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The Perception on Gender Stereotype among Students in Malaysian Public Universities

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Abstract

Gender stereotype is a social practice that can be found across the world including in Malaysia. The study aims to examine the perceptions of students from Malaysian Public Universities towards gender stereotype, for it has been experienced not only in the working environment but unfortunately has started in the campus or might be earlier. The primary data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire which was distributed to 665 respondents via an online survey. The respondents were chosen by convenience multistage clustered sampling technique among students in various public institutions of higher education in Malaysia. Many of them are students from UiTM with 30.4% and the lowest are from UMT and UNIMAP with 1.2% each. The quantitative method was applied to analyse the data by using SPSS Version 26.0. The data were descriptively analysed to determine the level of knowledge and compliance with the decision. This study found that the students' perceptions on gender stereotype vary based on their personal experiences and life background. These findings are discussed in relation to culture, religion, social, and norms of the Malaysian context as a multi-religious and ethnic society.

Keywords: Perception, Gender Stereotype, Student, Malaysia.

Introduction

In general, stereotyping is a practice that is used to generalize about an individual or a group based on some features or characteristics which can be varied in terms of age, gender, religion and many other factors (Hentschel et al., 2019). But in specific, gender stereotyping refers to ascribing certain attributes, characteristics or roles to people based on their gender (UNESCO, 2017) due to her or his membership in the social group of women or men. The gender stereotype has been practiced globally since decades ago which can be seen in an example that blue represents a boy, and a girl with pink.

Undeniably, the labelling or ascribing stereotypically something to someone could be negative. The characteristics of agentic such as 'masculinity', 'instrumentality', 'competence', or communal features such as 'femininity', 'expressiveness', or 'warmth' often associated

with each gender (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). Therefore, it was perceived stereotypically in society that men are characterized as more agentic than women, while women are characterized as more communitarian than men. As a result of this gender stereotype, discrimination and prejudices occurred against women as well as men. Women were labelled as complicated, emotional, seductive; while men were regarded as aggressive, insensible, abusive and many other negative traits.

The negative impacts resulted from the gender stereotype should not be experienced by the young generation. It is essential to challenge and break down gender stereotypes to create a more inclusive and equal society that allows young people to explore their passions, express themselves authentically, and pursue their goals without unnecessary limitations or biases. Due to that, this research aims to examine the perceptions of students from Malaysian Public Universities towards gender stereotype, for it has been experienced not only in the working environment but unfortunately has started in the campus or might be earlier. The objectives are to discover:

- The students' understanding on the meaning of gender stereotype.
- The students' experience in dealing with gender stereotype.
- The students' knowledge on the practice of gender stereotype in Malaysia and the possibility to eliminate this practice.

Therefore, this study is vital by conducting survey among the students, and the result will be analysed for the betterment of the society.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section describes the literature related to brief information on gender stereotype that happened to be existed in Malaysia and being discussed by previous researchers. This is followed by methodology applied in collecting and analysing data. The last section contains findings and discussion in achieving the research objectives, then the paper ended by conclusion.

Literature Review

Multiple variables played a role in the establishment of gender stereotypes in the past. Stereotypes started after the gender of baby has been identified, usually boy with blue, and girl with pink. Gender stereotypes are rooted in society, particularly in family perception, where girls are expected to do more of the home tasks and to care for the children, whilst boys are supposed to work and to provide for their family (Blackstone, 2003). In terms of personality, boys are expected to show fewer emotions compared to girls (Löckenhoff et al., 2014). Girls' toys emphasize beauty and nurturing, while males' toys emphasize intellect and physical prowess. Even some parents forbid their children from playing with boy's toys if their children are girls, and the opposite. There are various characteristics and roles that society has established for both genders, as well as diverse ways in which masculinity and femininity are defined or understood.

The language and content of educational materials such as textbooks also contributed to children's perceptions of gender stereotypes. According to Bahiyah Abdul Hamid et al (2008), most of the publications frequently depict male characters as being more successful and powerful than female characters based on the occupation differences which represent men as dominant in variety of work than women. Gender stereotypes were presented in three different ways; First, males are given precedence over females, with males being depicted as

the standard. Second, there is a skewed representation of male experiences in social, occupational, and political activities compared to female experiences in the portrayal or representation of characters. Third, there is also a bias in the portrayal of personality features that run parallel to traditional masculine and feminine attributes.

Furthermore, the media has a greater tendency to include aspects that contribute to the establishment of gender stereotypes among children and adolescents in their program (Council of Europe, 2016; Ward & Grower, 2020; Wille et al., 2018). In Malaysia, for example, the average amount of time children spend watching television, particularly during MCO, is seven hours and twenty-four minutes, compared to five hours and seventeen minutes before MCO (Hirschmann, 2021). What's more unexpected is that gender stereotypes, particularly sexualization of women in the media, are among the top three challenges that women face (IPSOS, 2018). When the cognitive limitations of early childhood are combined with highly segregated environments, the result can be the development of rigid and extremely limiting stereotypes that influence the choices of children, their preferences, and their expectations about themselves and others as early as the first few years of their lives.

Along with these depictions, women face gender stereotype in the media a lot more compared to men (Kathiraveloo, 2001; Mat Rahim et al., 2017; Saabar et al., 2012) where women are depicted within the context of the consumerism paradigm in order to sell things. As a result, women are seen as the objects of capitalism, and products that reflect feminine traits such as 'slim' tend to be extremely successful (Cohan, 2001) to attract buyers. In reality, it is a positive development for the image of women to encourage women to pursue their dream without limiting on gender stereotype (Fong, 2019). Worst of all, when their feminine gestures fail to portray an authentic or true picture of women's diverse roles and contributions to change the world. The situation becomes even worse when the use of women's bodies as a sexual reflector or sexual symbol is considered to be more problematic (Güdekli & Çelik, 2014). Instead of focusing on a specific job, the media should present women as equally successful as men in a wide range of occupations.

Interestingly, a recent study found that gender stereotypes have changed slightly over time. In the seven decades that have elapsed between 1946 and 2008, there has been a growth in the level of communion towards women, but there has been no change in the relative advantage of males in agency (Eagly et al., 2020). In the twentieth century, many researchers used psychological assessments combined with machine learning techniques to track changes in gender stereotypes. They discovered that the strength of these concepts has diminished as a result of the development of time (Bhatia & Bhatia, 2021). This most recent study has effectively demonstrated that in this day, men and women are on an equal playing field. Despite the fact that there may be a little variation in strength between men and women, both genders are required to complement one another. It is unfair to categorize people into two groups solely on their physical appearance and gender.

Indeed, gender stereotypes resulted huge impacts socially and psychologically. The restriction of both males and females to specific forms of conduct, courses of study, professional options, and the limitation of their full potential based on gender created problems (Right, 2014). One example of the negative impacts is the decrease of self-esteem if the gender becomes the main factor that restricted their lifegoals. If a girl wants to work in automotive engineering

for instance, which was traditionally considered a man's profession, the parents will support their children to pursue their dreams without lowering their self-esteem by implying that the girl is not qualified for the job. The same should be true in school, where teachers should encourage their students to pursue whatever their ambitions are without having any stereotype view about what they should be doing. The teacher should establish a sense of self-esteem in the students about whatever work they like to be. After all, teachers at school and parents at home have a significant impact on the self-esteem of children and young adults (Yeung et al., 2010).

Following that, unequal treatment of both genders may have a mutually beneficial relationship with gender stereotype classroom practices, where one gender is favoured over the other, resulting in a disharmonious classroom environment (Matheis et al., 2020). According to Tiedemann and Matheis et al (2002) teacher judgments of gender differences in mathematics were compatible with the belief that boys have more developmental resources in mathematics than girls. Consequently, guys received more attention from teachers and more time to speak in class than girls, and boys also received more praise, critical feedback, and remediation as a result of these differences than girls. When girls believe they are being treated unfairly by the teacher, this view might create a discordant environment in the classroom.

Besides, the students will face difficulty when they are growing up and searching for job. In some cases, gender stereotype influenced the interpretation of their performance in a given role. Men were given less credit or viewed less positively for the same quantity and/or quality of work as a male counterpart. Women are discouraged from attempting to work in that industry because of this type of misconception. Consequently, no one realizes that job that has traditionally been allocated for males may also be appropriate for women.

Therefore, in order to analyse the gender stereotype that happened in Malaysia, this study is conducting the survey among the students in higher institutions in Malaysia by evaluating on how they perceived the gender stereotype as a social problem that may occurred around themselves. The gender stereotype might be a huge problem in Malaysia if there is no action taken to counter this practice. It could be encountered earlier before this issue spreading as a virus which affected the social development.

Methodology

To evaluate the students' perceptions and their understandings on the concept of gender stereotype, this study has been conducted quantitatively by distributing online questionnaire to the respondents. This method is more relevant compared to qualitative because the quantitative method was designed to assume that cognition and behaviour can be predictable and explainable determined by one or more causes (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

Data Collection Procedure

Using convenience multistage clustered sampling technique, the sample participated in this study consists of 665 respondents from various public institutions of higher education in Malaysia. Many of them are students from UiTM with 30.4% and the lowest are from UMT and UNIMAP with 1.2% each. The details of participants in this research can be in Table 1.

Table 1

Respondents of survey from different educational institutions in Malaysia

Item	Frequency	Percentage	
Educational institutions	UIAM	33	5.0%
	UITM	202	30.4%
	UKM	45	6.8%
	UM	21	3.2%
	UMP	10	1.5%
	UMS	56	8.4%
	UMT	8	1.2%
	UNIMAP	8	1.2%
	UNIMAS	12	1.8%
	UNISZA	21	3.2%
	UPM	24	3.6%
	UPSI	32	4.8%
	USIM	96	14.4%
	USM	14	2.1%
	UTEM	10	1.5%
	UTHM	10	1.5%
UTM	39	5.9%	
UUM	24	3.6%	

In addition, the respondent consisted of 23.9% male students ($n = 159$) and 76.1% female students ($n = 506$). The sample also comprised students from multi races: 89.2% Malay, 1.5% Chinese, 0.9% Indian, 8.0% Bumiputera Sabah and Sarawak, and 0.5% other than these races. It is worth noting that the respondents' highest academic qualification was the PhD degree (0.2%), and the lowest academic qualification was the diploma (26.8%).

Data Instrument

This study employed a survey approach through self-developed and self-administered questionnaire as a research instrument. The questionnaire consists of three parts. The first part gathered information on socio-demographic profile including gender, marital status, ethnic group, religion, highest education, and educational institution. The second part measured respondents' knowledge and perception on gender stereotype. The third part assessed respondents' knowledge and perception of gender discrimination. In this instrument, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with particular statement using a five-point Likert scale, with (1) indicating strongly disagree, followed by (2) indicating disagree, (3) indicating neutral, (4) indicating agree, and (5) indicating strongly agree.

Data Analysis

The collected data from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive and statistical inferential with the help of SPSS 26.0 software. Statistical Inferential analyses were accomplished using T-test and ANOVA. In terms of validity and reliability, a popular rule of thumb recommended that the size of Cronbach Alpha should generally be, at a minimum, greater than or equal to .70 for research purposes (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). It is found

that all spectrums of questions in this study have been tested with Cronbach Alpha value of more than .723, and therefore acceptable to be used for further analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The major topic to analyse the students' perception is on their understanding towards gender stereotype. However, for the purpose of this article, there are only 7 issues that are significant to be discussed. Those issues are as follows:

Understanding on the Meaning of Gender Stereotype

The concept of gender stereotype, although it is practically known by everybody, it is important to identify whether the respondents are not only aware but understand on its meaning. The study found that 323 respondents (48.6%) strongly agree with the statement of "I understand that gender stereotype refers to a belief that people have about the characteristics of males and females", and only 1 respondent (0.2%) strongly disagree with the statement. From the total respondents, female respondents have higher number compared to male respondents, and the only respondents who disagreed was from a male respondent (See Table 2).

Table 2

Understanding on the Meaning of Gender Stereotype based on Different Gender

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Gender	Male	1	2	21	71	64	159
	Female	0	7	49	191	259	506
Total		1	9	70	262	323	665

Respondents' Experiences of Gender Stereotype

The study also attempts to know whether the respondents have experience in dealing with gender stereotype. It is found that 196 female respondents (29.5%) strongly agree with the statement of "I have experienced of gender stereotyping in my life" compared to 47 male respondents (7.1%) who strongly agree on the similar statement. However, the number of female respondents who has no experience of gender stereotype is also higher which is 23 respondents (3.5%) compared to the male respondents which are only 8 respondents (1.2%). Due to the majority of respondents in this study is female, there are variety answers from female respondents regarding their experiences of gender stereotype in their life (See Table 3). But it is undeniable fact that female has higher chance in facing gender stereotype compared to male either in educational, social, and political aspect. Due to that, violence cases against women were reported increasing every year particularly during pandemic (Farhira Farudin, 2021).

Table 3

Experience of gender stereotype based on different gender

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Gender	Male	8	15	37	52	47	159
	Female	23	44	83	160	196	506
Total		31	59	120	212	243	665

The Practice of Gender Stereotype in Malaysia

According to the World Economic Forum (2022) in a relatively low position at 103 out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index. However, this position is up from the 112th position in 2021. The index is measured based on four aspects, namely educational achievement, participation and opportunities in the economic sector, health, and survival, as well as empowerment in the political field involving both men and women. Although this rank getting better from the previous years, it has proven that gender gap is still existed among the Malaysian community.

As the multi-racial country, Malaysia's population in 2023 Quarter 1 has been estimated at 33.2 million people consisting of 17.5 million male residents and 15.7 million female residents increase by 1.6% compared to the first quarter of 2022 32.6 million. The gender ratio for the entire population is 111 males for every 100 females (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). Out of the total number of Malaysian citizens, the composition of Bumiputera rose 0.2 percentage points to record 57.9 per cent in first quarter 2023 when compared to 57.7 per cent in first quarter 2022. However, Chinese declined to 22.6 per cent (Q1 2022: 22.8%) and Indian's population remain the same 6.6 percent (Q1 2022: 6.6%) while others remained at 0.7% (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023).

Due to the composition of Malaysia's population, the majority of the respondents are 89.2% of the Malay. Simultaneously, this study also found that majority of them strongly agree with the statement "Gender stereotype has been practiced in my country" with 287 respondents (43.2%), followed by Bumiputera with 23 respondents (3.5%), Chinese with 4 respondents (0.6%), Indian and Other with 3 respondents each (0.5%). However, the Malay also came with the highest among those who strongly disagree with the similar statement (See Table 4).

Table 4

The Practice of Gender Stereotype in Malaysia based on different Ethnic

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Ethnicity	Malay	9	11	92	194	287	593
	Chinese	0	0	2	4	4	10
	Indian	0	0	1	2	3	6
	Bumiputera	3	1	12	14	23	53
	Other	0	0	0	0	3	3
Total		12	12	107	214	320	665

Gender Stereotype in the Family Institution Based on Marital Status

Undeniably, there is difference of role between male and female in the family institution regardless of any race, ethnic or religion. Male who holds position as a husband and father is usually regarded as a breadwinner or income earner, while female who is a wife and mother are often busy managing household and domestic responsibilities. This stereotyped gender role has been practiced from one generation to another, and it has gradually changed since there are families experiencing opposite roles due to certain circumstances. However, this study tends to know the respondents' views whether they believe that patriarchal culture might be an important factor to practice gender stereotype in the family institution. Thus, the

survey asked this statement: “Gender stereotype is a result of patriarchal culture that male has supreme authority in a family” in order to know their perceptions.

Most of the respondents who strongly agree with this statement are in the single status with 322 respondents (48.4%), and there are also 27 married respondents (4.1%), and 2 single parents (0.3%) who strongly agree with it. The main reason of having this kind of percentage might be because of majority of the respondents were single, and only few of them are married. However, these single respondents also were the ones who strongly disagree with this statement. None of them were among the married or divorced respondents.

Table 5

Gender Stereotype in the Family Institution based on Marital Status

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Marital Status	Single	16	13	85	179	322	615
	Married	0	3	2	15	27	47
	Single Parent/Widow	0	0	0	1	2	3
Total		16	16	87	195	351	665

Perception on Gender Stereotype Based on Religion

Malaysia has the proportion of 63.5% of Muslim, while other religions embraced were Buddhism (18.7%), Christianity (9.1%) and Hinduism (6.1%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). While majority of the Malaysian population are Muslim, and Islam also has been regarded as an official religion of the Federation, but other religions can be practiced in peace and harmony. However, concerning gender role, Islam is often being misunderstood of promoting bias against gender, particularly on women. This misunderstanding continuously happens until today even though many efforts have been conducted to solve this issue.

This study asked the following statement: “Gender stereotype has been mostly influenced by religion”. The majority of the respondents answered the middle answer (neutral) with this statement (213 out of 665 respondent). This study also found that who strongly agree with this statement were among Muslims with 118 respondents (17.7%). Those who did not specify their religions also answered agree (1 respondent) and strongly agree (2 respondents).

Unfortunately, the number of other religions than Islam is low could be a reason of not achieving the accurate answer for this statement. This study also aims to collect their perceptions only, and their responds might not be considered as a real fact since demographic background of the respondents are different. However, religion should not be considered as a factor to divide gender role and simultaneously to produce stereotyped sentiment based on gender, because gender is a social construct which involves the division and social valuation of masculinity and femininity which has been developed socially (Blackstone, 2003).

Table 6

Perception on Gender Stereotype based on Religion

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Religion	Islam	54	114	204	148	118	638
	Buddhism	1	1	3	3	1	9
	Hinduism	0	1	0	0	2	3
	Christianity	0	1	6	2	3	12
	Other	0	0	0	1	2	3
Total		55	117	213	154	126	665

The Elimination of Gender Stereotype

It has been known that gender stereotyping has negative consequences if it carries harmful and wrongful stereotypes as explained by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Holtmaat, 2012; International Commission of Jurists, 2015). Gender stereotype is harmful when it limits any gender's capacity to develop their personal abilities, to pursue their professional careers and to make choices about their lives and life plan, and it is wrongful when it leads to violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms (OHCHR, 2014). Due to this reason, any negative gender stereotyping will give bad results to the society, and many have agreed that the elimination of gender stereotype is better.

Therefore, this study interested to discover respondents' perception with this statement: "Gender stereotype is possible to be eliminated." From male respondents, 47 respondents (7.1%) agree, 45 respondents (6.8%) gave neutral answer, 40 respondents (6.0%) strongly agree, 14 respondents (2.1%) disagree, and 13 respondents (2.0%) strongly disagree. Meanwhile, majority of the female respondents strongly agree with 150 respondents (22.6%), 146 respondents (22.0%) agree, 142 respondents (21.4%) gave neutral answer, 55 respondents (8.3%) disagree, and 13 respondents (2.0%) strongly disagree. In sum, many of the respondents (n=193) agree with the idea that gender stereotype is possible to be eliminated (See Table 7).

The finding shows that both genders have different opinions either gender stereotype can be eliminated but impossible to abolish its practice in easy and fast way; or gender stereotype can be eliminated and possible to do even though it will go through difficult and long process. Men and women also have different ways to adapt in facing gender stereotype and lead them differently to eliminate such bias. According to Hentschel et al (2019), women were more flexible to incorporate gender roles and to diminish the stereotypic beliefs compared to men. It is due to the willingness of women to shift their roles in workplace and domestic affair, and their acceptance of their role as the new status quo. However, this study found that the majority of respondents agree that gender stereotype should be eliminated and there are possible ways to against its practice. In addition, the elimination should also come together with promoting positive portrayals of gender through government efforts, public campaigns and

Table 7

The Elimination of Gender Stereotype based on Different Gender

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Gender	Male	13	14	45	47	40	159
	Female	13	55	142	146	150	506
Total		26	69	187	193	190	665

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, gender stereotypes have influenced negatively in many aspects. It occurred almost in many Western and Eastern countries decades ago, and unfortunately stereotyping based on gender still happened today in the modern world. Malaysia is not exception, because gender stereotype has started from a child was born, and continued when a child attending school, until they become an adult in the university and later has their own career.

In conclusion, the study has achieved the research objectives to examine the perceptions of students from Malaysian Public Universities towards gender stereotype, for it has been experienced not only in the working environment but unfortunately has started in the campus or might be earlier. The findings showed that their perceptions on this issue vary based on their personal experiences and life background. These findings are discussed in relation to culture, religion, social, and norms of the Malaysian context as a multi-religious and ethnic society. Further research can be conducted by preparing detailed questions and widen the respondents from private higher institutions.

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