

Childhood maltreatment and its effects on self-esteem

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Abstract

This present study aimed to investigate the relationship between childhood maltreatment and its effect on self-esteem among youth. This study was conducted through the survey method, using an online survey via Google Form for the respondents. The total number of respondents received is 156 (n =156) participants from youth aged 18 to 30, with 74 (47.4%) male respondents and 82 (52.6%) female respondents who are willing to participate in the study. Instruments used in this study were the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). This research includes the use of descriptive analysis for the demographic information. Meanwhile, the research hypothesis was tested using Pearson's correlation to obtain the results between the two variables. Results indicated that emotional neglect has the highest number of childhood maltreatment experiences by youth, but emotional abuse has the most severe case. Childhood maltreatment had a strong negative correlation with self-esteem ($r(156) = 0.671, p < 0.001$). Among the respondents, the increase in the level of childhood maltreatment was correlated with a decrease in self-esteem. Through this study, screening children's conditions and environment early with extensive intervention is essential to preventing such adverse complications.

Keywords

Childhood maltreatment, self-esteem, youth

Introduction

Childhood maltreatment is a serious issue that affects many kids all over the world. Media have reported numerous kinds of news about these global issues, attracting much attention. Based on research, Malaysia recorded 6,061 cases of child abuse in 2019, which has been increasing drastically from the previous year (Shaari et al., 2021). This is worrying as every state in Malaysia has many cases of reported child abuse. This state recorded the highest number of abuse cases compared to other states in Malaysia for most years (Zailah, 2022).

Besides, in an Asian country's population study, sexual abuse of children is reported at 41.9%, where most of the victims have been abused by a person they already known (Solehati et al., 2021). On top of that, 300 million children between the ages of two and four regularly endure physical and psychological abuse at the hands of their parents and other adult caregivers (World Health Organization, 2022). These statistical facts show that childhood maltreatment is still happening in this modern era, where children are supposed to be living safely away from hostile surroundings.

Furthermore, the perpetrator of this maltreatment is usually close to the child, such as the parents, family members, and neighbors (Solehati et al., 2021). Regardless of the abuser, the effects of the maltreatment can cause many problems for the children, especially during adulthood. Maltreatment during childhood can leave a permanent and memorable scar in an individual's life where they can have highly damaging repercussions that linger for a very long time. Children may exhibit a variety of significant physical, emotional, and

behavioral issues following this terrible experience (Berkel et al., 2020).

Moreover, such maltreatment has been linked to not only a vast range of mental health outcomes but also causes low self-esteem in the long term (Thoma et al., 2021). Low self-esteem during adulthood or even childhood can affect individuals mentally or physically and impair their daily functions, such as a lack of confidence in themselves. Research also stated that low self-esteem will negatively affect an individual, such as increasing their anxiety, stress, loneliness, and risk of developing depression (Berkel et al., 2020).

Childhood maltreatment is a worrying social problem because it is prevalent throughout the world and is associated with psychological and behavioral effects on victims. Several studies investigated the relationship between childhood maltreatment and self-esteem among youth (Azaf et al., 2022; Makhubela, 2019; Mwakanyamale & Yizhen, 2019). Although maltreatment from childhood is something that many individuals have experienced, it is still a concerning issue, especially in today's society. The issue is alarming because there are still some adults who experienced this traumatic event who did not believe they had been abused and felt like it was customary for them to be punished (Downey

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& Crummy, 2021). As a result, the inflicted maltreatment has taken a toll on them, which affected their internal mental health, such as having low self-esteem.

At the same time, having low self-esteem due to maltreatment during childhood has been linked to mental health outcomes (Thoma et al., 2021). Individuals with low self-esteem during adulthood or even childhood can be affected mentally or physically. At the same time, it impairs their daily functions, such as a lack of confidence in themselves. Lacking confidence or having low self-esteem, especially for youth, will negatively influence their social communication (Masselink et al., 2018), which later will negatively affect them, such as increasing their anxiety, stress, loneliness, and the risk of developing depression (Berkel et al., 2020). Another impact of low self-esteem is that it can also affect an individual's education and career development. At school age, low self-esteem can consistently influence academic achievement (Alghamdi et al., 2023; Harris & Orth, 2020; Kärchner et al., 2021). Individuals already working can influence their career development; they are more stable and can achieve optimal self-actualization. People with a good self-esteem level can be more productive (Gómez-Jorge & Díaz-Garrido, 2023). The level of self-esteem one has is capable of having many life choices and determining satisfaction with one's job or career (Krauss & Orth, 2022). Considering the impact of self-esteem levels, which can influence various aspects of an individual's life at various stages of life development, researching self-esteem is essential, especially to find out possible causal factors that can be protective and risk factors. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine the prevalence of childhood maltreatment experienced by youth, the level of self-esteem among youth, and the relationship between childhood maltreatment and self-esteem among youth.

Method

Participants

In this study, the researcher used the quantitative approach and cross-sectional online survey method to collect data of the relationship between childhood maltreatment and self-esteem among 153 youth aged 18 to 30, studying in tertiary institution at Malaysia. The sample were selected using convenience sampling. The number of participants that were selected in this study is 153 youths aged 18 until 30. They were also having to able comprehend English well as the questionnaire are fully in English. The participants of this study were those who have experienced childhood maltreatment, not an orphan or adopted. In addition, the participants must be studying or have studied in any tertiary educational institution in Malaysia. This is due to the fact that most of the Malaysian's youth in the targeted age are or have pursued their tertiary studies in institution (Malaysia. Policy Planning and Research Division, Ministry of Higher Education., 2022). Therefore, it is be fitting to circulate the questionnaire among them. Exclusion criteria have also been applied to the participants. The criteria consist of individuals who are below 18 or above 30 years old, those who have not experienced childhood maltreatment, orphan, and adopted. Participants that are orphans or have been adopted might obstruct the result authenticity as they are

Table 1. Demographic characteristic of participants (N=156)

Demographic Factor	f	%
Gender		
Male	74	47.40
Female	82	52.60
Age		
Adolescence (18-21 years old)	47	30.10
Adulthood (22-30 years old)	109	69.60
State of Origin		
Johor	6	3.80
Kedah	3	1.90
Kelantan	11	7.10
Melaka	8	5.10
Negeri Sembilan	7	4.50
Pahang	6	3.80
Penang	5	3.20
Perak	19	12.20
Perlis	1	0.60
Sabah	11	7.10
Sarawak	3	1.90
Selangor	57	36.50
Terengganu	8	5.10
Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur	8	5.10
Wilayah Persekutuan Labuan	1	0.60
Wilayah Persekutuan Putrajaya	2	1.30
University Region		
Borneo	4	2.60
Eastern	10	6.40
North	75	48.10
South	21	13.50
West	46	29.50

seven times more prone to develop internal mental problems compared to their peers (Mohammadzadeh et al., 2019).

This research has received 156 respondents with 74 (47.4%) male respondents and 82 (52.6%) female respondents who are willingly to participate in the study. The range of the participants age is from 18 to 30 years old ($M = 23.10$; $SD = 2.62$). The highest participant's age is 21 with 16%, followed by 22 years old (15.4%). The following data in Table 1 shows the demographic characteristic of the participants.

Furthermore, the respondent originated from states around Malaysia with Selangor stated the highest respondent at 57 people (36.5%) followed by Perak with 19 people (12.2%). As for the respondent educational states, most of the respondent are from the university in North Malaysia with 75 respondents (48.1%) followed by university in West region with 46 respondent (29.5%).

Research Instruments

Each participants received a questionnaire comprising of four sections: 1) screening; 2) demographics; 3) Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ); and 4) Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES). In the screening section, the questions were asking whether the respondents have experience mistreatment such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect during childhood and whether the respondent are orphan or have been adopted. The demographics section included age, gender, current university, and participant state of origin.

Childhood maltreatment is the abuse and neglect of kids under the age of 18 which includes all forms of physical and/or emotional maltreatment, sexual abuse and neglect or other exploitation having the effect on harming the well-being of the children (Thoma et al., 2021). Childhood maltreatment is operationally defined as the scores obtained from the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ). The instruments used are the revised short form in the language of English (Bernstein et al., 2003). There were five domains in this instrument which are physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. The instrument is a self-administered questionnaire and if they scored high, meaning they have experienced more maltreatment experience. Higher score means higher level of childhood maltreatment meanwhile lower score means low level of childhood maltreatment experience. The CTQ form contained 28 items to identify maltreatment experiences in adolescence or adults during childhood. Each item was rated with a 5-point Likert scale range from 1 = Never true to 5 = Very often true. Few items from CTQ are “family said hurtful things,” “hit hard enough to leave bruises,” “was touched sexually” and more. Based on previous study, internal consistency of this questionnaire ranges from 0.70 to 0.94 (Bernstein et al., 2003). The reliability from present study is at 0.84 indicating high internal consistency.

Self-esteem is an individual belief in their worthiness. It will be operationally defined as the scores obtained from Rosenberg’s self-esteem scale. The scores range from 10 until 40 with scores lower than 15 suggested as having low self-esteem (Wood et al., 2021). Normal scores range from 15 until 25 and above from that score is indicated as having high self-esteem. Higher score means high self-esteem while lower score means low self-esteem. RSES consisting of 10 items that measure individual sense of worth based on their own characteristics. Each question has a 4-point Likert scale response option, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Examples of items in this scale are “on the whole, I am satisfied with myself” or “I am able to do things as well as most other people.” The reliability and validity of this questionnaire is quite high. Cronbach alpha from a previous study in young adults was recorded at 0.84 (Zeidan et al., 2021) and 0.80 (Robins et al., 2001). The reliability from present study is at 0.94 indicating high internal consistency.

Data Analysis Technique

Complex statistical analysis was conducted using statistical software IBM SPSS Version 23.0. The correlation between childhood maltreatment and self-esteem were analysed using Pearson Correlation.

Data Collection Procedures The survey was disseminated through online channels such as emails and social networking sites. For the emails, the survey was sent through the official university student email. The social networking channels that have been utilised include Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram applications. Considering that these sites contain people from various background, the survey was only distributed through private group that contained only Malaysian university students in each social site. Those who are interested and fits all the listed criteria had fill out the

Table 2. Score of CTQ sub-variable

Level	f	%
Physical Neglect (M=13.01, SD=4.13)		
Low	52	33.30
Moderate	58	37.20
Severe	46	29.50
Physical Abuse (M=12.46, SD=4.99)		
Low	53	34.00
Moderate	57	36.50
Severe	46	29.50
Emotional Neglect (M=17.42, SD=5.74)		
Low	55	35.30
Moderate	62	39.70
Severe	39	25.00
Emotional Abuse (M=15.99, SD=5.39)		
Low	67	42.90
Moderate	38	24.40
Severe	51	32.70
Sexual Abuse (M=7.78, SD=4.38)		
Low	78	50.00
Moderate	27	17.30
Severe	51	32.70

given online survey. Participation of the participants in this experiment was completely voluntary.

Result

After analyzing the collected data, both variables’ mean values and standard deviations were obtained. We examined the independent and dependent variables aligned with the study’s objectives to reveal the mean and standard deviation results. For the level of self-esteem among 156 participants, the mean score is 28.46 (SD = 4.83). Meanwhile, for childhood maltreatment, the mean score is 78.42 (SD = 20.84).

The study employed the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire to gauge the level of childhood maltreatment experienced by respondents. This questionnaire consists of five sub-variables, with scores ranging from 5 to 25 for each. Higher scores on each sub-variable provide a quantitative overview of the respondents’ experienced maltreatment, with elevated scores indicating more substantial maltreatment. The participants scored highest in emotional neglect (M = 17.42, SD = 5.74), followed by emotional abuse (M = 15.99, SD = 5.39). Interestingly, the respondents were least likely to have experienced sexual abuse (M = 7.78, SD = 4.38) during their childhood. This suggested a lower occurrence of sexual abuse compared to other types of maltreatment. The summarized results are presented in Table 2.

The score of the CTQ sub-variable in Table 2 indicated that there are three levels of maltreatment for each sub-variable, which are low, moderate, and severe. The tables below explained the frequency of the sub-variables according to the CTQ score level. Based on the results for physical neglect, there were 52 (33.3%) respondents who experienced less maltreatment, 58 (37.2%) respondents who experienced moderate physical neglect, and 46 (29.5%) respondents who experienced severe neglect during their childhood. According to the results for physical abuse, there are approximately 53 respondents out of 156 who experience a low level of

physical abuse. In contrast, 57 or 36.5% of the respondents experience moderate abuse, and 46 of them experience severe physical abuse. As for emotional neglect, there are 55 (35.5%) respondents who have been less likely to be emotionally neglected during their childhood. 62 (39.7%) respondents believe they were moderately neglected, while 39 (25.0%) respondents believe they have been severely emotionally neglected. Compared to the emotional abuse in Table 4.8, there are more respondents at the severe level, with 51 (32.7%) of them. 67 (42.9%) respondents experienced a low level of emotional abuse, while 38 (24.4%) experienced a moderate level of emotional abuse. In this research, 78 (50.0%) participants scored low on experiencing sexual abuse, 27 (17.3%) scored moderate, and 51 (32.7%) participants experienced severe experience of sexual abuse.

Level of self-esteem among participant was evaluated based on the scores of RSES in this study. The total scores for each item were summed to provide a quantitative overall self-esteem score. RSES utilizes a 0 to 40 scoring scale, meaning that 0 is the lowest possible score and 40 is the highest possible score. Therefore, the lower scores indicate a lower level of self-esteem. Participants in the highest quartile were put in a low level of self-esteem. The results show that the majority level of self-esteem among participants was low ($f = 95, 60.9\%$), and the others were high ($f = 61, 39.1\%$). It means that most of the participants have low self-esteem.

According to the correlation analysis, the results indicated that childhood maltreatment had a strong negative correlation with self-esteem, $r(156) = 0.67, p < 0.001$. Among the respondents, the increase in the level of childhood maltreatment was correlated with a decrease in self-esteem.

Discussion

This study showed that childhood maltreatment is relatively widespread among adolescents. The results indicated that the respondents most frequently experienced emotional neglect (26.15%), followed by emotional abuse (24%). These findings were confirmed by research that emotional abuse and emotional neglect are the most common maltreatment experiences of adolescents (Azaf et al., 2022). However, compared to emotional neglect (39 respondents), there were more severe cases of emotional abuse (51 respondents) experienced by the adolescent population. This indicates that emotional abuse is the most common in all cases of childhood maltreatment.

Similarly, a longitudinal study conducted in Guangzhou, China, reported a high prevalence of maltreatment, with emotional, physical, and sexual maltreatment being the most common forms of child maltreatment (Guo et al., 2021). In another similar study using the CTQ, the prevalence of emotional maltreatment was highest among the other types of maltreatment (Gama et al., 2021). However, the results of the current study did not confirm the findings of previous research where physical maltreatment is the most common. In this cross-sectional study, 3509 10–12-year-olds in Selangor state were surveyed, and males were more likely to be maltreated than females (Ahmed et al., 2015). Correspondingly, in Australian-based research, 3500 maltreated participants aged 16 years old and above agreed that they experienced physical

abuse the most, with women having significantly more cases of abuse than men (Higgins et al., 2023).

Furthermore, this research finding contrasts with research that found physical neglect is the most common childhood trauma experienced by students in a correctional school in Malaysia (Ahmad & Mazlan, 2014). Although current research suggested that emotional abuse is the most common form of childhood maltreatment, a recent study in the Netherlands found that emotional neglect was the most prevalent type of maltreatment, where 484 of 663 participants had reported it as the primary type of maltreatment (Berkel et al., 2020). The prevalence figures reported in these studies confirm the observation that childhood maltreatment is not an out-of-the-ordinary occurrence in Malaysia. The result of this study was clarified by a previous study in which the researcher highlighted that children who were maltreated in childhood due to depressed caregivers have lower self-esteem (Maruyama et al., 2023). A possible explanation for this could be the mother's lack of social interaction and maternal love. Children must experience communication early, which teaches them how to communicate and interact with others (Jaafarawi, 2017).

Consistent with the findings, another study also reported particular outcomes where individuals aged older than fifty were also affected by the maltreatment (Thoma et al., 2021). The researchers found that the higher the emotional abuse or emotional neglect experienced by an individual, the probability of high self-esteem reduced in the future (Celik & Odaci, 2019). The observed decline in self-esteem may be explained by the fact that experiencing these events inhibits the development of emotional regulation capacities and interpersonal skills and impairs the mental processing of emotional situations. Childhood maltreatment may impair a person's ability to understand and control his or her emotions, which is one of the ways to increase the risk of psychological distress, including low self-esteem. This study highlights that emotional abuse is more common than other types of maltreatment, which may overwhelm a person's ability to successfully regulate emotions due to repeated exposure to adverse affective conditions. Because emotional abuse is highly likely to be associated with poor mental health in adulthood, these overall findings point to the urgent need to identify and treat victims (Gama et al., 2021). However, this research outcome did not support the previous research that indicates childhood maltreatment was linked to a number of unfavorable psychological outcomes, such as anxiety and depression; the study revealed that it was not significantly linked to self-esteem (Kessler et al., 1997). Likewise, the current research is contrary to that of Finkelhor and colleagues, who found that after adjusting for other variables, including depression and anxiety, it was discovered that childhood maltreatment experienced by college students was not substantially connected to self-esteem (Finkelhor et al., 2015).

This raises the possibility that childhood trauma is more widespread than is often assumed and that its effects on the transition to adulthood and functioning as an adult are not limited to depression symptoms but are broader in scope. One of the ways to counteract the fatality of trauma is to increase the frequency of implementation of programs that expose children in schools to the characteristics of abuse or neglect.

The government can make this mandatory for all schools in the country so that relevant agencies such as the Ministry of Health and Women, Family, and Community Development can identify children who need help. As seen in the literature, childhood maltreatment affects not only the body but also the mind. Therefore, further evaluation and diagnostic testing are needed, including more comprehensive screening for early detection and treatment to prevent such adverse complications. The main theoretical implication of this study is closely related to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, according to which the connections between microsystems are essential for a child's growth (Hayes et al., 2017). The theory teaches us that proper relationships between close family members are essential for children's self-esteem (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). Taken together, the findings suggested educating the entire community about good parenting so that children do not become victims of abuse and neglect. In addition, a government policy can be added to screen individuals to see if they have the right resources to become good caregivers.

After conducting this study, the researcher identified several limitations that must be highlighted for future studies. First, the researcher believes the respondents may have hesitated to comment on their personal lives. This is because this study was based on a questionnaire that asked about abuse and neglect, which may have resulted in underreporting and underestimation of actual abuse. Respondents were instructed to remain anonymous when answering the questionnaire to circumvent this limitation. The scope of this study was limited in terms of a sample size of university youth in each region and admittedly small compared to the overall population.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study suggests that a similar number of respondents from each university region is better because it includes more participants and helps to ensure that the results are generalizable. Furthermore, the measurement of CTQ did not consider the magnitude, duration of exposure, or specific perpetrator of each unpleasant event; it included only counts of frequency occurrences. Future studies should examine these factors, which undoubtedly influence how an unpleasant experience affects an individual.

The limitations mentioned before should be overcome for a better outcome in future studies. Firstly, instead of relying solely on personal opinion to achieve the research objectives, a quantitative approach that is more systematic can be adopted in the selection of instruments for this study. Further investigation and experimentation using different instruments is strongly recommended to determine the best approach. In regards to the sample size, future research should increase the sample size matching with the population to increase the impact of the results. The researcher hopes that future studies will not limit the size to only youth in university but can be expanded to youth in Malaysia. This makes the result more generalizable and valid to the Asian population. Given the impact of this abuse on the youth's self-esteem, appropriate prevention measures aimed at ultimately preventing child abuse should be strengthened, as well as the treatment of the victims of child abuse. Providing early childhood education and care, reducing poverty and unemployment, and suppressing dangerous environmental risk factors such as the availability of alcohol are some of the measures that should be prioritized (Azaf et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This study reveals that childhood maltreatment is prevalent among the youth, with emotional neglect and emotional abuse being the most common forms. Emotional abuse appears to be more severe than emotional neglect, indicating that it is the most prevalent type of maltreatment. These findings are consistent with other studies conducted in different countries, although there are variations in the prevalence of different forms of maltreatment. The study highlights the negative impact of childhood maltreatment on self-esteem, emphasizing the importance of healthy relationships within families for children's well-being.

Regarding childhood maltreatment, the research suggests implementing educational programs in schools to raise awareness about abuse and neglect. It is recommended to make such programs mandatory and establish screening processes to identify children needing assistance. This study also emphasizes the need for comprehensive evaluation, diagnostic testing, and early detection of maltreatment to provide appropriate support and treatment. This suggests that the effects of childhood trauma may extend beyond these specific psychological outcomes, highlighting the need for a broader understanding of its impact on individuals as they transition into adulthood.

Moreover, this study underscores the urgent need to address childhood maltreatment and its effects. Prevention measures, support for victims, and community-wide education on good parenting are crucial in combating this issue. By overcoming the limitations of previous research and conducting further studies, a better understanding of childhood maltreatment and its broader implications can be achieved.

Declaration

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Ethics Policy

Informed consent: Participants must read the consent form carefully and ask the researcher if they need to understand it clearly. The researcher also explained clearly and transparently to participants if they had questions about the study.

Voluntariness and withdrawal rights: The participants in this study were entirely voluntary, and no force was used to answer the survey. The participants also have a right to withdraw from the research anytime they wish without consequences or penalty. Any data collected was destroyed as soon as they withdrew from this study.

Confidentiality and anonymity: All information taken from this study was coded to protect each subject's name. The participants' information was not shared with third parties and was used for this research only. Instead, no names or other identifying information were used anonymously when the researcher authors reported. The researcher has safely kept all files and data collected.

Risks: The participants may find that certain survey statements or questions evoke negative emotions and feelings as they recall them. If participants are uncomfortable, they could redraw the survey at any time without any penalties. Some participants may feel fatigued or bored while completing the survey. In this case, participants can take a break before resuming as there is no time limit for the survey completion. The participants might feel stressed by their experience; the researcher has provided several counselors or organizations where they can ask for help if needed.

Author contributions

The author's contributed equally to this research.

Conflict of interest

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