



MINISTRY OF YOUTH AND SPORTS

YOURS' HIGHLIGHTS 2025

2025 YOURS

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR YOUTH

EMPOWERING YOUTH FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE: SHAPING A RESILIENT AND RESPONSIBLE GENERATION

1st - 2nd JULY 2025 | KOTA KINABALU, SABAH

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**MALAYSIA
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YOURS' Highlights 2025

International Conference for Youth 2025 (YOURS' 25)

"Empowering Youth for Sustainable Future:
Shaping a Resilient and Responsible
Generation"

Organized collaboratively by the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia
(IYRES) and Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)

Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES) 2026

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DISCLAIMER: This publication and writing are based on reporting during the presentation and have been updated and summarized.

International Conference for Youth 2025 (YOURS' 25)

" Empowering Youth for Sustainable Future: Shaping a Resilient and Responsible Generation"

Organized by

Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES) 2025

In Collaboration with

Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)

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ABOUT YOURS'25

YOURS'25 continues the legacy of the International Conference for Youth, serving as a dynamic platform that brings together key stakeholders in youth development. The conference was held on 1–2 July 2025 at Ming Garden Hotel and Residences, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, jointly organized by the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES) and Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), with strategic collaboration from the Sabah Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Sabah Convention Bureau.

Carrying the theme “**Empowering Youth for Sustainable Future: Shaping a Resilient and Responsible Generation**,” YOURS'25 gathered policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and NGOs from Malaysia and abroad to exchange knowledge, research findings, and best practices that drive evidence-based youth development.

The conference was officiated by The Honourable Adam Adli Abd Halim, Deputy Minister of Youth and Sports Malaysia, with the presence of YBhg. Dato' Ts. Dr. Nagulendran Kangayatkarasu, Secretary General of the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

Over two days, the conference featured four main forums, involving 15 local and international experts and guided by four moderators, addressing sub-themes on youth social issues, economic participation, political socialization, and digital literacy, all aimed at shaping a more resilient and responsible generation.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of YOURS'25 are as follows:

1. To strengthen understanding of the youth development landscape in Malaysia and internationally;
2. To discuss current issues that impact the well-being, resilience, and social responsibility of the young generation;
3. To review and assess the latest research findings and data on youth challenges and opportunities in social, economic, political, and digital aspects;

4. To provide actionable guidelines and best practices for empowering youth towards a sustainable future;
5. To foster the exchange of knowledge, experience, and ideas for building a balanced and resilient lifestyle among youth; and
6. To disseminate effective strategies that reinforce evidence-based youth policies and development initiatives.

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ABOUT YOURS'25 HIGHLIGHTS

This publication reflects IYRES' aspiration and mandate as the *“Leader of Youth Development Research and Youth Data Reference Centre Towards 2035,”* emphasising the importance of relevant, high-quality research in shaping a resilient and responsible young generation. YOURS'25 continues the legacy of the International Conference for Youth as a dynamic platform that brings together key stakeholders in youth development at both national and international levels.

With the theme *“Empowering Youth for a Sustainable Future: Shaping a Resilient and Responsible Generation,”* the conference serves as an important avenue for policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and civil society organisations to exchange knowledge, research findings, and best practices that support evidence-based youth development.

YOURS' Highlights 2025 is published as a continuation of this effort, broadening the reach and understanding of the issues discussed during the conference. With the participation of 118 attendees and presentations by 15 local and international experts across four major forums, YOURS'25 offered diverse perspectives on youth social issues, economic participation, political socialisation, and digital literacy. These insights have been consolidated to support a holistic understanding of the contemporary youth landscape.

YOURS' Highlights 2025 also focuses on critical issues affecting the well-being of young people, including mental health challenges, social pressures, digital safety risks, and economic uncertainties that increasingly affect youth stability today. IYRES data for 2024, which shows that 28.4% of Malaysia's population consists of young people aged 15 to 30, underscores the need to understand their voices, needs, and aspirations deeply. This publication, therefore, compiles facts, statistics, and recent research findings to support effective policy formulation and targeted interventions that empower youth development.

In an increasingly digital era, YOURS' Highlights 2025 highlights the importance of digital literacy, resilience, creativity, and essential 21st-century skills (i.e., critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, & communication, in developing responsible digital citizens. Threats such as online scams, digital exploitation, misinformation, and exposure to extremist content demand new

and proactive approaches. As such, this publication serves as a scientific reference that equips readers with knowledge on digital risks and strategies to empower youth to navigate modern challenges.

Ultimately, YOURS' Highlights 2025 represents a collective effort to strengthen the youth development ecosystem through comprehensive and evidence-driven research. With support from strategic partners such as Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and various collaborating agencies, this publication not only documents the expert discussions and perspectives but also serves as a medium to expand awareness, enhance knowledge, and reinforce our collective commitment to addressing youth-related issues at the national and ASEAN levels. It is hoped that this publication will serve as an important reference for academics, policymakers, practitioners, and youth themselves in shaping a more sustainable and inclusive future.



WELCOMING ADDRESS



As a national youth research center, research efforts carried out by the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES) do not only involve presentation and reporting of research findings. In fact, various alternatives have been taken by IYRES to convey and share the results of the study to the community and stakeholders who are directly or indirectly involved in youth development. One of them is by holding the International Conference for Youth 2025 (YOURS' 25): *Empowering Youth for a Sustainable Future*

- *Shaping a Resilient and Responsible Generation* on the 1st–2nd of July 2025, involving a total of 118 participants.

This conference is seen in accordance with the vision statement of IYRES: "*Leader of Youth Development Research and Youth Data Reference Centre Towards 2035.*" With the publication of this YOURS' Highlights 2025, it could help maximize dissemination and use. YOURS' Highlights 2025 are equipped with facts about mental health issues as well as the results of the Youth Mental Health study in the country and abroad, which are very suitable as reading material and scientific reference for all groups of readers, such as academicians, practitioners, youth and others.

In appreciation, I would like to express my gratitude for the collaboration with Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) in making this conference a success. YOURS'25 has involved 15 presenters, comprising 11 local presenters and 4 international presenters who have shared tips reflecting our collective commitment to nurturing empowered, forward-thinking youth who are equipped to lead and thrive in an ever-evolving global landscape. I would like to sincerely thank the 118 participants for your valuable involvement in this conference. May this effort continue to raise awareness, expand knowledge, and strengthen our collective commitment in addressing youth-related challenges at both national and international levels.

Mrs. Shahhanim Yahya

Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES)

OPENING REMARKS



Young people are not only the leaders of the future but also key partners in shaping the present, especially within the ASEAN region. Your role is central to driving change, and your energy, creativity, and vision are crucial for achieving peace, prosperity, and social progress. What we begin today is not a temporary initiative but the starting point of meaningful and transformative action—providing a platform for youth to speak, lead, and help shape our shared future.

Today's young generation is growing up in a world filled with complex and rapidly evolving challenges, ranging from emotional pressures and shifting social expectations to misinformation and digital security threats. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach and a youth-first mindset that empowers young people with the knowledge, support, and inclusive spaces they need. Issues such as low financial literacy, rural-to-urban migration without adequate preparation, and the difficulty of sustaining entrepreneurship in an uncertain economy further highlight the importance of building long-term decision-making skills.

According to IYRES data for 2024, Malaysia is home to 1.95 million young people aged 15 to 30, representing 28.4% of the nation's population. In recent years, we have witnessed a significant increase in youth participation in politics, public policy, youth organizations, and advocacy efforts. This clearly demonstrates that young people today are not passive observers but active contributors and key drivers of progress who continue to shape the nation's direction.

As we navigate an increasingly digital world, threats such as online scams, digital sexual exploitation, data breaches, and the spread of extremist content make digital literacy more important than ever. I look forward to receiving the findings from this conference, which will support efforts to strengthen youth-focused policies across ASEAN. My sincere appreciation goes to IYRES, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and Universiti Malaysia Sabah for organizing this meaningful event, and to everyone who has contributed to its success.

YB Adam Adli Abd Halim
Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia

WELCOMING REMARKS



Youth today are living in a fast-changing world full of pressure, uncertainty, and new challenges that directly affect their mental, social, and economic well-being. A healthy environment encompasses physical, social, and psychological aspects that support well-being and reduce health risks. Improving infrastructure with green spaces, including in urban areas, and implementing positive planning in schools can help create a better and more balanced environment for everyone.

Youth unemployment in Malaysia remains a pressing concern. According to research conducted by IYRES, youth unemployment rates from 2005 to 2024 show worrying trends, highlighting the ongoing difficulties faced by young people in securing stable employment. Additionally, low financial literacy, with only 3% of workers having a high level of financial knowledge, contributes to poor saving habits, bankruptcy, and long-term mental health issues. Most youth bankruptcies are caused by personal loans, such as credit cards, emphasizing the urgent need for financial education.

In the modern technological era, youth must prioritize resilience, creativity, and vigilance to become responsible digital citizens. 21st-century skills, including the 4Cs (i.e., critical thinking, creativity, collaboration & communication) are essential for building competitiveness and innovation.

Moreover, youth must cultivate a sense of belonging to Malaysia and appreciate its ethnic diversity. Participation in volunteer work and community service not only strengthens relationships within the community but also enhances self-concept. Tolerance and unity among youth help improve inter-ethnic relations and support the building of a more harmonious and resilient nation.

YBhg. Professor Datuk Dr. Kasim Hj. Mansor, JP
Vice-Chancellor
Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)

THEME 1: YOUTH MENTAL STRENGTH, REAL TALK

Research highlights how youth mental health is shaped by multiple forces biological, emotional, social, and cultural. Some studies explore how natural plant compounds may support mood, focus, or stress relief, but the real talk is this: anything that affects the brain must be backed by solid science, safe dosages, and responsible use.

“Natural” doesn’t mean risk-free, especially when psychoactive effects are involved. Substance use remains a major challenge, with many young people exposed early to smoking, alcohol, or drugs. Curiosity, peer influence, stress, and the need to escape pressures all fuel this behaviour. Effective prevention comes from life skills, strong role models, supportive communities, and evidence-based interventions like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), motivational interviewing, mindfulness, and family-centered approaches.

Youth sexual and reproductive health challenges driven by low awareness, cultural pressure, media influence, and substance use also impact mental well-being. This calls for accessible, youth-friendly education, parental involvement, and stronger support systems.

In schools, mental health issues such as depression, self-harm, family conflict, and post-pandemic stress are rising. Programs that build gratitude, emotional regulation, and self-awareness show promise. Meanwhile, academic performance is influenced less by social support and more by personal traits, especially conscientiousness, which consistently predicts stronger outcomes.

Across all findings, one message stands out: **Youth thrive when they are informed, supported, and empowered to make healthy decisions for their minds and future.**

Medicinal Plants of Sabah and Their Potential Role in Youth Mental Health

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Background

The escalating global crisis in youth mental health, characterized by rising rates of anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders, necessitates innovative and accessible therapeutic solutions. Concurrently, there is a renewed scientific interest in pharmacologically active plant compounds, particularly those with a history of ethnobotanical use. The biodiversity-rich region of Sabah, Malaysia, offers a unique repository of such flora, some of which have been utilized traditionally for their effects on the mind and body. This study investigates a selection of plants with documented psychoactive properties, *Papaver somniferum* (opium), *Erythroxylum coca* (coca), *Lophophora williamsii* (peyote), *Catha edulis* (khat), alongside the widely consumed *Coffea spp.* (coffee), *Camellia sinensis* (tea), and *Theobroma cacao* (cacao). While the first group is controversial and strictly controlled due to high abuse potential, they contain alkaloids of significant neuropharmacological interest. The latter group represents legally and socially accepted vehicles for psychoactive compounds (caffeine, theanine & theobromine). This research posits that the active constituents within these plants hold potential mechanisms for mood regulation, cognitive enhancement, and stress reduction. However, their application, particularly for vulnerable youth populations, is fraught with complexity, demanding a careful balance between exploring therapeutic potential and mitigating risks of misuse, dependency, and adverse effects.

Methodology

This study employs a multidisciplinary framework integrating ethnobotanical review, phytochemical analysis, and neuropharmacological evaluation. First, a systematic review of historical and anthropological literature was conducted to document the traditional use of these plants within Sabah and broader regional contexts, focusing on applications related to mood, energy, and cognition. Second, the primary active psychoactive compounds for each species were identified: morphine and codeine from *P. somniferum*; cocaine from *E. coca*; mescaline from *L. williamsii*; cathinone from *C. edulis*; and caffeine, L-theanine, and theobromine from the common beverages. Their established mechanisms of action on the central nervous system, including interactions with monoamine neurotransmitter systems (dopamine, serotonin & norepinephrine), opioid receptors, and neuromodulator pathways were analysed. The core methodological approach involves a critical comparative analysis of these

mechanisms against the pathophysiological hallmarks of common youth mental health challenges. This theoretical model is used to hypothesize potential therapeutic windows while explicitly charting the associated risks, such as neuroadaptation, tolerance, and acute toxicity. The methodology underscores the necessity of proceeding from this theoretical foundation to structured clinical inquiry.

Key Findings

The phytochemical analysis confirms that all examined plants contain compounds with profound CNS activity. Traditional stimulants like *Coffea spp.* and *C. edulis* (khat) demonstrate potential for transient alertness and mood elevation via catecholaminergic activation, relevant for fatigue-related depressive symptoms. The anxiolytic and focus-promoting effects of *C. sinensis* (tea), attributed to the synergistic combination of caffeine and L-theanine, present a compelling model for gentler neuromodulation. *T. cacao* (cacao) offers compounds with mild stimulant and putative mood-elevating properties. The alkaloids in the controlled plants, such as morphine (opium) and mescaline (peyote), while heavily restricted, reveal mechanisms for profound analgesia, emotional processing, and introspective states, pointing to underexplored psychiatric applications in severe, treatment-resistant conditions under absolute control.

However, the findings crucially highlight a direct and inseparable correlation between psychoactive potency and potential for harm. The risk of misuse, dependency, and severe psychosocial consequences is exceptionally high for cocaine, opium-derived substances, and synthetic cathinones. Even for legally accepted substances like caffeine, adverse effects including anxiety, insomnia, and dependence are documented, particularly with high intake common among youth. The key finding is not a recommendation for use, but the identification of a critical knowledge gap: the near-total absence of rigorous, dose-controlled clinical research on whole-plant extracts or isolated compounds (excluding caffeine) for specific youth mental health indications within safe and ethical frameworks. The ethnobotanical record provides a starting point for inquiry, not a prescriptive guide for modern application.

Conclusion

This study concludes that select medicinal plants from Sabah possess bioactive compounds with mechanistic pathways relevant to youth mental health therapeutics. The potential of widely consumed plants like tea and cacao, with their favourable safety profiles, merits targeted clinical investigation for adjunctive use in managing mild anxiety and improving cognitive resilience. Conversely, the powerful psychoactive properties of controlled plants like opium, coca, and peyote underscore their profound dangers alongside their scientific interest; any future research must be preconditioned on extreme caution, stringent ethical oversight, and recognition of their illegal status outside highly regulated research settings. The conclusion emphasizes a dual

imperative. First, the necessity for rigorous, phased clinical trials to move beyond ethnobotanical correlation to establish causal efficacy, optimal and safe dosages, and clear risk-benefit profiles for any plant-derived intervention. Second, the urgent need for robust psychoeducation for youth, distinguishing between potentially supportive dietary psychoactive and harmful substances of abuse. Integrating validated ethnobotanical knowledge into modern mental health strategies offers a promising but perilous frontier one that must be navigated with scientific rigor, ethical clarity, and an unwavering commitment to patient safety above all else.

Keywords: youth mental health, psychoactive plant compounds, mood regulation, stress reduction

Youth Mental Strength, Real Talk: Drug Abuse Among Youth

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Background

Substance abuse among youth represents one of the most critical and pervasive public health and social challenges globally, with profound implications for individuals, families, and communities. This issue strikes at the core of adolescent development, derailing potential and inflicting severe, long-term damage. The period of adolescence is characterized by significant neurobiological, psychological, and social transformation, making youth particularly vulnerable to the allure and subsequent harms of substance use. In the specific context highlighted by this study, the problem is alarmingly acute. Filipino adolescents face exceptionally early initiation, with exposure to substances like tobacco beginning as young as age seven and illicit drug use reported by age eleven. This premature engagement triggers a devastating cascade of negative outcomes, including deteriorating mental health, declining academic performance, compromised physical well-being, and fractured social relationships. The profound interconnectedness of these consequences necessitates a holistic approach to understanding and intervention. This study, therefore, employs a comprehensive biopsychosocial-spiritual lens to move beyond simplistic cause-and-effect models, aiming to dissect the complex web of influences driving youth substance abuse and to identify effective, multi-level strategies for prevention, intervention, and resilience-building.

Methodology

This study adopts a systematic, narrative review methodology, synthesizing existing empirical research, theoretical frameworks, and program evaluations within the field of adolescent substance abuse. Its analytical foundation is the biopsychosocial-spiritual model, a holistic framework that guides the examination of contributing factors across multiple domains: biological (genetic predisposition, neurodevelopmental effects of drugs); psychological (mental health conditions, trauma, coping deficits); social (peer pressure, family dynamics, socioeconomic status, community environment); and spiritual (lack of purpose, meaning, or connection). This model allows for an integrated analysis of the multifaceted causes and risk factors that predispose youth to substance abuse. The research further investigates a spectrum of evidence-based strategies, categorizing them into primary prevention (universal programs aimed at deterring initiation) and secondary/tertiary intervention (targeted treatments for those at high risk or already engaged in use). The synthesis evaluates the efficacy of these approaches based on documented outcomes in improving knowledge, enhancing coping mechanisms, and reducing substance use behaviours and their associated symptoms.

Key Findings

The study identifies a complex interplay of risk factors across the biopsychosocial-spiritual spectrum. Key drivers include genetic vulnerability, co-occurring mental health disorders like depression and anxiety, histories of trauma or abuse, pervasive peer pressure, dysfunctional family systems characterized by conflict or neglect, socioeconomic disadvantage, and a profound sense of existential emptiness or lack of positive identity.

In response to this complexity, the analysis reveals that effective strategies must be equally multifaceted. Prevention is most successful when it is proactive and skill based. Life skills education teaching critical thinking, stress management, refusal skills, and emotional regulation empower youth to navigate challenges without resorting to substances. The presence of positive adult role models and strong social support networks provides protective scaffolding. Furthermore, psychoeducation for both youth and their families demystify substances and their harms, fostering informed decision-making.

For intervention, several therapeutic modalities demonstrate significant efficacy. Motivational Interviewing helps resolve ambivalence and strengthens a youth's internal motivation for change. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) equips individuals to identify and alter maladaptive thought patterns and behaviours linked to substance use. Mindfulness-based practices enhance emotional awareness and distress tolerance, reducing the impulse to use substances as a coping mechanism. Family Systems Theory addresses the relational context of abuse, working to improve communication, boundaries, and support within the home environment, which is often a critical factor in recovery.

Conclusion

This study concludes that combating youth substance abuse requires a fundamental shift from fragmented, reactive measures to a cohesive, systemic, and preventive paradigm. The alarming trend of early initiation underscores the urgent need for intervention long before experimental use begins. The cornerstone of an effective response is the integration of robust, community- and school-based prevention programs grounded in life skills and psychoeducation, creating a consistent protective environment. Simultaneously, healthcare and social services must provide accessible, evidence-based interventions like CBT and family therapy for those in need. Success is contingent upon strong institutional collaboration among educators, healthcare providers, law enforcement, community leaders, and families to deliver a unified message and support network. Finally, the study emphasizes the critical role of applied, culturally relevant research to continuously evaluate and adapt these strategies. By investing in this comprehensive, multi-pronged approach, one that builds resilience, fosters connection, and strengthens mental fortitude, society can empower its youth

not merely to avoid drugs, but to develop the intrinsic "mental strength" required to thrive and realize their full potential.

Keywords: youth substance abuse, adolescent vulnerability, biopsychosocial-spiritual approach, intervention strategies.

Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health: Trends and Challenges in Sabah, Malaysia

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Sabah State Health Department*

Background

Youth sexual and reproductive health (SRH) is a cornerstone of adolescent development, public health, and societal progress. In Malaysia, significant strides have been made in healthcare, yet substantial regional disparities persist. The state of Sabah presents a critical case study, where deeply entrenched social, cultural, and economic factors converge to create a challenging landscape for adolescent SRH. Teenage pregnancy serves as a potent indicator of this complex environment, reflecting gaps in knowledge, access to services, and socio-cultural pressures. Despite national initiatives, data indicate that Sabah continues to grapple with persistently high rates of adolescent pregnancy, signalling a systemic failure to reach and empower a significant portion of its youth. This trend carries profound implications, affecting young mothers' educational and economic prospects, perpetuating cycles of poverty, and posing risks to maternal and child health. This study examines the trajectory of teenage pregnancy in Sabah from 2018 to 2025, aiming to dissect the underlying drivers and evaluate the efficacy of current interventions. By doing so, it seeks to inform targeted strategies that can more effectively safeguard adolescent well-being and support their healthy transition into adulthood.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods, descriptive-analytical approach, primarily leveraging secondary data from the Sabah State Health Department's official records and surveillance systems covering the period from 2018 to 2025. The quantitative analysis focuses on yearly teenage pregnancy rates, demographic breakdowns of affected adolescents (including school status & marital status), and geographical distribution. To contextualize these statistics and understand the lived experiences behind them, the methodology incorporates a review of related policy documents, program evaluations, and existing sociological research on youth in Sabah. This synthesis allows for a nuanced exploration of the socio-behavioural determinants contributing to the observed trends. The analysis specifically assesses the implementation and reach of key national and state-level programs, such as the Adolescent-Friendly Health Services (AFHS) clinics and community awareness campaigns, against the profile of the most affected populations. This combination of statistical trend analysis and program review forms the basis for identifying systemic gaps and proposing evidence-based recommendations.

Key Findings

The data from Sabah reveals a persistent and troubling public health issue. Teenage pregnancy rates remain consistently high, with a recorded rate of 6.60% in 2023, a figure that significantly exceeds the national average and shows little sign of sustained decline. The demographic profile of these pregnancies is stark: the vast majority (84.9%) occur among out-of-school adolescents, and a significant proportion are linked to early marriage, whether formal or informal (*syarie*). This points to a critical disconnect, where the adolescents most at risk are precisely those who are most disconnected from formal education and institutional support systems.

A complex web of contributing factors underpins these statistics. Low comprehensive SRH knowledge, stemming from discomfort in discussing these topics at home and school, leaves youth vulnerable to misinformation. Cultural and religious norms can discourage open discussion while sometimes tacitly accepting early union as a solution to pregnancy. Media influence and pervasive digital content often provide distorted portrayals of sexuality without corresponding education on responsibility and health. Substance use is identified as a risk factor that impairs judgment, and limited legal knowledge about age of consent, statutory rape, and reproductive rights further compounds vulnerability.

While existing programs like Adolescent-Friendly Health Services (AFHS) and various community campaigns provide essential services, the study finds they suffer from inadequate reach and accessibility. Their impact is often limited to urban centres and engaged, in-school youth, failing to penetrate the high-risk groups of out-of-school adolescents in rural and remote communities, where needs are greatest.

Conclusion

This study concludes that addressing the high rate of teenage pregnancy in Sabah requires a fundamental shift from fragmented, clinic-based approaches to a comprehensive, multi-sectoral, and youth-centric strategy. Successful intervention must bridge the access gap by meeting high-risk adolescents where they are in their communities. This entails strengthening and decentralizing youth-friendly health services, making them more accessible, non-judgmental, and confidential. Simultaneously, robust, culturally sensitive SRH education must be delivered through alternative, trusted community channels beyond the formal school system. Active parental involvement must be fostered through awareness programs to break intergenerational cycles of silence. Finally, these efforts require stronger policy implementation and coordination between health, education, religious, and social welfare departments to create a cohesive support ecosystem. By integrating health education, accessible services, community engagement, and supportive policies, stakeholders in Sabah can develop a resilient framework to empower adolescents,

improve reproductive health outcomes, and enable all youth to pursue their full potential.

Keywords: youth sexual and reproductive health (SRH), teenage pregnancy, regional disparities in Sabah, adolescent well-being.

Mental Illness Affecting Youth: A Malaysian School Counselor's Perspective

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Background

Mental health among youth has emerged as a critical issue in Malaysia, particularly within the education sector, where students face increasing academic, social, and emotional pressures. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing mental health challenges, creating unprecedented stressors due to prolonged school closures, social isolation, and disruptions to routine. National data indicate that more than 424,000 children experience mental health issues, with approximately 21% suffering from depression and 56% engaging in self-harming behaviours. Contributing factors include cultural stigma surrounding mental health, family dysfunction, academic pressures, and the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic. These statistics underscore the urgent need for effective school-based mental health interventions and support mechanisms. In this context, school counsellors play a pivotal role as frontline practitioners in identifying, managing, and supporting students with mental health challenges.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, focusing on the perspectives and experiences of school counsellors in managing adolescent mental health issues. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and analysis of school counselling records to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced in practice. The study also reviewed evidence-based interventions implemented in schools, such as the Gratitude Blueprint Intervention Module (GBIM), which emphasizes gratitude practices, reflective writing, and emotional regulation skills. The integration of field experience with evidence-based practices allowed for a nuanced analysis of effective strategies and persistent barriers in school-based mental health support.

Key Findings

The findings revealed that school counsellors encounter multifaceted challenges in supporting students' mental health. Cultural stigma remains a significant barrier, as many students and families hesitate to seek counselling due to societal perceptions of

mental illness. Family dysfunction, including parental conflicts, neglect, and lack of emotional support, was frequently cited as a major contributing factor to students' psychological distress. The post-pandemic era has intensified these issues, with students reporting heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, and maladaptive coping mechanisms. Evidence-based interventions, particularly the GBIM module, demonstrated positive outcomes in reducing self-harming tendencies and improving emotional resilience. The module's focus on cultivating gratitude, reflective practices, and emotion regulation provided students with practical coping skills applicable to daily life. Counsellors highlighted the importance of contextualized counselling approaches that are culturally sensitive, age-appropriate, and adaptable to individual student needs. Additionally, the findings underscored the necessity for more trained counsellors, comprehensive mental health modules, and systematic institutional support to effectively address student mental health challenges.

Conclusion

The study confirms that school counsellors are critical agents in managing adolescent mental health, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Effective intervention requires a holistic approach, combining evidence-based strategies, culturally sensitive practices, and robust institutional support. Programs like the Gratitude Blueprint Intervention Module (GBIM) provide valuable tools for enhancing students' emotional well-being and reducing harmful behaviours. However, addressing the growing mental health needs of students necessitates increased counsellor training, broader implementation of relevant counselling modules, and systemic support from educational institutions. By strengthening these components, schools can create supportive environments that promote mental resilience, reduce stigma, and empower students to navigate psychological challenges successfully. This study emphasizes that the role of school counsellors is indispensable in fostering the mental health and overall well-being of Malaysian youth in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: youth mental health, school-based mental health interventions COVID-19, psychosocial impact, role of school counsellors

Youth Wellbeing Without Illicit Substances

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Background

Illicit substance abuse among youth has become an increasingly concerning public health issue, with clear implications for physical, mental, and social well-being. Adolescence is a developmental stage characterized by identity formation, emotional turbulence, heightened curiosity, and increased susceptibility to peer influence. These factors make young people particularly vulnerable to experimenting with harmful substances. Commonly misused drugs such as depressants, stimulants, hallucinogens, inhalants, and a growing variety of synthetic and designer substances pose significant risks to the developing brain and body. Their use can lead to impaired cognitive functioning, emotional instability, addiction, and long-term health complications. In many communities, rising trends in polysubstance use and the increasing availability of new psychoactive substances further complicate prevention and response efforts. Recognizing the interconnected nature of these risks, this study examines illicit substance abuse among youth, explores key psychosocial drivers, and evaluates prevention and rehabilitation strategies essential for safeguarding youth wellbeing.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive analytical approach, integrating findings from existing national reports, academic literature, and evidence-based prevention frameworks. Data were synthesized from research on youth behaviour, substance abuse patterns, and intervention programs implemented in schools and communities. Additionally, insights from practitioners in youth development, counselling, and rehabilitation were reviewed to understand practical challenges and best practices in addressing substance misuse. The methodology prioritizes triangulation of sources to ensure a balanced and accurate interpretation of youth experiences, risk factors, and responses to interventions. By combining theoretical perspectives with real-world observations, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of illicit substance abuse among young people.

Key Findings

The analysis reveals several critical findings regarding substance misuse and its impacts. First, youth commonly turn to substances due to curiosity, peer pressure, stress, escapism, and exposure to environments that normalize or glamorize drug use. Mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and emotional distress also increase susceptibility, especially when support systems are weak.

Second, the harmful effects of substance abuse are multifold. Depressants impair motor coordination and cognitive functioning, stimulants heighten cardiovascular risks, and hallucinogens distort perception and reality testing. Synthetic drugs often marketed as “legal highs”—present additional dangers due to their unpredictable chemical composition and potent psychoactive effects. These substances affect the developing brain more severely, leading to long-term emotional dysregulation, dependency, impaired judgment, and social withdrawal.

Third, current trends show a rise in polysubstance use, where multiple drugs are consumed simultaneously, intensifying health risks and complicating treatment. The proliferation of synthetic drugs further escalates the challenge, as they are harder to detect, regulate, and treat due to rapid chemical modifications and stronger addictive properties.

Fourth, prevention efforts must focus on empowering youth through life skills education, resilience-building, and emotional regulation training. Evidence suggests that youth who possess strong decision-making skills, self-esteem, and coping strategies are less likely to engage in risky behaviours. Family involvement—such as open communication, parental monitoring, and positive relationships—also plays a protective role. School-based programs, including awareness campaigns, counselling services, and peer support groups, are instrumental in early identification and prevention.

Finally, rehabilitation and community-based initiatives are essential for restoring well-being in youth affected by substance abuse. Effective rehabilitation incorporates psychological counselling, behavioural therapy, vocational training, and social reintegration support. Community involvement reinforces positive environments that foster purpose, connection, and sustained recovery.

Conclusion

The study underscores that ensuring youth wellbeing requires a comprehensive and holistic approach to preventing, intervening, and responding to illicit substance use. Substance abuse not only threatens physical and mental health but also disrupts social relationships, academic performance, and long-term life trajectories. Strengthening protective factors—such as resilience, family support, and school engagement—while implementing structured prevention programs is critical to reducing youth vulnerability. Addressing emerging challenges like polysubstance use and synthetic drug proliferation demands coordinated action across families, schools, health agencies, and community organizations. Rehabilitation and reintegration must be prioritized to ensure affected youth regain stability, purpose, and long-term sobriety. Ultimately, fostering a drug-free generation depends on sustained, collaborative efforts that place youth wellbeing at the centre of national and community development.

Keywords: youth illicit drug abuse, psychosocial risk factors, polysubstance prevention, rehabilitation.

Empowering Youth: Voice For Sustainable Development

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Background

Youth represent the most dynamic and potent demographic force for driving sustainable development, fostering innovation, and catalyzing social change. In Malaysia, and particularly in Sabah, young people stand at a critical juncture, poised to inherit and transform a landscape marked by both immense opportunity and systemic challenge. They confront a multifaceted array of barriers, including persistently high youth unemployment, unequal access to quality education and digital resources, the escalating threats of climate change and environmental degradation, and a growing sense of political and civic disengagement. These challenges risk undermining social cohesion and long-term national prosperity. This presentation posits that overcoming these obstacles requires a paradigm shift from viewing youth as passive beneficiaries or problems to be solved, to recognizing them as essential agents of change. The analysis is anchored in two complementary frameworks: Positive Youth Development (PYD), which focuses on building inherent strengths, assets, and competencies; and Amartya Sen's (1999) Development as Freedom, which conceptualizes development as the expansion of substantive freedoms and capabilities that enable individuals to lead lives they have reason to value. Within this dual theoretical lens, the presentation explores actionable strategies to enhance youth empowerment in Sabah, translating broad principles into context-specific pathways for growth, engagement, and leadership.

Methodology

This discussion is informed by a mixed-methods approach synthesizing policy analysis, a review of developmental frameworks (PYD and Development as Freedom), and the examination of case studies from Sabah. The methodological core involves a qualitative analysis of existing programs and platforms, assessing their design, implementation, and outcomes against the key tenets of empowerment. The presentation draws upon documented reports, program evaluations, and stakeholder insights related to specific initiatives. This desk-based research is structured to identify common success factors, gaps, and transferable lessons. Thematic analysis is used to distill strategies across several interconnected domains: education reform, economic opportunity, civic participation, and psychosocial well-being. This approach allows for

a holistic exploration of how structured interventions can expand youths' capabilities and freedoms in tangible ways, providing a nuanced understanding beyond purely quantitative metrics.

Key Findings

The investigation identifies several pivotal thematic areas and associated strategies for effective youth empowerment in Sabah. First, quality, future-oriented education is foundational, necessitating curricula that integrate sustainability literacy, ethical reasoning, and digital fluency alongside traditional academics. Second, targeted economic empowerment is critical, with significant opportunities lying in the green economy (e.g., sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, eco-tourism), ethical resource management, and social entrepreneurship. These sectors not only provide livelihoods but also align developmental goals with environmental stewardship. Third, meaningful civic and political participation must be institutionalized. Platforms that move beyond tokenism to give youth a genuine voice in policymaking are essential for fostering ownership and responsibility. Case examples such as SEEDS Sabah (promoting environmental stewardship), Youth PRENEUR Borneo (incubating social enterprise), and the Sabah Youth Assembly (a platform for policy dialogue) illustrate the efficacy of inclusive, action-oriented platforms. Furthermore, empowerment strategies must be integrative, simultaneously addressing psychosocial dimensions including mental resilience, poverty reduction, and identity formation. The findings underscore that the most effective approaches are those that are structured (providing clear pathways and support), values-driven (rooted in community and sustainability ethics), and context-sensitive (addressing Sabah's unique socio-economic and cultural realities).

Conclusion

Empowering the youth of Sabah is not merely a social imperative but a strategic investment in Malaysia's sustainable and equitable future. The evidence strongly suggests that a siloed approach is insufficient. Instead, a synergistic strategy that intertwines capability-building in education, economic opportunity in growth sectors, and authentic civic participation is required. By applying the strengths-based perspective of Positive Youth Development and the freedom centric approach of Sen's framework, stakeholders can design interventions that do more than mitigate problems they actively nurture agency, competence, and connection. The highlighted case studies demonstrate that when youth are provided with the right tools, platforms, and

trust, they emerge as resilient leaders and innovative problem-solvers. Ultimately, fostering a generation equipped with the skills, knowledge, ethical foundation, and agency to shape their own destinies is the most effective pathway to addressing Sabah's and Malaysia's pressing socio-economic and environmental challenges, ensuring a legacy of resilience and prosperity for generations to come.

Keywords: youth empowerment, positive youth development, sustainable development, Sabah

THEME 2: BUILDING YOUTH ECONOMIES: FROM POTENTIAL TO PROGRESS

This necessitates a strategic shift from viewing young people merely as a demographic dividend to actively empowering them as drivers of sustainable growth. Key to this transition is fostering entrepreneurial mindsets, equipping youth with critical digital and financial literacy skills, and creating supportive ecosystems that transform their innate potential into tangible progress.

Successful models demonstrate that innovation, adaptability, and technological integration are crucial for building resilient enterprises. Youth engagement, whether through digital entrepreneurship, sustainable agribusiness, or community-based social ventures, proves to be a powerful catalyst. These pathways not only address unemployment and underemployment but also unlock creativity, solve local challenges, and promote environmental sustainability. Grassroots innovation, when combined with targeted training, mentorship, and access to digital platforms, significantly enhances market reach, employability, and community impact.

Ultimately, converting youth potential into broad-based economic progress requires an integrated approach. This includes developing both intrinsic confidence and extrinsic skills, implementing supportive policies, and establishing incubators that provide practical guidance. By prioritizing youth empowerment through entrepreneurship, digital fluency, and sustainable practices, societies can build resilient economies where young people are central architects of their own and their communities' prosperity.

Empowering Youth In Digital Entrepreneurship: The First Step Towards The Economy Of The Future By Farm Bay Sdn Bhd

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Background

This case study examines the entrepreneurial journey of Dayang @ Jessie Binti Ambukon, the founder of Farm Bay Sdn. Bhd., a growing enterprise that integrates local agricultural resources with innovative digital strategies. As a youth-driven business operating within Malaysia's evolving digital economy, Farm Bay represents a model of how small and medium enterprises (SMEs) can navigate market constraints, adopt technological tools, and design sustainable business solutions. The case highlights the personal motivations and environmental factors that shaped Jessie's entrepreneurial drive, including her commitment to community empowerment, improving livelihood opportunities, and promoting local agricultural products.

The study is situated within broader discussions of digital entrepreneurship, which emphasize the role of technology, creativity, and adaptive business models in enhancing competitiveness. As the business landscape becomes increasingly influenced by digital tools ranging from social media marketing to e-commerce integration entrepreneurs face the dual challenge of innovating their products while maintaining sustainable operations. Against this backdrop, Jessie's experience offers valuable insights into how young entrepreneurs can address business obstacles, build resilient strategies, and pursue long-term sustainability.

Methodology

This case study employs a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews, document reviews, and observational insights related to the operations of Farm Bay Sdn. Bhd. Primary data was gathered through detailed dialogues with the founder, focusing on her entrepreneurship motivations, challenges encountered, innovation strategies, and use of digital platforms. Additional data was collected from company materials, digital footprints, and related secondary sources to contextualize the business ecosystem in which Farm Bay operates.

The qualitative design enables an in-depth understanding of the entrepreneurial processes, decision-making patterns, and creative practices adopted by Jessie to develop and sustain her business. This approach is suitable as it captures the lived experience of the entrepreneur and provides a holistic perspective on how digital tools and innovative thinking shape business growth. The data was coded thematically based on concepts of innovation, sustainability, digital adoption, and youth entrepreneurial development.

Key Findings

The analysis reveals several interconnected factors that contributed to the success and resilience of Farm Bay Sdn. Bhd.:

- Motivational Drivers:** Jessie's motivations stem from a combination of personal passion for local agriculture, a desire to uplift rural economic activities, and the ambition to build a business that reflects her creativity. These internal drivers sustained her perseverance despite financial constraints, market uncertainties, and operational challenges.
- Innovation and Creativity:** A central finding is the role of continuous innovation in ensuring the business remains relevant. Jessie's creativity is reflected in product development, branding strategies, and diversified business activities. She consistently seeks new ideas, experiments with market preferences, and evolves her business model to match emerging trends. This proactive approach strengthens Farm Bay's market positioning.
- Digital Entrepreneurship and Technological Integration:** Digital tools serve as a critical enabler for business expansion. Jessie effectively uses social media, e-commerce platforms, and digital communication tools to market products, engage customers, and streamline operations. Technological integration enhances the company's visibility, reduces operational barriers, and opens new market segments particularly important for SMEs with limited physical outreach.
- Business Sustainability:** Sustainability is embedded in Jessie's business philosophy through practices that prioritize local sourcing, community collaboration, and environmentally mindful operations. Her strategies include optimizing resource use, promoting ethical practices, and building a brand that resonates with responsible consumerism. This long-term sustainability focus contributes significantly to the company's operational resilience.

Adaptability and Problem-Solving: The findings highlight adaptability as a key competency. Jessie's ability to adjust to market changes, respond to customer feedback, and manage risks demonstrates strong problem-solving skills. These characteristics allow Farm Bay to weather disruptions and maintain growth momentum.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates how innovation, adaptability, and digital engagement play crucial roles in strengthening business resilience and enhancing competitiveness. Jessie's entrepreneurial journey showcases the importance of combining creativity with strategic digital adoption, demonstrating how technology can amplify market reach and operational efficiency. Her experience serves as a model for youth entrepreneurs,

offering practical lessons on developing problem-solving skills, embracing sustainable practices, and building dynamic business strategies within the digital economy.

Overall, Farm Bay Sdn. Bhd.'s trajectory reinforces the idea that entrepreneurial success is driven not only by technical skills but also by visionary thinking, strategic planning, and a commitment to continuous innovation.

Keywords: digital entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity, business sustainability, technological integration

Building Youth Economies: From Potential To Progress

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Background

Asia is home to more than 700 million youth aged 15 to 34, representing one of the world's largest concentrations of young people and a powerful source of human capital for future economic development. Despite this demographic advantage, global youth unemployment remains above 12%, and many more young individuals face underemployment, informal work conditions, or limited opportunities for upward mobility. These challenges highlight a persistent mismatch between youth skills and labour market demands, raising concerns about long-term productivity, economic inclusion, and social stability.

This study investigates key barriers contributing to employment challenges among Asian youth, with an emphasis on financial literacy, entrepreneurship development, and digital leadership. As economies transition toward digitalized and innovation-driven models, the need for adaptable, tech-savvy, and financially informed young people becomes increasingly urgent. Case studies from Indonesia, a country with a rapidly expanding youth population and a dynamic digital marketplace, provide concrete examples of how behavioural confidence, values-based marketing, and digital competencies can enhance youth employability and entrepreneurial success. The study positions these insights within the broader context of youth economic empowerment, capacity building, and policy interventions needed to unlock the region's youth dividend.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative multi-case study approach, drawing on literature reviews, policy documents, and case analyses focusing on youth entrepreneurship and digital innovation initiatives in Indonesia. Data was gathered from secondary sources including academic publications, reports from international organizations, government documents, and youth development programme evaluations. Particular emphasis was placed on initiatives related to financial literacy training, youth entrepreneurship incubators, and digital skills development platforms.

The case-based methodology enables an in-depth exploration of real-world examples that demonstrate how young people adopt entrepreneurial strategies, utilize digital tools, and navigate structural barriers. The thematic analysis framework was applied to categorize findings into core domains: financial capability, entrepreneurial behaviour, digital leadership, and ecosystem support. This approach provides a holistic

understanding of how skill development, mentorship, and policy frameworks collectively influence youth economic participation.

Key Findings

The study identifies several interrelated insights that shape youth employment outcomes and entrepreneurial potential:

Skill Gaps and Financial Literacy Deficiency:

Many young people in Asia lack foundational financial knowledge, including budgeting, credit management, and investment decision-making. These gaps weaken their economic resilience and reduce their ability to start or sustain business ventures. Targeted financial education programmes—especially those tailored to youth contexts significantly strengthen economic decision-making and long-term planning.

Entrepreneurship as a Strategic Pathway:

Entrepreneurship emerges as a critical avenue for reducing youth unemployment, particularly in regions where formal job creation cannot keep pace with population growth. Indonesian case studies demonstrate that behavioural confidence, values-driven marketing strategies, and creativity-driven business models contribute to higher entrepreneurial success rates. Youth incubators and innovation labs provide vital platforms for mentoring, prototyping ideas, and strengthening market competitiveness.

Digital Leadership and Technological Integration:

Digital skills have become essential for employability and business growth. Platforms such as Shopify, TikTok Shop, and social commerce channels enable youth entrepreneurs to reach broader markets, automate business processes, and enhance customer engagement. Indonesian youth who effectively leverage these digital platforms benefit from increased visibility, revenue growth, and cross-border market opportunities.

Role of Ecosystem Support:

Successful youth economic participation requires structured support systems, including mentorship, policy incentives, and access to financing. Programmes that integrate entrepreneurial training with digital literacy and soft skills development produce stronger outcomes in terms of employability and business sustainability.

Resilience and Adaptability:

Youth who engage in continuous skill upgrading, digital experimentation, and values-based entrepreneurship demonstrate greater resilience in dynamic economic environments. This adaptability is crucial for navigating uncertainty, technological disruption, and shifting labour market demands.

Conclusion

The study concludes that bridging the youth employment gap in Asia requires a holistic and integrated approach. Financial literacy, entrepreneurship development, and digital leadership must be strengthened simultaneously to unlock the full potential of the region's young population. Case studies from Indonesia underscore that combining behavioural confidence with technological capability and value-driven business strategies leads to improved employability, stronger entrepreneurial performance, and greater economic resilience.

To fully realize the youth dividend, supportive policies, mentorship networks, and investment in youth-focused innovation ecosystems are essential. When these elements are aligned, young people can transition more effectively into meaningful work, contribute to sustainable economic growth, and drive digital transformation across Asia.

Keywords: youth employment and unemployment, financial literacy, entrepreneurship development, digital leadership and skills

Social Entrepreneurship For Rural Youth

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Background

Rural socio-economic development in Malaysia continues to face persistent structural challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, limited employment opportunities, and increasing youth outmigration to urban areas. These factors constrain local economic growth and undermine the long-term sustainability of rural communities. Limited access to entrepreneurial knowledge, start-up capital, and market opportunities further restricts the potential of rural youth to become drivers of local innovation. Within this context, social entrepreneurship has emerged as an important approach to improving community well-being by offering solutions grounded in social impact and sustainability.

The Social Entrepreneurship for Rural Youth (SERY) programme was introduced as a strategic intervention aimed at empowering rural youth through comprehensive training, mentorship, capacity-building, and structured monitoring to nurture social entrepreneurship. Among the standout initiatives under this programme is the organic fertilizer innovation project developed by Borneo Fertilyst. The project successfully transformed 365 tonnes of agricultural waste specifically banana peels into high-value organic fertilizer, generating RM284,266 in income for 25 local individuals. Additionally, more than 600 participants have been empowered through 15 community programmes focusing on sustainability, agropreneurship, and community-based innovation. This study explores how such social entrepreneurship interventions enhance income generation, environmental conservation, and youth engagement in rural transformation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, focusing primarily on the Organic Fertilizer Project spearheaded by Borneo Fertilyst as a representative example of SERY's implementation. Data was collected through programme documents, impact reports, informal interviews with programme participants, and observations of community activities conducted throughout the programme. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the role of training, mentorship, and support networks in shaping social entrepreneurial capabilities among rural youth.

Data was thematically analyzed based on categories such as youth empowerment, economic impact, environmental sustainability, and community-based innovation. The thematic analytical method helped identify success factors, challenges, and the overall effectiveness of SERY in enhancing the economic resilience of rural communities.

Key Findings

The study reveals several key findings demonstrating the effectiveness of the SERY programme and the organic fertilizer initiative by Borneo Fertilyst:

1. **Income Generation and Economic Stability:**

The organic fertilizer project created significant new income opportunities, generating RM284,266 for 25 individuals. This demonstrates that social entrepreneurship can serve as a sustainable income source, reducing dependency on traditional rural employment sectors that are increasingly limited.

2. **Environmental Sustainability Through Waste Management:**

The successful conversion of 365 tonnes of banana peel waste into organic fertilizer highlights the potential of sustainability-driven innovation in addressing agricultural waste issues. This approach not only reduces environmental pollution but also promotes the use of eco-friendly fertilizer alternatives.

3. **Youth Empowerment and Community Engagement:**

More than 600 participants were empowered through 15 community programmes emphasizing agropreneurship and sustainability. Increases in skills, confidence, and community engagement among youth illustrate how structured training and mentorship can shift mindsets and enhance productivity potential.

4. **Community-Based Innovation as a Driver of Transformation:**

Borneo Fertilyst demonstrates that innovation emerging from local needs carries strong economic and social value. This impact-oriented business model connects youth to market opportunities while addressing local environmental challenges.

5. **Advancing Rural Sustainable Development:**

Social entrepreneurship projects under SERY contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting environmental preservation, generating green jobs, and reducing poverty. These initiatives show the transformative potential of social entrepreneurship as a long-term development tool for rural communities.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social entrepreneurship is an effective approach to addressing rural socio-economic challenges in Malaysia. Through programmes such as SERY, rural youth can be equipped with relevant skills, knowledge, and mentorship to develop innovative, high-impact solutions. The Borneo Fertilyst organic fertilizer

project illustrates how community-based initiatives can increase local income, protect the environment, and strengthen sustainable development.

Empowering youth through social entrepreneurship not only reduces rural-to-urban migration but also encourages their active participation in rural economic transformation. With supportive policies, continued training, and strong community networks, social entrepreneurship has the potential to become a major driver of rural development in the future.

Keywords: social entrepreneurship, rural youth empowerment, sustainable development, community-based innovation.

Promoting Sustainable Agriculture And Food Security Through Innovation: The Story Of Kundasang Aquafarm

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Background

Agriculture plays an indispensable role in ensuring food security, particularly in rural regions where communities often face economic instability, limited resources, and increasing environmental pressures. As Malaysia advances toward a more sustainable and resilient food system, there is growing interest in innovative agricultural models that optimize land use, preserve water resources, and empower rural youth. Aquaponics a system that integrates aquaculture and hydroponics has emerged as a viable solution for addressing land scarcity, water constraints, and the need for high-yield food production.

This study focuses on the entrepreneurial journey of Azizul Julirin, the founder of Kundasang Aquafarm in Sabah, who transformed minimal resources into a thriving and sustainable aquaponics enterprise. Kundasang Aquafarm exemplifies how grassroots innovation, combined with external training, research collaboration, and community participation, can reshape rural agricultural landscapes. Azizul's experience reflects broader trends in sustainable agriculture and youth empowerment, demonstrating that modern agri-technology can stimulate economic development while strengthening local food security.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to analyse the development, operations, and community impact of Kundasang Aquafarm. Data were gathered through interviews, project documentation, field observations, and secondary literature on aquaponics and sustainable agriculture in Malaysia. Attention was given to three key elements:

1. **International training** received by the founder in Japan, which provided foundational knowledge in modern agricultural systems;
2. **Research collaboration** with Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), which contributed to system innovation, design refinement, and improved efficiency;
3. **Community engagement activities**, including youth training, employment creation, and local outreach initiatives.

The data were thematically analysed to identify factors contributing to the success of Kundasang Aquafarm, focusing on innovation, sustainability, and rural youth development. The case study approach enables an in-depth understanding of the processes, challenges, and strategies involved in creating a sustainable aquaponics model tailored to rural contexts.

Key Findings

Several significant findings emerged from the analysis, underscoring the transformative potential of aquaponics and community-based entrepreneurship in rural Malaysia:

1. Innovative System Design and Productivity Gains:

Kundasang Aquafarm successfully developed both vertical and horizontal aquaponics systems that maximize space efficiency and resource utilization. These designs allow for high-density production in limited land areas, making them highly suitable for rural regions with spatial constraints. Water-saving mechanisms inherent in aquaponics also reduce environmental impact. Overall productivity increased **tenfold**, demonstrating the system's ability to outperform conventional farming methods.

2. Capacity Building Through International Training and Research Collaboration:

Azizul's participation in international agricultural training in Japan provided him with advanced technical skills and global perspectives that shaped the farm's operational model. Collaboration with Universiti Malaysia Sabah further strengthened the project by incorporating scientific research, system optimization, and continuous innovation. This partnership exemplifies how academia–industry collaboration can accelerate agricultural modernization and sustainability.

3. Youth Empowerment and Employment Creation:

A key contribution of Kundasang Aquafarm is its impact on rural youth. By offering training, employment opportunities, and pathways to entrepreneurship, the project engages young people who may otherwise migrate to urban areas. The hands-on experience gained through aquaponics supports youth skill development in agri-technology, sustainable farming, and business management areas that are increasingly important in Malaysia's evolving agricultural landscape.

4. Community-Based Entrepreneurship and Local Food Security:

Beyond economic gains, the venture fosters a community-oriented approach to agricultural development. Residents are involved in training sessions, farm visits, and collaborative projects, strengthening community resilience.

Increased production of vegetables and fish enhances local food availability, contributing directly to regional food security.

5. **National and International Recognition of Grassroots Innovation:** Kundasang Aquafarm has been showcased on national and international platforms, highlighting the success of community-driven innovation supported by resilience and strategic partnerships. This recognition validates the potential of rural-based enterprises to influence Malaysia's sustainable agriculture agenda.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that sustainable aquaponics entrepreneurship, when supported by innovation, research collaboration, and community engagement, can significantly advance rural food security and socio-economic development. Azizul Julirin's journey with Kundasang Aquafarm illustrates how grassroots initiatives can achieve large-scale impact through determination, technical training, and strategic partnerships. The project not only increases agricultural productivity but also empowers rural youth, enhances local resilience, and contributes to Malaysia's long-term vision of sustainable and modern agriculture.

Keywords: Sustainable Agriculture, Food Security, Youth Empowerment In Agriculture, Community-Based Entrepreneurship.

THEME 3: FOSTERING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN NATION-BUILDING

Fostering youth participation in nation-building is critical for sustainable development. With numerous young people facing pervasive challenges like environmental crises, economic instability, and limited civic space, empowering this demographic is essential. Effective strategies involve creating dedicated platforms that strengthen youth leadership, particularly for marginalized groups, through targeted training, inclusive dialogues, and widespread workshops. These initiatives successfully build crucial knowledge, advocacy skills, and a sense of agency, enabling young people to transition from passive observers to active contributors.

Integrating youth perspectives into policy requires a multi-level approach. This includes designing gender-responsive strategies, expanding resources, and fostering cross-border learning to amplify impact. Furthermore, addressing systemic barriers such as unemployment, underemployment, and skill mismatches is fundamental. Policies must promote skills development, entrepreneurship, and structured mobility programs to harness the potential of young people, turning challenges like migration into opportunities for development through remittances and skill transfer.

Ultimately, cultivating leadership and volunteerism through structured programs is key. By providing training in essential soft skills and facilitating community projects, young people develop confidence, problem-solving abilities, and social cohesion. Such inclusive ecosystems empower adaptive, responsible leaders, ensuring youth are not merely beneficiaries but active architects of a resilient and prosperous future, driving social cohesion and sustainable progress for all.

Youth Empowerment In Climate Action Platform

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Youth Empowerment in Climate Action Platform (YECAP)*

Background

The Asia-Pacific region stands at the epicentre of both the demographic youth bulge and the escalating climate crisis. It is home to over 600 million young people between the ages of 15 and 24, a cohort whose future is disproportionately threatened by climate impacts such as extreme weather, sea-level rise, and biodiversity loss. Concurrently, youth in the region face systemic barriers, including high unemployment, underrepresentation in decision-making spheres, and limited avenues for meaningful civic engagement. This disconnect between the urgency of the climate threat and the exclusion of youth voices from solution-building represents a critical gap in the regional response. To bridge this gap, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Asia-Pacific, in partnership with various UN agencies and regional youth networks, launched the Youth Empowerment in Climate Action Platform (YECAP) in 2021. YECAP was conceived as a transformative mechanism to convert youth from passive stakeholders into empowered leaders and architects of climate policy and action.

Methodology

YECAP employs a holistic, multi-level methodology designed to build capacity, foster dialogue, and mainstream youth participation. Its approach is structured around three interconnected pillars: capacity building, policy advocacy, and network creation. First, the platform implements intensive fellowship programs targeting young climate advocates, providing them with advanced training in climate science, policy analysis, project management, and advocacy communication. Second, YECAP facilitates large-scale and localized multi-stakeholder dialogues, national consultations, and virtual workshops that connect youth with policymakers, private sector leaders, and technical experts. Third, it cultivates a sustained regional community of practice through digital hubs and peer-learning exchanges. A cornerstone of its methodology is an intentional intersectional lens, prioritizing the inclusion and leadership of young women, non-binary individuals, and youth from marginalized and indigenous communities. This ensures the platform's outputs are gender-responsive and equitable.

Key Findings

Between its launch in 2021 and the end of 2023, YECAP demonstrated significant impact through quantifiable outputs and qualitative shifts. The platform directly trained 153 Youth Climate Fellows, who subsequently designed and implemented local adaptation and mitigation projects. It engaged over 8,800 youth in high-level dialogues and national consultations and reached an additional 37,000 participants through more

than 700 workshops and webinars. The key outcomes, however, extend beyond these numbers. Pre- and post-engagement assessments revealed:

1. **Enhanced Climate Literacy:** Participants showed a marked increase in understanding complex climate issues, climate finance mechanisms, and the nuances of international frameworks like the Paris Agreement.
2. **From Awareness to Agency:** The program successfully translated knowledge into motivation for individual and collective action, with participants reporting greater confidence in leading community-based initiatives, such as mangrove restoration and plastic waste campaigns.
3. **Strengthened Advocacy Capability:** Youth, particularly from previously underrepresented groups, developed robust skills in policy drafting, media engagement, and negotiation, enabling them to credibly engage in policy processes.
4. **Policy Integration:** YECAP's structured dialogues directly fed youth-authored recommendations into several national climate policies and contributed to the regional discourse ahead of COP26 and COP27, demonstrating a tangible pathway from youth voice to policy influence.
5. **Empowerment of Marginalized Voices:** The focused support for young women and marginalized groups led to more equitable participation and ensured climate solutions addressed broader social justice issues.

Conclusion

YECAP has established a proven, replicable model for meaningful youth empowerment in the climate sector. It demonstrates that when provided with the right tools, access, and platforms, young people in Asia-Pacific are not merely beneficiaries but essential collaborators and innovators in climate action. The platform's success underscores the necessity of moving beyond tokenistic youth engagement to institutionalized resourced partnership. Key future directions for scaling YECAP's impact include securing long-term funding to expand its fellowship and grant-making components, deepening gender-responsive and intersectional analysis within all activities and enhancing cross-border digital learning to share localized solutions across the region. Ultimately, YECAP's legacy is its contribution to a more resilient and equitable future by investing in the region's most potent asset: the leadership, creativity, and unwavering commitment of its youth.

Keywords: youth climate leadership, climate action engagement, capacity building, inclusive climate advocacy.

Empowering Youth For Sustainable Future: Shaping A Resilient And Responsible Generation

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Background

Sabah, endowed with rich natural resources and a diverse population, faces distinct developmental challenges, including uneven economic growth and urban-rural disparities. Its youth demographic is both a potential engine for progress and a group vulnerable to socio-economic dislocation. In an era defined by climate imperatives and digital transformation, empowering this generation is synonymous with building a sustainable and resilient future.

However, local labour markets often fail to absorb the growing number of educated young entrants, offering limited opportunities that do not match their aspirations or qualifications. This disconnect fuels significant youth migration, both to peninsular Malaysia and abroad, creating a complex phenomenon with profound implications for Sabah's developmental trajectory.

Understanding this dynamic is not merely an academic exercise but a policy necessity. This study, therefore, seeks to move beyond simplistic narratives of "brain drain" to provide a nuanced analysis of the causes, consequences, and potential opportunities embedded within youth migration, framing it within the larger goal of fostering a responsible and resilient generation capable of driving sustainable development.

Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach to ensure a comprehensive and triangulated analysis. Quantitatively, it analyses secondary data from national and state-level sources, including the Department of Statistics Malaysia and specific Sabah economic reports, to map migration trends, youth employment rates, educational attainment levels, and sectoral labour demands. Qualitatively, the study incorporates a review of existing policy documents and academic literature. Furthermore, it synthesizes findings from targeted interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders, including youth (both prospective migrants and returnees), employers from key industries in Sabah, community leaders, and officials from relevant government agencies. This methodological blend allows for the validation of statistical trends with ground-level insights into the lived experiences, motivations, and perceptions of young people, thereby ensuring the findings are both empirically sound and contextually rich.

Key Findings

The investigation reveals several interconnected findings:

1. **Drivers of Migration:** The primary impetus for youth migration is economic, rooted in the perceived and real scarcity of high-quality local jobs. Educated youth report a lack of career progression, low starting wages, and underemployment where their skills are underutilised—as critical push factors. This is often contrasted with broader narratives of opportunity in urban centres or overseas.
2. **The Dual Impact on Sabah:** The socio-economic impact is bifurcated. On the negative side, selective outmigration leads to a depletion of local human capital ("brain drain"), creating acute skills gaps in professions crucial for development, such as engineering, healthcare, and specialised technical fields. This can stifle innovation and productivity in the local economy. Conversely, migration generates potential benefits. Remittances provide direct financial support to families, boosting household resilience. Returning migrants bring back new skills, networks, and perspectives that can spur entrepreneurship and cultural exchange. The diaspora itself can become a resource for investment and knowledge transfer.
3. **The Plight of Non-Migrant Youth:** For those who remain, challenges persist. Many face unemployment or are trapped in informal, low-productivity work with no social security, despite wider technological advancements. A critical, persistent issue is the skill mismatch, where the outputs of educational institutions do not align with the evolving demands of modern, sustainable industries.
4. **Systemic Barriers:** Underpinning these challenges are systemic weaknesses, notably fragmented career guidance, limited industry-education collaboration, and weak social protection mechanisms that fail to safeguard young workers in transitional or informal employment.

Conclusion

The study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive, youth-focused policies that transform migration challenges into sustainable development opportunities. Strengthening technical and vocational training, expanding internship and apprenticeship programmes, and supporting youth entrepreneurship are essential steps toward bridging skills mismatches and improving employability. Additionally, structured youth mobility programmes both domestic and international can ensure that migration serves as a tool for skill enhancement rather than a symptom of local deficiencies. Enhancing social protection coverage, particularly for informal workers, would further empower young people to pursue meaningful and secure livelihoods. Overall, a resilient and responsible generation can only emerge when youths are

equipped with the skills, opportunities, and institutional support needed to thrive. By addressing labour market gaps, fostering inclusive development pathways, and leveraging the positive dimensions of migration, Sabah can cultivate a sustainable future driven by empowered, capable, and socially engaged young people.

Keywords: youth migration, brain drain, labour market challenges, skills mismatch.

The Role of Youth in Leadership and Volunteering in Sabah

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Background

In Sabah, a state characterized by rich cultural diversity and distinct developmental challenges, engaging the youth demographic is not merely advantageous but imperative for future progress. Youth represent a potent force for innovation and social change, yet their potential often remains untapped without structured platforms for participation. Leadership and volunteerism have emerged as dual pillars for channelling this energy constructively. Effective youth engagement in these areas is proven to bolster social cohesion particularly vital in a multi-ethnic society and drive civic participation, laying the groundwork for sustainable, community-led development. Recognizing this, the Sabah Youth Council (SYC) was established as the apex body to consolidate and direct youth efforts. Encompassing 14 major state youth associations and an impressive network of 983 grassroots organizations, the SYC provides a unified framework to cultivate a generation of empowered, socially responsible leaders. This abstract explores the SYC's methodology and the tangible impact of its core programs.

Methodology

The SYC's approach is multi-faceted, combining formal leadership pedagogy with hands-on community service. This methodology is operationalized through two primary, interlinked vehicles:

The Sabah Youth Leadership Incubator (IKEBS): This program functions as a foundational training academy. It employs workshops, simulations, and mentorship to equip participants with critical competencies. The curriculum is meticulously designed to cover interpersonal communication, strategic project management, collaborative teamwork, effective public speaking, and creative problem-solving. A key methodological strength is its emphasis on inclusive participation, actively recruiting and accommodating youth from urban and remote rural areas, indigenous communities (Orang Asal), and young people with different abilities.

The Sabah Youth Volunteer Corps (SYVC): Serving as the practical application arm, the SYVC translates acquired leadership skills into actionable community service.

It mobilizes trained youth cohorts to conceptualize and execute volunteer projects targeting identified local needs. The methodology here is participatory and needs-based, focusing on sectors such as education (e.g., tuition programs, digital literacy workshops) and environmental conservation (e.g., beach clean-ups, reforestation drives). This creates a virtuous cycle where training informs action, and action, in turn, deepens learning.

Key Findings

The implementation of this dual-pronged methodology has yielded significant, observable outcomes at individual, organizational, and community levels:

1. **Individual Empowerment:** Participants consistently report substantial growth in self-confidence and agency. The structured training demystifies leadership, making it accessible. Enhanced decision-making capabilities, rooted in the problem-solving frameworks taught, enable youth to navigate complex personal and community challenges more effectively.
2. **Skill Acquisition and Inclusivity:** The programs successfully deliver a transferable skill set highly valued in both civil society and the professional world. Crucially, the intentional inclusivity has fostered unprecedented dialogue and collaboration across Sabah's diverse social strata, breaking down barriers and building mutual understanding among youth from vastly different backgrounds.
3. **Community Impact:** SYVC-led projects deliver direct, tangible benefits. Educational initiatives supplement formal schooling in underserved regions, while environmental projects enhance local ecosystems and raise public awareness. Beyond these material outputs, the process itself strengthens community solidarity. Seeing youth lead and contribute inspires broader civic participation and fosters a shared sense of ownership over local development.
4. **Development of Adaptive Leadership:** The combination of theoretical training and real-world application cultivates a specific brand of community-focused and adaptive leadership. Graduates of the ecosystem demonstrate resilience, pragmatism, and a deep commitment to contextual problem-solving, embodying the qualities necessary for addressing Sabah's unique challenges.

Conclusion

The structured ecosystem for youth leadership and volunteerism orchestrated by the Sabah Youth Council proves to be a transformative investment in Sabah's social fabric and developmental future. By synergizing the leadership incubation of IKEBS with the community-driven action of the SYVC, the SYC has created a sustainable model for youth empowerment. This model does more than just organize activities; it systematically builds capacity, fosters inclusive social capital, and directs youthful energy toward pressing community needs. The key findings—ranging from individual empowerment to stronger community solidarity—demonstrate that Sabah's youth are not merely future leaders but essential present-day partners in driving civic engagement and sustainable development. The success of this framework offers a replicable blueprint for how structured, respectful, and inclusive youth engagement can unlock a demographic dividend, ensuring that young people are empowered, responsible, and adaptive leaders committed to the prosperity and cohesion of their communities.

Keywords: youth leadership development, volunteerism, civic engagement, community empowerment.

THEME 4: YOUTH SWIPE SMART: NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL WORLD

Youth Swipe Smart: Navigating the Digital World emphasises the evolving digital landscape and the importance of empowering Malaysian youth to engage online safely and responsibly. The increasing prevalence of cybercrimes such as scam calls, love scams, fake e-commerce, false job or loan offers, and non-existent investments illustrates how technology advancements have heightened exposure to online risks.

Analysis from 2024–2025 reveals sophisticated social engineering tactics that exploit digital platforms, signalling the urgency for preventive strategies, awareness campaigns, and multi-agency collaboration in law enforcement. Parallel to cyber risk concerns, research involving 203 young adults aged 18–25 shows no significant gender differences in social media use, attention span, or loneliness, although high integration of social media underscores the need for healthy usage habits.

With Media and Digital Citizenship positioned as a key indicator under the Malaysian Youth Index (MYI), youth currently demonstrate moderate digital readiness, supported by high mobile access (99.5% in 2024). While digital media offers opportunities for learning, career growth, and active participation, issues of misinformation, privacy breaches, addiction, and declining attention span highlight the need for digital literacy. Strengthening critical thinking, cybersecurity awareness, and responsible online behaviour is crucial for youth to swipe smart and thrive in the digital age.

Fraud And Cybercrime

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Background

The rapid advancement of digital technology and widespread internet adoption in Malaysia has catalysed significant economic and social progress. However, this digital transformation has been accompanied by a parallel and alarming surge in cybercrime, particularly online fraud, which now poses a critical threat to national security, financial stability, and social trust. The Malaysian population, with its high internet penetration rate and increasing reliance on digital services for banking, commerce, and social interaction, presents a vast and often vulnerable target for cybercriminals.

This study provides a focused examination of the contemporary landscape of online fraud in Malaysia from January 2024 to May 2025. It moves beyond generic descriptions to deliver a nuanced analysis of the specific modus operandi employed by perpetrators and the evolving trends that characterise these crimes. The research underscores the urgent need for evidence-based insights to inform more effective public policy, enhance law enforcement strategies, and bolster societal resilience against these pervasive digital threats.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and quantitative analytical framework based on secondary data from authoritative national sources. The primary data set comprises official statistics, threat reports, and public advisories issued by key Malaysian agencies, including the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM), the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), and the National Scam Response Centre (NSRC), covering the period from January 2024 to May 2025. The methodology involves a systematic content analysis of reported fraud cases to categorise and deconstruct prevalent scam typologies. Attention is paid to dissecting the technical and psychological mechanics of each modus operandi. Furthermore, the

analysis identifies demographic and behavioural patterns related to victim vulnerability by examining available data on reported incidents. This triangulation of data sources aims to build a comprehensive and current picture of the cyber fraud ecosystem in Malaysia, identifying not just *what* crimes are occurring, but *how* they are executed and *who* is most at risk.

Key Findings

The analysis reveals a sophisticated and diversified threat landscape dominated by several key fraud schemes, each with distinct yet often overlapping modus operandi. Predominant categories include:

1. **Impersonation & Phishing Scams:** This includes fraudulent phone calls purporting to be from government bodies (like the Inland Revenue Board or police), banks, or delivery services. Criminals use urgency, fear, and authority to trick victims into revealing personal data or making direct payments.
2. **Romance Scams:** Perpetrators build emotional relationships on social media or dating apps over time before fabricating a crisis to solicit money, demonstrating advanced psychological manipulation.
3. **E-commerce & Auction Fraud:** Fake online marketplaces or social media sellers advertise non-existent goods, leveraging secure payment illusions (like fake logistics tracking) to deceive buyers.
4. **Non-existent Loan, Job, and Investment Scams:** These prey on socioeconomic needs, offering fraudulent financial opportunities that require upfront "administrative fees" or direct investments into phantom platforms.

The central and unifying modus operandi across all these schemes is social engineering, exploiting human psychology such as greed, fear, compassion, or urgency rather than solely relying on technical hacking. This is facilitated by the abuse of legitimate digital platforms, including social media, messaging apps, e-commerce sites, and financial technology tools, which provide criminals with reach, anonymity, and a veneer of credibility.

Key trends identified include: a shift towards hybrid scams that combine multiple narratives (e.g., a romance scam leading to a fake investment); the use of mule accounts to launder money and obscure trails; and the increasing monetisation of personal data stolen from previous breaches to make phishing attempts more convincing. Data indicates that while all demographics are affected, certain groups show higher vulnerability to specific scams, such as younger adults in e-commerce and job scams, and older populations in impersonation and investment frauds.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the trajectory of online fraud in Malaysia is marked by increasing sophistication, with criminals continuously adapting their social engineering tactics to exploit new technologies and societal trends. The core challenge lies in the human element, as the primary modus operandi subverts trust and manipulates emotion. Therefore, while technological solutions are necessary, they are insufficient alone. Effective mitigation requires a holistic, multi-stakeholder strategy. This includes: (1) Enhanced Public Awareness through sustained, targeted educational campaigns that simulate real-world scam tactics to build critical digital literacy; (2) Strengthened Legal Frameworks and Enforcement via inter-agency collaboration (PDRM, MCMC, Bank Negara Malaysia) to streamline reporting, accelerate financial transaction freezing, and prosecute kingpins; and (3) Mandatory Corporate Responsibility, requiring banks, telcos, and digital platforms to implement stricter verification processes and fraud detection systems. The findings of this analysis aim to provide policymakers, law enforcement, and community leaders with a clear, evidence-based roadmap to develop proactive measures. By integrating robust prevention, swift response, and continuous public education, Malaysia can build a more resilient digital society capable of mitigating the risks posed by these evolving cyber threats.

Keywords: online fraud, cybercrime in Malaysia, digital vulnerability, public policy and law enforcement strategies

Sexuality In Digital Age

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Background

The advent of the digital era has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of human sexuality, altering modes of sexual interaction, access to information, and processes of identity formation. For emerging adults (aged 18-29), a developmental cohort navigating the transition to full adulthood, cyberpornography has become a prevalent and often primary source of sexual socialization and knowledge. This is particularly salient in Malaysia, a nation characterized by a complex socio-cultural fabric where conservative norms often limit formal and familial discourse on sexuality, creating a significant knowledge vacuum. While global research has explored cyberpornography's impacts, a critical gap exists in understanding its nuanced role within non-Western, multi-ethnic contexts like Malaysia. Specifically, there is a paucity of data on female usage patterns, the experiences of the emerging adult group (as distinct from adolescents), and the mechanisms that may exacerbate or mitigate its effects on psychosexual health. Psychosexual health, encompassing constructs like sexual self-esteem (one's subjective evaluation of their capacity as a sexual being) and psychological distress, is vital for overall well-being. This study, therefore, seeks to address these gaps by investigating the associations between motivations for cyberpornography use, specific usage patterns, and key indicators of psychosexual health among Malaysian emerging adults.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design, utilizing an anonymous online survey disseminated via social media platforms and university networks. Purposive sampling was used to target self-identified pornography users within the emerging adult age range (18-29 years) across Malaysia. The survey incorporated a suite of validated psychometric instruments to ensure robust measurement. The Pornography Consumption Inventory assessed frequency, duration, and motivations for use. Psychosexual health was measured through the Sexual Esteem Scale (a subscale of the Multidimensional Sexual Self-Concept Questionnaire) and the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) to gauge non-specific anxiety and depressive symptoms. To test the proposed theoretical model, the study also

administered the Brief Self-Control Scale and a Perceived Realism Scale, which evaluates the degree to which individuals perceive pornographic content as reflective of reality. Data analysis involved correlational analyses to identify direct relationships. More critically, advanced statistical techniques, namely moderated mediation analysis, were employed to test the hypothesized model where: 1) the relationship between usage patterns (e.g., frequency, addictive patterns) and psychosexual health outcomes is mediated by *perceived realism* (i.e., negative effects are amplified when content is perceived as realistic), and 2) this indirect pathway is moderated by *trait self-control*, acting as a protective buffer.

Key Findings

Preliminary analysis of the data reveals several significant insights pertinent to the Malaysian context. First, a diverse range of motivations for cyberpornography use was identified, extending beyond sexual gratification to include curiosity, stress relief, and, notably, compensatory education due to a lack of other reliable sexual information sources. Second, significant associations were found between specific usage patterns particularly compulsive or avoidant-use patterns and poorer psychosexual health outcomes, namely lower sexual self-esteem and higher levels of psychological distress. The mediating role of perceived realism was substantiated; negative associations were stronger for individuals who rated the content as highly realistic regarding sexual performance, body image, and relational dynamics. This suggests that internalization of depicted norms is a key mechanism of impact. Crucially, the moderating role of trait self-control was confirmed. Individuals with higher self-reported self-control demonstrated resilience, showing weaker negative associations between usage and psychosexual health, even when perceiving content as realistic. This highlights self-regulation as a critical protective factor. Furthermore, the study yielded novel data on female users in Malaysia, revealing that while usage rates were lower than males, the negative correlates with sexual self-esteem, often linked to internalization of unrealistic body standards, were pronounced.

Conclusion

This study provides critical, context-specific evidence that cyberpornography use among Malaysian emerging adults is not a monolithic experience but is intricately linked to psychosexual health through specific psychological pathways. The findings underscore that the impact is significantly shaped by *how* individuals engage with content (their motivations and

patterns), *what* they believe about it (perceived realism), and their personal regulatory resources (trait self-control). The results move beyond simplistic cause-effect narratives, offering a nuanced model for understanding risk and resilience. For public health and policy, this underscores the urgent need for comprehensive, evidence-based digital sexual literacy programs in Malaysia. Such initiatives should aim not to stigmatize use but to foster critical media literacy deconstructing the unrealistic nature of most pornographic content while concurrently strengthening psychosocial competencies like self-regulation and fostering positive sexual self-concepts. Future research should pursue longitudinal designs to establish causality and explore qualitative dimensions of user experience. Ultimately, this study contributes foundational knowledge for developing culturally responsive strategies to support the psychosexual health of emerging adults navigating a hyper-digital world.

Keywords: digital sexuality, Southeast Asia, sexual health education, media literacy

YOURS' HIGHLIGHTS 2025:

Empowering Youth for a Sustainable Future: Shaping a Resilient and Responsible Generation

This theme emphasises mental and emotional wellbeing as a core element of positive youth development. However, many youths continue to face challenges such as limited access to mental health services, social stigma, and inadequate support systems, particularly in rural and underserved communities. These barriers negatively affect emotional development and stress management, underscoring the need for structured community-based education, peer support, and early intervention programmes to strengthen youths' coping skills and emotional resilience.

Findings from the **Malaysia Youth Index 2023** indicate a concerning decline in youth wellbeing. The overall score for the **Wellbeing and Physical Health** domain decreased by **5.64 points**, from **72.23 (Moderate)** in 2022 to **66.59 (Less Satisfactory)** in 2023. Similarly, the **Mental Health** indicator recorded a significant drop of **19.87 points**, declining from **88.56 (Very Satisfactory)** in 2022 to **68.69 (Moderate)** in 2023. These trends highlight the urgent need to strengthen accessible and preventive mental health services, including helplines, adolescent clinics, and life-skills-based interventions, to support the development of emotionally resilient, confident, and responsible youths.

The second theme, *Building Youth Economies: From Potential to Progress*, focuses on empowering young people to achieve economic independence and long-term stability. Many youths today struggle with unemployment, low financial literacy, and limited access to financial support. By strengthening financial skills such as budgeting, saving, pricing, and responsible spending, youths can develop maturity in financial decision-making. Financial literacy is crucial not only for personal stability but also for encouraging entrepreneurial mindsets that can contribute to economic growth.

This theme focuses on empowering youths to achieve economic independence and long-term stability. Many young people continue to face challenges such as unemployment, low financial literacy, and limited access

to financial resources. Strengthening fundamental financial skills including budgeting, saving, pricing, and responsible spending is essential in developing sound financial decision-making. Financial literacy not only supports personal economic stability but also nurtures entrepreneurial mindsets that contribute to broader economic growth.

In line with this, the theme emphasises the importance of **digital and practical competencies**. Youths must be equipped with skills such as cost management, strategic thinking, business operations, and the effective use of social media for entrepreneurship. In the digital era, these competencies enable young people to innovate, generate new income opportunities, and compete more effectively in both local and global labour markets. Structural support, including financing through **TEKUN** and vocational training programmes such as **SERY**, further enhances youths' capacity to pursue sustainable careers and establish businesses aligned with industry and community needs.

Evidence from the **Malaysia Youth Index** reflects encouraging progress in this area. The **Economic** domain score increased by **13.44 points**, from **58.55 (Less Satisfactory)** in 2022 to **71.99 (Moderate)** in 2023. Similarly, the **Financial Literacy** indicator improved by **14.49 points**, rising from **62.72 (Moderate)** in 2022 to **77.21 (Satisfactory)** in 2023. These improvements highlight the positive impact of integrated financial education, digital skills development, and institutional support in transforming youth potential into meaningful economic progress.

This theme highlights the importance of meaningful youth participation in nation-building and leadership development. Although young people possess strong potential, many still face limited access to inclusive platforms, leadership spaces, and opportunities to engage in decision-making processes. By expanding accessible leadership platforms, equipping youths with future-ready skills, and strengthening community-based resources, young people can be empowered to contribute actively from the grassroots level to national policymaking. Evidence from the **Malaysia Youth Index 2023 (IBM'23)** supports this direction, showing a significant improvement in the **Values and Identity** domain, which increased by **15.68 points** from **75.22 (Satisfactory)** in 2022 to **90.90 (Very Satisfactory)** in 2023. In addition, key indicators such as **leadership, lifestyle, self-concept, social relationships, and social sensitivity** also recorded improvements in 2023, reflecting growth

in youths' confidence, communication abilities, social responsibility, and readiness to lead the nation's future.

Aligned with this, the theme highlights the importance of inclusive leadership and civic participation in achieving sustainable development. Youths must be encouraged not only to share their views but also to lead initiatives that address social, environmental, and community challenges. Volunteerism plays a key role here, as it nurtures empathy, responsibility, teamwork, and a strong civic spirit. When young people actively engage in volunteer work, they become agents of positive change who contribute meaningfully to national progress. This theme reinforces the belief that empowering youth leadership is central to building a resilient and future-ready society.

The fourth theme emphasises the urgent need to guide youths towards responsible and safe digital citizenship in an increasingly connected world. Young people today face numerous online risks, including scams, cyberbullying, misinformation, and exposure to harmful content, making comprehensive digital literacy and cyber awareness initiatives essential. These programmes equip youths with skills to critically evaluate information, recognise threats, protect personal data, and act responsibly online. Practical strategies, such as avoiding suspicious messages and reporting incidents to the **National Scam Response Centre (NSRC 997)**, further strengthen online safety. According to the **Malaysia Youth Index 2023 (IBM'23)**, the **Media and Digital Citizenship** domain improved from **73.21 (Moderate) in 2022** to **77.77 (Satisfactory) in 2023**, while the **Digital Literacy** indicator showed a substantial increase from **70.25 (Moderate) in 2022** to **86.63 (Very Satisfactory) in 2023**, reflecting an increase of **4.56 points** and **16.38 points**, respectively. These improvements highlight that enhancing digital literacy is crucial not only for online safety but also for enabling youths to participate effectively in the digital economy and assume future leadership roles.



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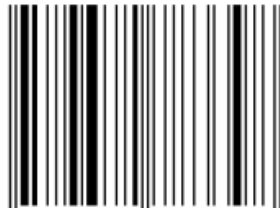
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