated EQ level. However, he noted that both genders seemed to perceive that males have higher EQ levels than females. This interesting finding suggests that there is some form of stereotyping taking place in the minds of the local participants.

Najib (2012), however, found that more than half of the male (51.25%) and female (51.55%) students had low scores in emotional intelligence, but there was no significant difference between the two. Haryani, Sharifah, and Rose (2010) observed that gender was correlated with emotional self-regulation. Female participants had higher emotional self-regulation, thereby suggesting that females were better at controlling their emotions.

Methodology

The domain of disagreements compiled for this study was developed from a previous survey that was conducted on a group of young Malaysians. They were randomly asked if they experienced disagreements, and if so, in what context. From their responses, the contexts of disagreements were subsequently grouped as home (with parents, siblings, and boyfriend/girlfriend), education (university/colleges – lecturers, classmates and administrative staff), and workplace (bosses and colleagues). For the purpose of this paper, only the coping mechanisms used after disagreements in the home domain was applied.

Respondents comprised a non-probability sample of 672 Malaysian youths comprising 271 males and 401 females. Although their ages ranged from 19 to 40 years, a majority were between 20–25 years old (Mean age = 23.38, SD = 3.01). All had voluntarily participated in the survey which contained fourteen responses based on the 5-point Likert scale ranging from Always (1 point) to Never (5 points), and two open ended questions. The aim of the study was conveyed and all the questions contained in the survey form were explained in detail. The questionnaires were administered and collected by the researchers after respondents had completed them within 2030 min. Respondents who were unable to complete on time were allowed to take the survey forms home. These were then collected the following week by the researchers at a specific pick-up point. Out of 684 questionnaires administered, only 672 were found suitable for analysis with the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 16.

This paper focuses on the data generated from one of the questions which asks, 'How do you normally react after disagreements? You can tick more than one option. A total of 21 options were provided for this question: 'sleep', 'cry', 'mope/sulk', 'feel unhappy', 'feel depressed', 'feel angry', 'feel life is unfair', 'feel confused', 'feel sad', 'feel restless', 'cannot concentrate', 'keep feelings to myself', 'no difference', 'share feelings with friends', 'share feelings with family', 'share feelings with intimate friend', 'see counsellor', 'listen to loud music', 'listen to soft music', 'write into a journal,' and 'play games'. These responses comprised actions that can be taken to cope with their disagreements. They may also experience

certain sensations following the disagreements. The 5-point Likert scale responses ranged from 'always', 'frequently', 'sometimes', 'rarely' to 'never'. Mann-Whitney U Tests were undertaken to test gender differences.

Results

For the purpose of this paper, the survey questions first looked into whether or not Malaysian youths experienced disagreement in the home domain. Of the total of 672 respondents surveyed, statistics indicate that majority of the youths – 91.6% males and 94.6% females, agreed that they experienced disagreements in their interactions in the home domain. The Chi-square analysis indicates no gender difference in disagreement with others in the home domain, $r(722) = .18, p > .05$.

To further test the frequency of disagreements occurring in their lives, the Mann-Whitney U Test was used to determine gender differences. No significance in gender difference was noted, with the mean rank for males being 379.50, and for females being 340.79.

To tap into the Malaysian youths' perception of whether or not disagreements spoil their day, gender differences were compared. Results showed that there were gender differences, $r(667) = .72, p < .05$.

The following section focuses on gender difference in the coping mechanisms used after disagreements in the home domain.

Table 1: Mann-Whitney U Test on Gender Differences on the way Youths React

| Coping Mechanism | | n | Mean Rank | U | Z | P |
|---------------------|---|-----|-----------|----------|-------|-----|
| Sleep | M | 280 | 372.85 | 50022.00 | 3.02 | Sig |
| | F | 411 | 327.71 | | | |
| Cry | M | 280 | 445.86 | 29018.00 | 11.39 | Sig |
| | F | 409 | 275.95 | | | |
| Mope / Sulk | M | 271 | 387.46 | 38898.50 | 6.22 | Sig |
| | F | 395 | 296.48 | | | |
| Feel Unhappy | M | 283 | 380.27 | 50864.00 | 3.28 | Sig |
| | F | 418 | 331.18 | | | |
| Feel Depressed | M | 279 | 357.73 | 53922.00 | 1.39 | NS |
| | F | 411 | 337.20 | | | |
| Feel Angry | M | 279 | 345.77 | 57410.00 | .139 | NS |
| | F | 414 | 347.83 | | | |
| Feel Life is Unfair | M | 280 | 334.63 | 54355.00 | .73 | NS |
| | F | 401 | 345.45 | | | |
| Feel Confused | M | 276 | 356.90 | 52053.00 | 1.69 | NS |
| | F | 407 | 331.89 | | | |
| Feel Sad | M | 279 | 381.38 | 46488.00 | 4.25 | Sig |
| | F | 408 | 318.44 | | | |

(continued)

Table 1: Mann-Whitney U Test on Gender Differences on the way Youths React (continued)

| Coping Mechanism | | n | Mean Rank | U | Z | P |
|----------------------------|---|-----|-----------|----------|------|-----|
| Restless | M | 279 | 352.78 | 51677.00 | 1.59 | NS |
| | F | 398 | 329.34 | | | |
| Cannot Concentrate | M | 282 | 341.51 | 56396.00 | .00 | NS |
| | F | 400 | 341.49 | | | |
| Keep to Myself | M | 278 | 350.33 | 54256.50 | .89 | NS |
| | F | 406 | 337.14 | | | |
| No Difference | M | 276 | 303.03 | 45409.50 | 3.35 | Sig |
| | F | 386 | 351.86 | | | |
| Share with Friend | M | 273 | 370.04 | 44487.00 | 4.06 | Sig |
| | F | 396 | 310.84 | | | |
| Share with Family | M | 272 | 383.44 | 42447.50 | 5.13 | Sig |
| | F | 403 | 307.33 | | | |
| Share with Intimate Friend | M | 271 | 334.89 | 52063.00 | .39 | NS |
| | F | 391 | 329.15 | | | |
| See Someone I Trust | M | 271 | 324.29 | 51027.00 | .81 | NS |
| | F | 390 | 335.66 | | | |
| Listen to Loud Music | M | 273 | 317.58 | 49297.00 | 1.77 | NS |
| | F | 392 | 343.74 | | | |
| Listen to Soft Music | M | 277 | 354.42 | 50850.50 | 1.82 | NS |
| | F | 399 | 327.44 | | | |
| Write into a Journal | M | 273 | 362.97 | 45600.00 | 3.53 | Sig |
| | F | 393 | 313.03 | | | |
| Paint/Draw | M | 273 | 341.82 | 51100.00 | 1.07 | NS |
| | F | 392 | 326.86 | | | |
| Play Games | M | 278 | 287.47 | 41136.50 | 5.63 | Sig |
| | F | 394 | 371.09 | | | |

Sig = Significant at $p < .05$ NS = Not significant

As can be seen, there were significant gender differences in some of the coping mechanisms applied. The mean ranks indicate that male youths tended to significantly differ from their female counterparts in the following ways: cry (11.39), mope/sulk (6.22), play games (5.63), share with family (5.13), feel sad (4.25), share with friend (4.06), write into a journal (3.53), no difference (3.35), and feel unhappy (3.28).

In addition, male youths have less or no emotions to express despite a negative event like a disagreement. with restraint in their emotions by claiming 'No Difference'. Results further indicate that when they do try to cope by resorting to some mechanism, male youths chose 'Play Games' as an active activity after disagreements. However, the nature of the type of games played was not elaborated upon.

The findings of this study also showed that female youths differed significantly from male youths. The results also showed females liked sharing their feelings with others and expressed themselves after disagreements in subtle as well as expressive manners.

There were little or no gender differences in the following reactions, feelings or coping mechanisms after a domestic disagreement: 'feel depressed', 'feel angry', 'feel life is unfair', 'feel confused', 'feel restless', 'cannot concentrate', 'keep feelings to myself', 'share feelings with intimate friend', 'see someone i can trust', 'listen to loud music', 'listen to soft music' and 'paint/draw'.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has reported on the findings of the coping mechanisms used by 672 non-probable samples of Malaysian nationality. Evidence can be drawn to show that the majority of Malaysian youths experienced disagreement in the home domain, but there was no gender variation in this aspect of their interaction in the home domain. There was evidence indicating no gender variation in the frequency of disagreements experienced in their lives, but there were gender variations in terms of whether or not disagreements spoiled their day.

The comparison of results implied that males were more restrained with their emotions- 'No Difference' after a disagreement in the home domain. In contrast, females tended to succumb to their emotions by feeling sad. They also chose to express themselves inwardly through crying, moping or sulking in silo. While males chose to indulge in an active activity like playing games to cope with the disagreement, majority of the females chose to "Sleep". Male youths did nothing about their emotions, henceforth, feelings. Female youths shared their feelings with others, as Conner (2000) had noted about women, they needed to seek support from others.

The results of this study showed a communication trait or pattern that demonstrates some aspect of the male stoic traits and the female expressive behaviors, as noted by literature. The interpretation derived from this study imply that the male youths' indifference towards disagreements suggest their self-restraints, avoiding any reactions or responses to the situation. Such a response pattern suggests that male youths were adhering to the conventional male roles of being stoic, restrained, and non-expressive (Levant, 1992).

There is perhaps no ideal way to release stress after each disagreement. Male children who are brought up with sufficient family love and support are healthier and stronger in facing adversities in their adulthood. Japan, a developed nation with male dominant mentality, is evolving in a way where males are allowed to cry in public. This phenomenon can be seen in many reality television or modern dramas in Japan (Ikoro, Omessah & Ekevere, 2015).

Conner (2000) contended that men who are less expressive could explore, understand and appreciate communication traits that are regarded as feminine, and by so doing, would understand themselves better. Likewise, when women have explored and come to understand how men perceive problem solving in a relationship, women themselves can be better equipped in understanding their own emotional needs that resonate and reflect femininity. For that reason, it is recommended that further research be conducted on younger men and women in other domains, such as love relation and friendship, workplace and education in other regions in order to verify if the distinctions do exist between men and women. Future studies can focus on finding ways to deflect this possibility of men adhering too heavily to social norms. It is vital to identify with swiftness if this restrained behavior of men can cause the Malaysian youths to succumb to stress, and ultimately experienced some mental health issues. Emotions, whether among men or women, need to be expressed and healthily

managed. If left unattended, this could potentially result in excessive stress thereby leading to a high level of anxiety for men. Nonetheless, this threat needs to be addressed and further evidenced by future research.

Carothers and Reis (2012) noted that average men and women are indifferent in aspects pertaining to interpersonal orientation (e.g. empathy, relational-interdependent self-construal), gender-related dispositions (e.g. masculinity, femininity, care orientation, unmitigated communion, fear of success, science inclination, personality type), and intimacy (intimacy prototypes and stages, social provisions, intimacy with best friend).

The above notion is applicable to the fact that males and females did not show very significant differences with regards to their emotions and feelings after a domestic disagreement. For example, there were little or no gender differences in terms of how both genders were emotionally affected by domestic disagreement: feel depressed, feel angry, feel life is unfair, feel confused, feel restless, cannot concentrate, keep feelings to myself, share feelings with intimate friend, boy/girlfriend, see someone i can trust, listen to loud music, listen to soft music and paint/draw.

However, the results showed that after having disagreements in the home domain, Malaysian females were more likely to express themselves, via self-restricting activities such as crying and sulking, as compared to men. The aftermath discomfort or anger due to disagreement is hence, confined to themselves. However, some females would not just do the self-confining acts in silo. They also tend to share their feelings with other people whom they trust, seeking validation of their feelings by telling or consulting others. As previous studies (Kilmartin, 1994; Pennebaker, 1995) had shown, women communicate to share their feelings with others after disagreements. Talking it out perhaps helped to scaffold the aftermath of disagreement, such as the feelings of discomfort or uncertainty.

Limitations

The findings of this study have shed some light on the coping mechanisms chosen by 672 Malaysian youths to show that gender variation exists. This study also confirms a cultural phenomenon that male youths behave in a 'masculine' manner by being introverted, suppressive, or non-expressive of their arising emotions. They keep feelings to themselves although they might resort to intrapersonal outlets to stabilize their emotions, and in this case, playing games. Nonetheless, the nature of the game (e.g. online, physical sports, contact games or

engaging in tournament) had not been clearly specified in the responses, hence it could not be further elaborated. The finding of this paper is probably too small to substantiate any solid claims about gender variation for the general Malaysian youths. However, the outcome may be able to assist youths to detect their own strengths and weaknesses when dealing with disagreements, particularly in the home domain. The step for any behavioral change, can thus begin with the individuals recognizing their own habitual responses and behavioral traits in disagreements (Habermas, 1984; Hovatter, 1996).

There could be another socio-cultural dimension that has not been addressed in this quantitative study. For example, given the multi-ethnic culture of Malaysia, the youths are probably and naturally more tolerant towards disagreements both in the public and the home domains. They may also be expected to be obedient by leaning towards their family norms, values, and expectations. Thus, they behave in the way they are expected to, not truly in the manner they wish to respond to. It is hoped that the findings of this paper can enhance our understanding as well as empower the Malaysian youths in their interaction with others by allowing them to adjust their behavior patterns whilst dealing with others across different cultures, boundaries and social positions.

As a concluding note, disagreements and differences in opinions amongst family members and those living under the same roof can always be dealt with more harmoniously via effective communications. This is embedded in trust and support for each other. Therefore, it is essential for parents and their young adults to establish the trust and support that is required to mitigate the situation within the home domain.

Competing Interest Statement

All authors have read and approved the manuscript and take full responsibility for its contents. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Acknowledgements

We wish to convey our thanks to the University of Malaya for the grant RG238/11HNE. In addition, the authors would like to thank the reviewers and editors of this manuscript for publishing our manuscript in this scholarly journal.

We wish to convey our thanks to the University of Malaysia for the grant RG238/11HNE.

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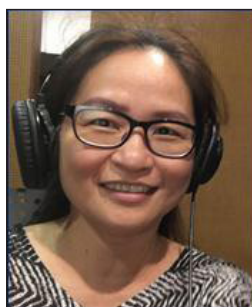
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