

Identifying the challenges and coping mechanisms of undergraduate Malaysian student leaders during their leadership experience

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Abstract: This study provides an in-depth exploration of the challenges and coping mechanisms of undergraduate Malaysian student leaders in the post-pandemic era. Drawing on qualitative interviews with seven student leaders from various public universities, the study identifies key themes of challenges related to leadership responsibilities and skills, personal well-being and resilience, communication and collaboration, and organizational operations. The study also uncovers a range of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping mechanisms employed by these leaders. While the findings may lack generalisability due to the specific sample, they offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of student leadership in Malaysia. The study concludes with implications for student leadership development and suggestions for future research.

Keywords:

Coping mechanisms, student leaders, student leadership challenges.

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On a voluntary basis, university student leaders are tasked with a wide range of responsibilities, including promoting campus community improvement (Soria et al., 2013), leading entrepreneurial activities (Bagheri & Pihie, 2011), and demonstrating strong leadership characteristics such as having moral purpose, being adaptable, and having the ability to connect with others (Hilliard, 2010). Their roles also extend beyond the campus, as they are also expected to be pioneers of student activism through involving themselves in discussions of higher education policies and leading student organizations that serve as a platform for democratic youth development (Serafimovska & Markovikj, 2018). These external roles are supported more recently in Malaysia with the emergence of Student Unions replacing Student Representative Committees, such as the case in International Islamic University Malaysia in 2019, as an effort to empower student voices and promote student autonomy which highlights the evolving landscape of student leadership in the country (Hasan, 2021). On top of such responsibilities, student leaders are also expected to fulfil their learning responsibilities successfully (Hilliard, 2010), potentially making them far more burdened than the average university student.

With more and more emerging roles that student leaders are expected to execute, comes more potential challenges they have to endure. Existing bodies of research outside Malaysia such as those by Mitra (2022), found that student leaders face numerous obstacles, including issues related to follower support, management support, leadership competencies, organizational inflexibility, and stress. In the Malaysian context, the most recent and relevant work done with regards to the student leadership challenges was dated before the pandemic. The study was conducted by Chandrasegran & Siaw (2018), whose qualitative study on the challenges and factors of student leadership found issues of time constraint, management support and membership support among student leaders. However, by using Google Scholar with the range set from the year 2019 and inputting the following search: "student leadership" AND "Malaysia" AND "qualitative study", no relevant research that points to a post-pandemic qualitative study on the subject matter can be found. On top of that, using Emerald Insight with the following prompt: title:"student leaders" OR (title:"student leadership") AND (title:"challenges") AND ("Malaysia") set from the year 2019 also did not bring up recent relevant research on the challenges of Malaysian student leaders.

The absence of recent studies exploring the challenges of Malaysian student leaders in the post-pandemic era is significant. The recent aforementioned establishment of Student Unions in the country (with the new responsibilities that come along with it) and the disruptions caused by the pandemic might have introduced novel difficulties, reshaping the landscape of student leadership. The pandemic in particular, has forced changes in higher learning institutions and beyond, from propelling new modes of learning to shifting organizational cultures (Nugroho et al., 2021; Sá & Serpa, 2020), all of which impacted higher education students in general in various ways, including those with leadership roles.

The same can also be applied to research delving into coping mechanisms of Malaysian student leaders. While there is plenty of research documenting coping strategies among general Malaysian undergraduate students (Abdul Aziz et al., 2021; Falasifah et al., 2020), coping

mechanisms of Malaysian student leaders (with their unique responsibilities) demands a more targeted investigation. This is evident as there are no results found when searching for an article from 2019 or newer in Google Scholar with the following search: "Malaysian student leaders" OR "student leaders in Malaysia" AND "coping mechanisms". This gap is significant, as understanding how student leaders cope is essential for tailoring interventions and support services to their needs given their multifaceted responsibilities. An exploration of coping mechanisms of a specific group is always valuable as it can help in the development of individualised care for said group (Kawalec et al., 2022). As such, without more data on coping mechanisms currently employed by student leaders, higher educational institutions may not provide the best interventions in supporting their student leaders to navigate the challenges they face.

In conclusion, the absence of recent studies on the challenges and coping mechanisms of Malaysian student leaders, especially in the post-pandemic era, is a notable gap in the existing literature. The evolving landscape of student leadership and the disruptions caused by the pandemic, necessitates up-to-date research on student leaders' challenges and coping mechanisms. Therefore, the present research aims to fill in such gaps in research by identifying the possible new challenges that undergraduate student leaders in Malaysia may face as well as to identify the coping mechanisms employed by these leaders to navigate the intricacies of their roles.

The main objective of this study is to explore the challenges and coping mechanisms of undergraduate Malaysian student leaders during their leadership experience in the post-pandemic era. To achieve this objective, the following research questions are formulated, what are the primary challenges encountered by Malaysian student leaders during their leadership tenure? How do Malaysian student leaders cope with the challenges they encounter in their roles?

METHODS

A qualitative and descriptive approach was applied in this study to explore in-depth perceptions among student leaders on the challenges they face and the coping mechanisms they use during their leadership experience. The approach was chosen as it can allow for a deeper and exploratory understanding of human experiences and behaviours, which cannot always be captured through quantitative methods (Camic et al., 2003). In the current study, a deeper understanding on the perceived challenges and coping mechanisms employed by Malaysian undergraduate student leaders can be obtained through a qualitative approach.

Purposive sampling method was used to collect the data because there are criteria that need to be met in choosing the participant for this study such as, (1) having gone through or currently going through a year of student leadership experience within the past 3 years, and (2) is a Malaysian student. The primary objective of purposive sampling is to concentrate on particular attributes within a population that are of relevance to effectively address the researcher's inquiries (Rai & Thapa, 2015).

Seven (7) student leaders, ranging from 20 to 24 were interviewed. They all had at least 1 year of student leadership experience either in managing Student Unions (SU) / Student Representative Councils (SRC), residential hostel societies or faculty level societies. The anonymous details of the 7 interviewees are as follows: Participant A is a 25-year-old male. He

was a student leader in a public university and has had experience for 4 years in handling several residential hostel societies before, during and after the pandemic. Participant B is a 23-year-old female. She was a student leader in a public university and has had experience for 4 years in handling all three types of societies before, during and after the pandemic. Participant C is a 23-year-old female. She was a student leader in a private university, and has had experience for 2 years, in handling a residential hostel society, during and after the pandemic.

Participant D is a 22-year-old male. He is a student leader in a private university and has had experience for at least 2 years in handling a faculty-based society as well as their SRC, during and after the pandemic. Participant E is a 23-year-old male. He was a student leader in a public university and has had experience for at least 4 years in handling a faculty-based society as well as their SU, before, during and after the pandemic. Brother F is a 23-year-old male. He is a student leader in a public university and has had experience for at least 2 years in handling a faculty based society as well as their SU, during and after the pandemic. Brother G is a 23-year-old male. He is a student leader in a public university and has had experience for a year in handling a faculty-based society after the pandemic.

Given the objectives and research questions of the research, a set of interview questions was developed to be used for the interview. Semi-structured interviews were utilised to obtain data for this qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews are in-depth interviews where the participant will be asked to answer open-ended questions developed based on the research questions of the study. The main questions focus on a) the challenges Malaysian student leaders encounter throughout their leadership experience and b) their coping mechanisms throughout their leadership experience.

After finalising the interview questions, the researcher has arranged meetings with participants using Google Calendar. During these scheduled meetings, interviews are then conducted and recorded via Microsoft Teams. Prior to commencing each interview, participants received a briefing on the study's title, objectives, and consent form, ensuring the confidentiality of their data. During the interview, questions from the prepared list will be asked, with additional probing questions for in-depth understanding. Following the interview, participants will receive a study debriefing. The recorded interviews are then transcribed using Microsoft Teams and subjected to thematic analysis, involving the extraction of themes from the data which involved a methodical approach using open and axial coding in an iterative manner guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase process. The process was informed by the processes Using Nvivo, transcripts were meticulously examined and broken down into distinct text segments which were then assigned specific codes, drawn from either the interviewee's language or expressions crafted by the researchers. Following this, a careful examination of the initial codes included listing them to identify any redundancies or overlaps, followed by a refining process to consolidate them into broader themes. Ultimately, the result of the data analysis revealed four overarching themes, complemented by ten sub themes for challenges and two overarching themes complemented by 8 sub themes for coping mechanisms.

RESULTS

Challenges Faced by Malaysian Student Leaders

Results of the thematic analysis on the challenges faced by Malaysian student leaders is shown in table 1.

Table 1

Challenges Faced by Malaysian Student Leaders

Themes	Sub-Themes
Leadership responsibilities	Time and Task Management Struggles
	Insufficient Organizational Knowledge
	Unreadiness to Adapt to Change
Personal Well-being and Resilience	Poor Work-life Balance
	Emotional Issues
Communication and Collaboration	Organizational Communication Breakdown
	Diversity Conflicts
	Stakeholder Expectations
Organizational Operations	Financial Constraints
	Low Participation

Leadership Responsibilities and Skills

All of the participants mentioned problems relating to leadership responsibilities and skills which include a) time and task management struggles, b) engaging and managing workloads, and c) insufficient organizational knowledge.

Time and Task Management. Despite the differences in the position they held, the most unanimous challenge brought up by all participants was related to their time and task management. In particular, the responsibilities as both a student and a student leader are oftentimes difficult to manage. Participant A for example, even noted that some of these tasks are ad hoc in nature which further complicates time management.

“I couldn't balance out the time for my studies and me being the student leader. So uh, sometimes there were too much on my plate and there were too much being asked from other people, and sometimes there were ad hoc stuff that I have to put my time into being student leader”. (Participant A)

“We do have many tasks like we have, we have our academics, we do have our own family. We do have our own friendship and being a student leader, or if you are willingly to participate in any of organization of or or club, you need to spend your whole maybe tenureship or certain period of time for the programs, right? So I think that was the first problem that I face is like I don't have- it's not that I don't have

ample time, but sometimes we may feel like ohh, we don't have time for this and for that. So we need to berkorban [sacrifice] la..” (Participant B)

“You know, as an undergraduate, of course, you need to attend classes. You need to submit your assignments. You need to participate very active in class. Cannot miss any class while also you know being a student leader you also have a different commitment. You have outside commitments. You have commitments to other students, to the university you have, you know, commitments to the lecturers, you have commitments to the student department. So yeah, I think like the biggest challenge on a personal level, definitely juggling, you know, between these”. (Participant D)

Insufficient Organizational Knowledge. Insufficient organizational knowledge (among both the leaders themselves and followers) have also been noted by several participants. The extent of the issue ranges from not having knowledge on standard of procedures, chain of commands to even emailing etiquette. In the context of a post-pandemic setting, it can be inferred from Participant B’s response that a lack of organizational knowledge among the new student leaders can be attributed to the lack of leadership opportunities in a physical setting due to the pandemic.

“They don’t know how to do all those the documentation properly, so it took a lot of time to learn to teach and also to make them understand how the black and white thingy the like the emailing”. (Participant B)

“The post pandemic students start feel like ohh I'm not a suitable for this and for that because I don't have skills because they are lacking the experience”. (Participant B)

“It can be in terms of specifically on organization management, specifically on standard operating procedures SOPs and then correspondence of organizations. So somehow this kind of things some people tend to overlook it and some people didn't emphasise”. (Participant F)

Difficulty Adapting to Change. Five of the seven participants highlighted issues relating to difficulty to adapt to changes in their setting. In particular, all five of them noted the need to have a readjustment period among themselves and their members specifically in their transition towards leading in a physical or hybrid setting. This is attributed to the many sudden changes caused by the pandemic on university policies as well as their own personal wellbeing.

Participant B for example, used the Malay metaphor “*Katak di bawah tempurung*” when describing her experience during the lockdown which denotes limited insight specifically of the community that she serves. And then, she noted the transitional experience after the pandemic as “*Keluar dunia balik*” which means seeing the world after a long while, indicating a sudden perceived change in her environment. Other participants also described their personal struggles as well as the struggles of their student leader peers trying to readjust to serve in a physical setting despite having the experience to do so prior to the pandemic.

“But after the pandemic it feels like we need to restart every single aspect in our life including leadership communication. Sort of like a readjustment”. (Participant B)

“When meeting up after the pandemic, they do not know how to confront the parents during registration (of students). They have experienced it in the past and

can talk to their parents. But after the pandemic, the committees are more emotional and that can lead to conflict” (Participant C)

Personal Well Being

Problems related to personal being were noted in two forms; a) poor work-life balance and b) emotional issues.

Poor Work-life Balance. Poor work-life balance was noted to be a major challenge for the participants. This manifests in various forms such as overthinking work responsibilities during leisure activities, seldomly taking breakfast or even feeling bad for prioritising work over family members. Such examples showcase the extent of the lack of control and focus Malaysian student leaders have in balancing their work-life.

“I even going on online or YouTube watching videos, the thing (work) still lingers in my mind and I cannot focus on anything”. (Participant A)

“But even though sometimes I rarely take breakfast”. (Participant B)

“When I choose to prioritise society activities, then I will feel burdened. Or I feel *serba bersalah* [bad] to leave my family”. (Participant E)

Emotional Issues. Across all responses, the word “stress” alone was mentioned in 11 instances, indicating emotional issues as a challenge among student leaders. Stress is a complex emotional and physiological response to external pressures, and its frequent appearance in the different contexts and responses suggests that student leaders commonly grapple with a range of challenges that take a toll on their mental health. Participant B said, “*We do have our assignment, especially sometimes I do feel like a club and society may be a bit interrupted. It stress me out.*”

Interestingly, Participant B in particular, attributes her emotional irregularities to her being a woman, having to repress strong emotions despite feeling the urge to express it.

Especially me as a woman I do have ups and down like sometimes we do feel like we very angry so we need to just silent or you need to manifest your madness ka apa kan but you need to control la so that was the hardest jugak I rasa because at some point I need to manifest my anger. (Participant B)

Communication and Collaboration

Several challenges pertaining to communication and collaboration among student leaders as well as with their stakeholders (administration, students, outside parties) are encountered by the Malaysian student leaders. This includes a) communication breakdown, b) conflict, c) managing expectations from stakeholders and d) unclear policies from authority.

Breakdown in Organizational Communication. A communication breakdown refers to a situation in which there is a failure or disruption in the exchange of information between individuals or groups. Majority of the participants expressed difficulty in organizational communication specifically due to the hybrid context they lead in. Several participants noted issues in which their intended messages are not effectively conveyed, received, or understood through an online channel leading to misunderstandings. Interestingly, the participants noted that the problems seem to persist even in a post-pandemic setting as the convenience provided by online meetings are generally more preferred among followers despite acknowledging their subpar effectiveness.

“And then one important thing is communicating via WhatsApp is very, very problematic because it does not translate to the people's emotions, so you don't really know if they are actually angry or they're actually happy. You don't know what they are, what their current mental situation during the communication, especially in an online setting”. (Participant G)

“Yeah, you create this option, you create this illusion of choice (of modes). People would definitely choose the one that benefits them. They get information from the webinar and they get the comfort of seeing staying at home. But you know, but you lose the connection of human to human. (Participant A)

“Discussions are online, they (the staff and members) do not want to do it face-to-face. So, when we want to address the problem, it doesn't feel important and become something else”. (Participant C)

Diversity Conflicts. Several participants have reported issues in navigating diversity conflicts. This includes diversity in religious beliefs, ethnicity, and culture, as well as diversity in personality and principles. Participant Z reported difficulty in collaborating with people from a different ethnicity as there are sensitivity considerations and heightened chance for misunderstandings.

“Other issues are probably like Malaysian issues itself. Like we have many races so in my hostel society, there are Indians as well. We do not intend to be racist but unintentionally, we may misspoke and they will perceive us as racist despite us having no intentions to do so. (The challenge is) When we need to collaborate with other races”. (Participant C)

Issues pertaining to diversity conflicts were also reported even in a homogenous context with members of the same ethnicity. However, the variations come from the different dialects and word structures used by other members of the same ethnicity as reported by Participant G. He noted that his members used a dialect that may seem harsher to him and that causes difficulties for him to understand the context in their communication.

“So my way of speaking in Malay in the city is very different from those not living in the city because some of them, I could say it's more harsh and it's more straightforward. So it's very it's hard for me to accept their feedback or their way of saying things.” (Participant G)

On the other hand, some participants mentioned issues in dealing with diverse sets of personalities and principles. Participant E noted difficulty in aligning himself with other members due to differences in personality. The diversity conflict was reported to complicate decision-making and team cohesiveness.

“You have that dynamic in in the council itself on how to negotiate, how to, you know, everyone is diverse with their own understanding, different principles and not to mention their cultural and religious background. So negotiating the terms with others to reach, to a conclusion- unanimous decision, that is the challenge itself”. (Participant D)

Stakeholder Expectation. Majority of the participants revealed difficulties in meeting stakeholder expectations. In the student leadership context, this extends particularly to the students they serve as well as the administration that supports the student organization.

Participant E for example, expressed feeling stressed due to clashing expectations from the administration specifically when conducting programs.

“So for example, they want the students to organise some specific program but it defeats the purpose, it defeat the organization’s purpose as it not aligned with the organizations vision, mission and value. So yeah, I think that's the hindrances or obstacles that makes us feel stressed out when we need to meet their expectation”. (Participant E)

“Because for them (the administration staff) we would be the ones to handle this and sometimes they would expect us to settle this. Even though you were- in universities we, student leaders, were also learning”. (Participant A)

Moreover, student expectations also put significant pressure for the student leaders to perform. Participant F mentioned that he simply “cannot entertain all of these expectations from students”. Participant D on the other hand mentioned an instance in which his team faced difficulty in living up to students' expectations for a large sports event due to not having the resources to do so. As such, managing stakeholder expectations prove to be a challenge in the service of Malaysian student leaders.

Organizational Operations

Financial Constraints. Financial constraints were reported to be challenges by student leaders from a Union / SRC level as well as faculty-based societies. Participant E, who had led a faculty-based society in a public university, noted that the budget given was too low and limits their program’s potential. He also added that their efforts to generate income were halted by the pandemic, resulting in them solely relying on the low budget set by the faculty administration.

“Effectively, we cannot make the project worthwhile and impactful to the students because, for example, when we do the programs the budget is too low. (Participant E) To get more independent funding la. Uh during the pandemic we cannot do any physical activities or business. We cannot do, uh, more or more options to generate our own income. So, I think that's the challenge to move forward without much um financial power”. (Participant E)

This problem seems to also be present in private universities, as participant D also reported a similar lack of funding from their administration when trying to execute a large-scale sports festival. However, he mentioned getting some funding help from the staff at their respective Student Affairs Department. Still, his overall perception on lacking adequate funding remains the same. Participant D said, “In terms of like the funding, you know, we say that ohh the funding that we receive from university top management is actually not enough. So how can we actually, you know, execute these tasks, execute these programs that they want?”. (Participant D)

Low Membership Participation. The interviews also revealed the challenge of low membership participation across the majority of the participants. The problem manifests specifically in the form of difficulty in getting participation in programs as well as in the organization itself.

“It's still a challenge is to get an audience”. (Participant A)

“Even if we can go back looking at our participation in the students, any kind of students event, student leadership program, election, etcetera, the post pandemic

students start feel like ohh I'm not a suitable for this and for that because I don't have skills because they are lacking the experience". (Participant B)

"I find the post pandemic batch I believe are still struggling with this participation Issues". (Participant F)

"So yeah, even in that faculty is very much very difficult to gain membership. You know, we work, I'd say twice as much as harder to secure, you know, new members in each intake and during events". (Participant D)

Participant B and participant F in particular, highlighted how interest among students to participate in multiple aspects of student leadership have considerably dwindled in a post-pandemic setting compared to before the pandemic. The problem also extends to private universities, which Participant D illustrated the increasingly difficult hurdle in recruiting newer lineups or successors, which may threaten the sustainability of their organization.

Coping Mechanisms Utilized by Malaysian Student Leaders

From the interviews with the student leaders, the coping mechanism can be grouped into themes of problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping, in line with Lazarus and Folkman's theory as shown in table 2.

Table 2

Coping Mechanisms Utilized by Malaysian Student Leaders

Themes	Sub-Themes
Emotion-Focused Coping	Social Support and Solidarity
	Leisure Activities
	Religious Coping
	Proper Scheduling of Tasks
Problem-Focused Coping	Knowledge Seeking
	Thorough Discussions/ Negotiations

Emotion-Focused Coping

Interviews with the student leaders have revealed that they utilise a variety of emotion-focused coping strategies which include a) doing leisure activities b) positive reframing of problems c) having social support and solidarity and d) religious coping.

Social Support and Solidarity. Majority of the participants cite their social support system as a means to help them cope with the challenges of being a student leader. The support system they mention ranges from fellow student leaders, and staff to friends and family. Participant A mentioned how connecting with fellow student leaders help collectively "buffer the stress". Moreover, Participant D echoed a similar emphasis on solidarity among fellow student leaders even beyond their university.

"And yeah, I think that's very pleasing that when I leave some of my stress and then I spent time with my friends. Spend time with my food. Catching up with my friends. Uh, hang out? So when I spent time with them, I feel relief". (Participant F)

“You know, I have a lot of burden, but then when I see, you know, student leaders, from other universities, they share their advice, they said yeah, it's a very difficult task but you know remember why we do this in the first place”. (Participant D)

Leisure Activity. Doing leisure activities is revealed to be prevalent among participants. Such activities include doing sports, video gaming, and even cafe hunting. Participant A noted such activities “clear out a bit of my mind” and that such clarity can allow him to do his work better later. This sentiment is also echoed by Participant E who expressed a feeling of “being grounded and composed” after doing a leisure activity such as eating comfort foods or playing sports. It seems leisure activities help the participants deal with the stress that comes with the challenges they encounter so that they could solve it properly later as illustrated further by Participant F.

“So sometimes my coping mechanism would be, sometimes I go outside or just go to get some good food at a good place or just or just yeah. Just a little bit and just try to not think about it for a while. And when you are ready and calm, attend to the problem again and try to solve it, yeah”. (Participant F)

Religious Coping. Religious coping was reported to be utilised as a coping mechanism by participant B and participant C. Participant B in particular noted gratefulness to have a community around her that “make sure my purpose in the spiritual aspect is fulfilled”. Participant C added that spiritual coping is also prevalent among her student leader peers from other ethnicities. As Participant C, “*Diorang pun macam kita jugak* [they (the other race)], rely on their God to get through”.

Problem-Focused Coping

Interviews with the student leaders have revealed that they utilise a variety of problem-focused coping strategies which include a) a proper scheduling of tasks, c) knowledge seeking and sharing as well as d) having thorough discussions or negotiations.

Scheduling. Some form of scheduling strategies were used by participant C, participant D and participant E. Participant C and E scheduled their daily tasks in a journal to keep them organised. On the other hand, participant D mentioned how he started to utilise mobile scheduling applications since the pandemic to manage his time better. Participant D said, “*I know and I started to do, you know, having my own schedule. I started to install applications that in my phone that can help me with my time management I'm doing*”.

Knowledge Seeking. Several participants noted seeking knowledge as a coping mechanism to solve the problems they encounter in a variety of instances. For example, participant E noted reading books as a means to help him reflect and recollect his thoughts on a problem. Participant D on the other noted to have “brushed up” his negotiation skills to be more diplomatic. Participant B noted that she took time to learn how to teach her members on organizational communication. By upskilling themselves and others, they empower each other to appropriately deal with the challenges that come their way.

Thorough Discussions and Negotiations. Several participants cited thorough effective discussions and negotiations as coping mechanisms. These are particularly useful in addressing communication breakdowns or misunderstandings within their teams or organizations. By engaging in thorough and effective discussions, they can ensure that everyone is on the same page, thereby reducing the likelihood of miscommunication. Participant A elaborated on how he has to

“slow talk” with the staff administration to negotiate a middle ground solution. Participant C also added that to address the aforementioned issues of diversity conflicts, a thorough informal discussion on religion was used to foster understanding among herself and her diverse group of peers. Participant C said, *“So we bond through eating and discussions. For example, we share about our religion and they share theirs. Helps us understand each other”*.

Participant D on the other hand compared his observations of other student leaders with regards to negotiation; highlighting how some student leaders are very diplomatic with their respective administration while others sometimes resort to protest if their voices are ignored. Participant D said, *“Some of them go through negotiations with the staff. At the same time the student leaders protest so that their voices are heard. So that's how they cope”*.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study shed light on the unique challenges and coping mechanisms of undergraduate Malaysian student leaders in the post-pandemic era. The results are discussed in relation to the existing literature, the theoretical framework, and the implications for practice and research.

Challenges Faced by Malaysian Student Leaders

The challenges faced by Malaysian student leaders can be categorised into four main themes: leadership responsibilities and skills, personal well-being and resilience, communication and collaboration, and organizational operations. These themes are consistent with previous studies that identified various internal and external obstacles for student leaders, such as time management, stress, conflict, and organizational support (Chandrasegran & Siaw, 2018; Collier & Rosch, 2016; Mitra, 2022). However, the current study also revealed some novel challenges that emerged in the post-pandemic context, such as adapting to changes in the mode of learning and leadership, dealing with unclear policies from the authorities, and coping with emotional issues. These challenges reflect the disruptions and uncertainties caused by the pandemic, which have impacted the higher education sector and beyond (Nugroho et al., 2021; Sá & Serpa, 2020).

In the Malaysian context, these novel challenges may be exacerbated by the country's unique socio-cultural and educational landscape. For instance, the shift to online learning and leadership may be particularly challenging for Malaysian student leaders who are accustomed to face-to-face interactions and community-based activities. Similarly, the lack of clear policies from the authorities may reflect the broader issues of governance and transparency in the Malaysian higher education system. Finally, the emotional issues faced by Malaysian student leaders may be influenced by the cultural norms and values related to mental health and well-being in Malaysian society.

Coping Mechanisms Employed by Malaysian Student Leaders

The coping mechanisms employed by Malaysian student leaders can be classified into two main types: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. These types are derived from the theory of stress and coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which proposes that individuals use different strategies to manage the internal and external demands of stressful situations. Problem-focused coping refers to strategies that aim to alter or manage the source of stress, while emotion-focused coping involves regulating aspects of the self (Baqutayan, 2015).

The current study found that Malaysian student leaders used both types of coping, with some variations depending on the nature and severity of the challenges they faced. Some of the problem-focused coping strategies used by Malaysian student leaders include proper scheduling of tasks, purpose restatement, knowledge seeking and sharing, and thorough discussions/negotiations. These strategies are consistent with previous studies that found that university students tend to use problem-solving, social support, and cognitive restructuring as coping methods to reduce stress (Bamuhair et al., 2015; Onieva-Zafra et al., 2020). On the other hand, some of the emotion-focused coping strategies used by Malaysian student leaders include prayer, leisure activities, positive reframing of problems, and social support and solidarity. These strategies are similar to those reported by other studies that found that university students use positive reappraisal, engagement in leisurely pursuits, and religious coping to deal with stress (Bamuhair et al., 2015; Jensen et al., 2016; Osei-Kuffour & Peprah, 2020).

In the Malaysian context, these coping mechanisms may be shaped by the country's unique socio-cultural and religious beliefs. For instance, the use of prayer as a coping mechanism may reflect the strong religious faith and spirituality among Malaysian students. Similarly, the use of social support and solidarity may reflect the collectivist culture and strong sense of community in Malaysian society.

CONCLUSION

The paper aimed to identify the challenges and coping mechanisms of undergraduate Malaysian student leaders during their leadership experience. The paper employed a qualitative approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with seven student leaders from different universities and positions. The paper found that the main challenges faced by the student leaders were related to leadership responsibilities and skills, personal well-being and resilience, communication and collaboration, and organizational operations. The paper also found that the student leaders used both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies to deal with the challenges, such as proper scheduling of tasks, purpose restatement, knowledge seeking and sharing, thorough discussions/negotiations, prayer, leisure activities, positive reframing of problems, and social support and solidarity. The paper concluded that the challenges and coping mechanisms of Malaysian student leaders were multifaceted and nuanced, reflecting the complex and evolving landscape of student leadership in the post-pandemic era. The paper also discussed the implications of the findings for the theoretical and practical aspects of student leadership development, as well as the limitations and recommendations for future research.

SUGESSTION

The findings of this study have several implications for practice and research. For practice, the findings can inform the design of targeted training programs, interventions, and support services for Malaysian student leaders, addressing their specific challenges and coping needs. For example, training programs can focus on enhancing student leaders' leadership skills, such as time management, communication, and conflict resolution. Interventions can provide student leaders with emotional and psychological support, such as counselling, peer mentoring, and stress management workshops. Support services can facilitate student leaders' access to organizational resources, such as funding, policies, and networks. These initiatives can

help student leaders to overcome their challenges, improve their well-being, and increase their leadership effectiveness.

For research, the findings can contribute to the theoretical and empirical knowledge on student leadership, particularly in the Malaysian and post-pandemic context. The findings can refine or expand existing theories, such as the stress and coping theory, by incorporating the unique experiences and perspectives of Malaysian student leaders. The findings can also provide a basis for future research, such as exploring the factors that influence the choice and effectiveness of coping strategies, examining the outcomes and impacts of student leadership, and comparing the experiences of student leaders across different settings and samples. These research directions can further enhance our understanding of the complexities and dynamics involved in student leadership roles.

This study acknowledges several limitations that need to be considered. Primarily, the participant pool predominantly consists of individuals of Malay ethnicity. This demographic composition may not fully encapsulate the diverse experiences of student leaders from different racial backgrounds in Malaysia. To address this, future research could strive for a more racially diverse sample that includes minority student leaders, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the student leadership landscape.

Secondly, the study was constrained by a relatively small sample size, primarily due to time limitations. While this may affect the breadth of the data, it is important to note that qualitative studies often focus on depth and detail over quantity. Nevertheless, future studies could benefit from a larger sample size to enhance the robustness and richness of the data.

Thirdly, despite employing a rigorous and transparent approach to data analysis, including coding, categorisation, and theme development, the study is inherently subject to the subjective interpretation and judgement of the researcher and the participants. This could potentially introduce bias, inconsistency, or error in the data collection and analysis. To mitigate this, the study incorporated multiple checks and balances, such as peer review and member checking, to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings.

Lastly, while the study did not primarily aim for generalisability, it sought to provide valuable insights into a complex phenomenon by delving deeply into the experiences of the participants. The intention was to generate a nuanced understanding that, while not universally applicable, could inform and enrich the broader discourse on student leadership in Malaysia. Future research could build on these findings by exploring similar phenomena in different contexts, thereby contributing to a more holistic understanding of student leadership.

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