7-7-2019

A Qualitative Expert Interview Approach towards Understanding Religious Extremism among Malaysian Youth

Norhafezah Yusof Associate Professor
Universiti Utara Malaysia, norhafezah@uum.edu.my

Amrita Kaur Dr
Universiti Utara Malaysia, amrita@uum.edu.my

Mohd Azizuddinbin Mohd Sani PROF. DR
Universiti Utara Malaysia, azizuddin@uum.edu.my

Rosna Awang Hashim Prof Dr
Universiti Utara Malaysia, rosna@uum.edu.my

Follow this and additional works at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr

Part of the Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons

Recommended APA Citation

A Qualitative Expert Interview Approach towards Understanding Religious Extremism among Malaysian Youth

Abstract

Religious extremism among Muslim youth is an emergent challenge and a variety of factors contribute towards its rise. However, few studies have explored this phenomenon in predominantly Muslim countries. Using expert interview approach, this study explored factors that provoke Malaysian youth into joining religious extremist groups and discussed findings from a social-ecological theory perspective. Inductive thematic analysis guided by socio-ecological theory was employed to analyze the data. Factors identified were Islamic Ideology-choice & Interpretation, Ummah and Practicality, and Charismatic leadership. The investigation through the social-ecological lens suggests that these causes mainly interacted at the macro-ecological and community-levels to influence the behaviour of Malaysian youths.

A Qualitative Expert Interview Approach towards Understanding Religious Extremism among Malaysian Youth

Norhafezah Yusof, Amrita Kaur, Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, and
Rosna Awang Hashim
Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah Darul Aman, Malaysia

Religious extremism among Muslim youth is an emergent challenge and a variety of factors contribute towards its rise. However, few studies have explored this phenomenon in predominantly Muslim countries. Using expert interview approach, this study explored factors that provoke Malaysian youth into joining religious extremist groups and discussed findings from a social-ecological theory perspective. Inductive thematic analysis guided by socio-ecological theory was employed to analyze the data. Factors identified were Islamic Ideology-choice & Interpretation, Ummah and Practicality, and Charismatic leadership. The investigation through the social-ecological lens suggests that these causes mainly interacted at the macro-ecological and community-levels to influence the behaviour of Malaysian youths. Keywords: Violence, Religion, Positive Youth Development, Adolescent, Qualitative Methods, Expert Interview

Positive psycho-social development and wellbeing of youth are central to prosperous nation building. Transforming a nation's social, political, and economic environments can significantly affect the direction and quality of youth development. Failing to manage issues and challenges surrounding youth may result in detrimental outcomes for a nation. Traditionally, nations have struggled with challenges such as substance abuse (Zapolski, Fisher, Banks, Hensel, & Barnes-Najor, 2017), delinquency (Zhang, Zhao, Ren, & Zhao, 2017), absenteeism from classes (Dahl, 2016), dropout from education (Archambault, Janosz, Dupéré, Brault, & Andrew, 2017), violence (Dahlberg & Potter, 2001), and mental health issues (Kessing & Ravn, 2017). However, violent Islamic religious extremism among youth has become a bigger challenge.

Kruglanski, Jasko, Chernikova, Dugas, and Webber, (2017) define extremism as deviance from usual behavioural norms of the society and violent extremism as the act of violence due to intolerance toward others' beliefs that are perceived to contradict with one's belief. Thus, religious extremism uses religion as a core motivation in carrying out violent acts such as bombing, shooting, and killing. The past decades have been peppered by tragic violent incidents that were religiously motivated. For example, the twin tower attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, the train bombings in Madrid, Spain on March 11, 2004, and the attack on satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris in October 9, 2015 were all religiously motivated violent acts. Recently, this pattern has moved from the fringe to the mainstream and a majority of such acts are perpetrated by young individuals. For example, approximately 4,500 young westerners, including females have joined Islamic militant groups (Bergen, Schuster, & Sterman, 2015). Furthermore, the evidence has established that youth, especially between the age of 15 and 25 are most likely to be involved in violent crimes (Budd, Sharp, & Mayhew, 2005; Farrington, 2003).

Malaysia is not an exception to this phenomenon and has witnessed several home-grown terror groups such as Tandzim Al Qaeda Malaysia in 2013, *Arakan Daulah Islamiyah*

in 2014, and *Daulah Islamiyah Malaysia* in 2015, which were all found to have established links with Daesh (the Islamic State/ISIS; Samuel, 2016). In August 2014, 19 suspected militants were arrested who later admitted to have been acting under the influence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and planned terrorist attacks that targeted pubs, discos and a Carlsberg brewery in Kuala Lumpur area (Ramakrishna, 2017). In April 2015, Malaysian police investigated 70 military personnel who were suspected to be involved with ISIS and in August 2015, police arrested 121 Malaysians who were linked to ISIS (Chew, 2015). These reports indicate that participation of youth in religious extremism has now become a pressing issue in Malaysia as well as around the world which not only undermines progress, peace, and prosperity but also affects international human rights, security, sustainable development and peace around the world.

According to the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES), psychological and personal factors responsible for such behaviours include low self-worth, distance from parents and peers, narcissism, distorted cognitive reasoning, high-level aggression, misinterpretation of religion, impulsive-sensation seeking, emotional sensitivity, and desire for change (Murad, 2017). The extensive work conducted under anti-radicalisation counter terror movement around the world suggests a variety of psychosocial, cognitive and emotional factors, such as socioeconomic status (SES) (Cheung, 2014; Piazza, 2011), social alienation (Yusoufzai & Emmerling, 2017), marginalisation (Williams, Bernard, & Jeffers, 2017), unequal political representation (Lombardi, Ragab, & Chin, 2014; Silke, 2008), and cultural misfit/social integration (Boukhars, 2009; Davis, 2016) as an explanation for religious extremism around the world.

Malaysia, a Muslim majority country, provides its citizens with reasonably good economic, political, and educational benefits along with political and social rights (The National Department for Culture and Arts, 2018). Therefore, issues such as social alienation, marginalisation, and lack of political representation, cannot possibly explain the motives for its youth to participate in religious extremism. The recent phenomenon of religious extremism among predominately Muslim majority countries like Malaysia and Indonesia has led to a renewed interest among researchers in understanding the factors and mechanism that impact youth to join the extremist groups (Weintraub, 2017). Although extensive research has been carried out on Islamic extremism, few studies have focused on Malaysian youth and their participation in religious extremism. Hence, the present study aims (1) to uncover the factors that provoke Malaysian youth into joining religious extremist groups and (2) discuss those findings from a social-ecological perspective.

The Ecology and Determinants of Religious Extremism

Based upon the definition of youth as defined by the World Health Organisation, we define "youth" as individuals who are between the ages of 15 and 24. To understand the developmental processes of children into adults and their behavioural outcomes, the ecological perspective (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) highlights the significance of the mutual interaction of the individuals with their environment (Christens & Peterson, 2012). The environment represents social context into layers such as the microsystem (i.e., parents, family, peers), the mesosystem (i.e., interaction and relationship among microsystem agents, such as parent- to-peer), the exosystem (i.e., broader social contexts, like community and neighbourhoods), and the macrosystem (i.e., societal modelling, media influence). These layers are nested into each other while the individual is placed at the centre. The framework explains that individuals' development is not only shaped by personal attributes (personality types), immediate environments or factors that have direct influence (parents, family, SES), but also shaped by their interaction with larger

community networks and changes in the larger environment. The interaction among these elements may have favourable or unfavourable influences over individuals' development. For example, parents/immediate family (Sullivan, Kung, & Farrell, 2004), peers (Brauer & Coster, 2015), schools (Jenkins, 1997), and community/neighbourhood (Chen, Voisin, & Jacobson, 2016), all have significant effect on delinquency and other forms of deviant behaviours among youth.

Religious extremism is one such deviant behaviour that incites violence among individuals. At the micro level, parents and family influence has been seen as a potential catalyst for young ones to develop propensity towards religious extremism. New America, a nonpartisan think-tank, reports that more than a quarter of western youth fighters have familial ties to Jihad (Burke, 2016). Furthermore, explanations for individual and psychological factors are abundant as a determinant of violent extremism. For example, individuals with distress, depression, or psychological disorder are vulnerable and more likely to participate in such events (Akhtar, 1999; Borum, 2007).

Even though the link between religion and crime is ambiguous, the role of religious ideology as process-oriented explanation is significantly highlighted as a precursor to religious extremism. It is understood that the religious belief of afterlife shields extremist's fear of death (Bunzel, 2016; Gunaratna, 2015; Topalli, Brezina, & Bernhardt, 2013). In contrast, it is also argued that religion and spirituality may function as a preventive mechanism in curbing violent or criminal behaviors among individuals (Benson, 2004; Khosrokhavar, 2013).

At a macro level, some theorists have argued that youth who are economically deprived or who underperform academically are more likely to be influenced by violent extremism (Cheung, 2014; Piazza, 2011; Zaidise, Canetti-Nisim, & Pedahzur, 2007). However, an investigation on support for terrorism in the West Bank found a positive relationship between support for terrorism and income and educational level among both Israeli and Palestinian youth (Krueger & Malečková, 2003). Another factor identified at the macro level is marginalization in terms of disadvantages for employment, educational opportunities, and political representation. For example, Silke (2008) stated that Muslims in the UK comprised 3 percent of the total population, but only 0.3 percent are the members of parliament and 36 percent of all Muslim population had no qualifications in the UK. Such instances apparently leave the youth with socially frustrating experiences and render them vulnerable to deviant or violent behavior to fight for social or political justice (Pedersen, Vestel, & Bakken, 2017). Furthermore, poor integration of the youth with the mainstream culture is seen as another potential determinant of religious extremism (Boukhars, 2009; Davis, 2016) wherein the inability to identify with the mainstream culture, lifestyles, and beliefs lead them towards identity crisis and loss of sense of belonging.

The ecological perspective can facilitate examination of forces and their functionality in determining the pull factors that provoke Malaysian youth into joining religious based extremist groups. The social-ecological framework has been applied to study child development, bullying and violent behaviour among adolescent (e.g., Espelage, 2014), however, its application in investigating religious terrorism is limited.

Expert Interview as a Tool for Terrorism Research

The studies on terrorism and related issues have been marked by several methodological and conceptual inadequacies that have affected the development of this field (Schuurman & Eijkman, 2013). For example, Silke (2008) in a systematic literature review covering studies published between 1971 and 2003 highlighted that most studies derived data from newspapers or magazine articles, or electronic media-based sources. As a result, the

findings from these studies become dubious as they may involve factual inaccuracies (Quiggin, 2013), editorial bias (Franzosi, 1987), or underreporting of the events (Schmid & Bowie, 2011). However, given the sensitive nature of this area, researchers have continued to rely upon secondary sources to obtain information (Jore, Utland, & Vatnamo, 2018; Kassin, Redlich, Alceste, & Luke, 2018) while alternative methods for empirical validation of these data are continually summoned (Aly & Striegher, 2012; Desmarais, Simons-Rudolph, Brugh, Schilling, & Hoggan, 2017; Schuurman, 2018). Therefore, the present study used the expert interview as a research design aiming to gather rich data that would contribute towards a better understanding of the area of investigation.

Method

Expert Interview

Expert interview as a qualitative empirical research method is widely used in social sciences to explore expert knowledge whereby the "participant is attributed as expert by virtue of his role as informant" (Walter, 1994, p. 271). While recruiting the participants, it is important to ensure that they do not just share information but also contribute with their expert opinion (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). To achieve rich data, we opted to conduct in-depth expert interviews using purposive sampling. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) describe interviews to be an effective method in obtaining a construction of meaning in natural settings.

The experts for this study possess exclusive knowledge in the field which is not accessible to others (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009). Expert interviews are more efficient and exploratory in nature as they can facilitate in gathering inside information in a more credible way and provide an opportunity to access additional interviewees, offering an easy point of entry to the field of research (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009).

Participants

Participants were selected based upon their closeness to the subject or experience of working with the issue of religious extremism. Three national security advisors (labeled as NS1, NS2, NS3), two communications & media experts (labeled as CM4, CM5), two political science experts (labeled as PS6, PS7), and three terrorism experts (labeled as TE8, TE9, TE10) were recruited for in-depth interviews. Their work experienced ranged between 13 to 36 years. The national security advisors and terrorism experts were experienced in operations against Jihadi operatives in Syria and Iraq. A few of them were a part of correctional units (to those who were not convicted) and de-radicalization program (to those who were convicted and serving terms) in the country. However, the political scientist and media expert did not have direct experiences with extremists, but were indirectly involved through their research, consultation, teaching, and volunteering in areas such as designing counseling programs for vulnerable youth and scrutinizing published reading material on contentious issues, before it went for sale. Overall, each expert had at least 13 or more years of experience with youth, religious extremism, and violence in Malaysia. Additionally, they have been holding important positions at university, associations and non-governmental bodies.

Procedure of Data Collection

Expert interviews were conducted in 2016 and 2017 in Singapore and Malaysia. In Malaysia, most interviews took place in the city of Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Singapore is a center for regional security with several organizations focusing on issues such as religious extremism and terrorism of other kinds.

An interview protocol was developed based on relevant literature and was provided to participants prior to the interviews. The protocol had four main sections: (1) participants background and work experiences, (2) views toward ISIS/Daesh, (3) sharing of description of the cases, anecdotes and experiences of youth involved in extremism (e.g., why do you think it happened? and what factors must have triggered it?) 4) opinions on persuasive elements of ISIS/Daesh that entice Malaysian youth towards extremism. Different probing questions were asked to elicit rich information.

The interviews were conducted by two members of the research team and were conducted in either English or Bahasa Melayu. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in English. The interviews lasted between 60 – 120 minutes.

Data Analysis

Each interview transcript was read by the researchers several times to ensure the accuracy of the data.

Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyze the interview data. Coding was conducted in three phases. In the first phase, initial line-by-line coding was carried out on the interview transcripts individually by the members of the research team and a long list of codes was generated. At this stage, the members of the team met regularly to compare codes and resolve discrepancies, if any. In the second phase, the members of the team collated codes as persuasive elements (non-theory based) such as religious justification, group identification, inspiration, and heroism and factors as proximal and distal factors (ecological theory based) such as mass media (exo level), dominant ideology, global identity (macro level), and community practices (micro level), and again came together to compare the codes and categories. In the final phase, the members collaboratively generated a thematic map for persuasive elements (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and defined and named the themes. The results were organised into three main themes that represented persuasive elements which may have accounted for Malaysian youth into joining extremist groups. Later, each theme was discussed using proximal and distal factors of ecological theory. Throughout the analysis, constant comparison between researchers, across interview transcripts and within one transcript, was used to link codes and collate under relevant themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Researcher Role

The four researchers involved in the study come from different backgrounds. One is an expert in studying communication pattern, especially in understanding terrorism-related behaviors. The other is a researcher in politics and international relations. He is interested in analysing political perspective of terrorism at the local and global level. The other two researchers come from an educational psychology background and have experience in analysing factors affecting adolescent development. We believe that these backgrounds are relevant and rich in their multiplicity to the area of inquiry.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

A qualitative study can be validated through three criteria, which is credibility, auditability, and fittingness (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003). Credibility refers to how congruent the description of phenomenon or findings are with reality (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003). In this study, data were collected by expert interviews. The knowledge production in an expert interview is not created from society or societal practice as a social construction; it is constructed through the interaction with the expert networks and knowledge bodies. After the interviews were transcribed, member checks were carried out whereby the researchers sought to clarify any discrepancy regarding the interviews by contacting the respondents in person, through text messages or phone calls. This helped in establishing the credibility of the study. Furthermore, during the coding process, the researchers read and reread the raw transcripts to maintain an accurate understanding. The audibility refers to the ability of another researcher to replicate the original study (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003). The methodology, data collection process, and data analysis is done rigorously and reported cohesively with the expert information and interview protocol details to facilitate other researchers to replicate the study. Fittingness refer to the "probability that the research findings have meanings to others in similar situations" (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003, p. 433). Fittingness ensures that the methodology was carefully demonstrated; the results were presented and discussed in detail to enable future researchers to evaluate and use them in their studies.

Ethical Statement

Mertens (1998) suggests that ethical issues are "an integral part of the research planning, and implementation process, not viewed as an afterthought or a burden" (p. 23). Immediately after getting the approval to conduct this study from the institution providing financial assistance to conduct this study, the researchers sought appointments from the respondents and gave sufficient time to them to respond to our questions. Since our local context did not require obtaining third party approval, the researchers took unto themselves to ensure that a high level of ethical practices was followed. The respondents were assured anonymity, safety, and confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used during the transcribing and manuscript writing process to ensure confidentiality. The respondents were also assured that they could withdraw from this study at any point of time without giving any reasons.

Findings

Three main themes were identified that may account for Malaysian youth joining religious extremist groups. In the discussion section, we discuss the role of each ecological domain (micro, exo, and macro) which contributed towards the development of those factors.

Islamic Ideology – Misinterpretation

The first theme of the findings explains "Islamic ideology" and issues surrounding its interpretation as one of the reasons for Malaysian youth joining religious extremist groups. The data suggest that the prevalence of misinterpreted ideology was perceived as a major threat that persuaded the youth into extremism.

For example, T10 said, "Islamic ideologies such as *Salafism* or *Wahhabism* have many divisions and not all incite hatred and encourage violent behavior among its followers. It is the interpretation that one adopts decides the direction of that ideology."

The prevalence of misinterpreted ideology was perceived as a major threat and needed to be managed. PS6 remarked that "This ideology cuts across the nation. Actually, it goes

beyond nation, that's why we have to educate our fellow Muslims on its correct interpretation." Similarly, NS3 stated that-

> Any ideology that comes to Muslims in Malaysia has to be managed and guided by the learned people to prevent misguidance. Knowledge has different levels. If the knowledge, I mean the ideology, is interpreted wrongly it can be dangerous for the minds of Muslim youth.

PS7 shares a longitudinal perspective on Islam and cautions against ideology development -

> Our local scholars since the 14th century had been careful in propagating Islam to Malay Archipelago populations. Some ideologies needed to be understood clearly before embracing it. These ideologies have a different cultural context. We are from a different culture. We cannot follow any ideology blindly. Knowledge can facilitate us to be more vigilant to dangerous ideology.

The acute worry was evident throughout the data on the prevalence of Islamic ideologies that can be manipulated and used against the youth in Malaysian society. This is evident in Ammar and Xu's (2018) work which found that radical clerics who are the followers of *Salafi* ideology have provided interpretation of Sharia law in such a way that it justifies the use of violence for religious causes. The experts warned against the misinterpretation of those ideologies that were foreign to local Malay context since the extremist groups have taken this opportunity to use these interpretations to support their cause. The Islamic ideologies are often presented to youth in the backdrop of national and international issues surrounding Muslim communities to stir emotions and justify violence by using ideological support. For example, Simon (2008) proposed that the Wall Street bombing in 1920 by Galleanist terrorist had also optimized public support and sympathy for its ideology. He also compared Galleanists to Al-Qaeda and other religious extremist groups for their ability to recruit new members using their ideology.

Ummah and Practicality

The second theme of the findings reveals the concept of "*Ummah* and practicality" as another explanation of Malaysian youth's involvement in religious extremism.

"*Ummah*" is an Arabic word that refers to "nation" or "community." However, a nation in terms of *Ummah* is hardly a political concept; it mainly refers to a community that adheres to the same religious rules (the Sharia; Maliepaard & Verkuyten, 2017). This finding suggests that the feeling of brotherhood and religious obligation to support and unite with *Ummah* prompted the Malaysian youth to abandon their privileges and join the extremist group. CM5 explains that-

> Malaysia is a country with Muslims as a majority and enjoys political, social and economic opportunity in the country. Thus, the feeling of empathy towards other Muslims who are marginalized in other parts of the world is high especially in cases of Rohingya and Palestine. The feeling of wanted to help has driven certain quarters of Muslims in Malaysia to join the extremist group.

Furthermore, compounded by this fact of *Ummah*, the Islamic extremists offered a realistic concept in terms of a geographical Islamic State which was missing in recent Islamic history. The Islamic extremist groups' ability to offer a physical territory to live and thrive for Muslims has functioned as a significant pull factor for Muslim youth for joining extremist groups. For example, PS7 stated that

> ISIS is the terrorist movement with the territory in cities in Iraq and Syria. They are promising a place for all the supporters to come together, live and support the cause. And due to this phenomena, the IS leaders are able to convince Muslims that the state is real and they can offer civil life.

The concept of *Ummah* in Islam is similar to the Jewish concept of Promised Land. Theoretically, all Muslims, irrespective of their country of origin are bonded together by their religion. Therefore, the feeling of close association experienced as part of *Ummah* and the likelihood of establishment of this *Ummah* in practical sense functioned as a major persuasive element among Malaysian Muslim youth to join these extremist groups.

The idea of a physical state for *Ummah,* wherein individuals belonging to a uniform ideology can come together to live and rule has come across as a very substantial and persuasive proposition among the youth to participate in religious extremism. The evidence from these findings corroborates with Maliepaard and Verkuyten (2017) who studied Muslim immigrants in Netherland and Germany on national dis-identification and minority identity and found that the respondents identified themselves closer to Muslim identity and less to the nations'. In this connection, Cesari (2018) argued that political Islam is a multifaceted religious nationalism. The concept of *Ummah* is defined as across national boundaries. She further noted that in global political Islam, especially in the context of extremism, *Ummah* is defined as "transnational imagined community" (p. 9) and has a great potential to provoke people to fight for it.

Charismatic Leadership

The third theme of the findings revealed the power of charismatic leadership as one of the reasons for Malaysian youth joining religious extremist groups.

According to the data, it appears that the charismatic power of the leaders functioned effectively in recruiting followers and gaining sympathizers because the elements of their leadership had religious as well as psychological associations. They dwelled on the idea of heroism and atonement to influence the followers through appropriate communication channels, As NS3 remarked,

> It is about the credibility and charisma of leaders in the extremist organisation that has helped them elevate themselves to a position where people can trust them blindly. They have established that they are fighting for a cause. They propose themselves as credible sources and inspiration to others and have established their positions as powerful leaders.

He further added that "the leaders are portrayed as humble yet strong personalities who can be trusted in protecting Islam in war-torn countries such as Syria and Iraq." The essence of their charisma was convincing. The idea of heroism was consistently used to inspire individuals. As NS2 stated -

> Heroism is a positive appeal that ISIS has addressed and managed to cultivate interest among youths and others in Malaysia. It is appealing to see how this concept is optimized positively with the reward strategy. It is indicated that if we are following the path (i.e., heroism path), we will be granted paradise.

They used the power of media to its maximum, as NS3 noted, "The leaders of the extremist organisations know that social media is an effective platform to attract followers and sympathizers. Their target to different groups of youth was strategically planned.

Overall, the data suggest that these leaders were apt in spreading charisma and influence of their leadership by choosing an appropriate channel to get across their message to the youth. The charisma of Islamic leaders thrived on the idea of religious atonement and heroism to inspire and able to exert power on the followers. These leaders, in their communication, have consistently used the concept of heroism among the youth to motivate them into joining their organisation. They were able to persuade the youth into thinking that their heroism will be celebrated as a consequence of their striving for a religious cause. The idea of power and being celebrated as a hero in a religious community as conveyed by the leaders was found to be very attractive for some of the perpetrators who decided to act along these lines. Their leadership also demonstrated spiritual appeal such as if the youth joined the movement, they would be rewarded in Jannah (paradise). Al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden and his close associates used emotional appeal to persuade Muslims to support their oppressed brethren in different parts of the world. Their efforts have impacted many Muslims from around the world and managed to influence their followers and sympathizers by claiming their power to be real (Mohammadov & Ashrafi, 2017).

Discussion from Ecological Theory Perspective

"Islamic Ideology-Choice and Interpretation," "Ummah and Practicality," and "Charismatic Leadership" were the three major factors that emerged as an explanation of Malaysian youth's involvement in religious extremism. Our analysis of these findings from ecological perspectives suggests that the factors mainly emanate from exosystem and macrosystem and permeate to microsystem where the identity development of these youth is situated.

Ideologies such as Wahhabism and Salafism may not be inherently aggressive or violent within itself, and hence may not directly contribute to the extremist behavior (Dzhekova et al., 2016). However, their interpretation may interact with other personal or environmental factors such as family environment, peers, educational institutions or social settings, and economic and political conditions to determine individuals' behavior. For example, this may determine how these Muslims see jihad (striving to uphold Islamic belief and practices) as part of their call to practice Islam. Analysis of this theme at macro level influence suggests that the recent trend of the penetration of extremist ideology of Islam in Malaysian society is attributed to the influence of mass media, social media, and mass communication. As CM5 stated that-

> The leader of the highest authority of ISIS has used social media (FB, Twitter, and other related channels) intensively to persuade potential followers and sympathizers. The leaders realized that it is one of the effective channels in spreading their beliefs. They have people who could create a message with impact. They have invested a lot in designing effective media propagation.

Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt serve as a societal model for several Muslims around the world for interpretation and context. At the macro level analysis of the factors that influenced Malaysian youth towards religious terrorism, the influence of these countries was apparent.

At Exo level, which refers to the influence of broader social contexts, it was evident that youths in Malaysian society were compelled to conform to the larger group ideology in order to achieve group cohesiveness and experience connectedness. As the data suggests, following other forms of moderate ideologies created a social divide among them. Furthermore, at the micro level, the families experience a social compulsion of associating themselves towards ideologies that are popular among significant members of the society. As TE8 said, "It gives them belongingness and identity as well as pass them off as sincere Muslims who are ready to follow a stricter form of Islam." T9 narrated an incident -

> The young son of a man who went to Syria to fight was happy to know that his father was doing a good cause. While the authority identified that the father was influenced by an extremist group, the family clearly believed that he has gone to do his duties. Sadly, the father died in Syria.

The second theme of "*Ummah* and Practicality" indicates connectedness of the Muslim youth of Malaysia with the rest of the youth in the Muslim world. The youth in Malaysia identify with the cause of other vulnerable Muslims and feel, as a part of their religious duty, to make an effort for their wellbeing (Maliepaard & Verkuyten, 2017). This perceived sacred mission lends unquestionable connectivity among Muslim youth to establish social and political equity for each other. Therefore, Malaysian youth, despite economic, political and social accomplishments seek to stand up for the cause of troubled Muslim youth elsewhere. An investigation from an ecological perspective suggests that personal identity formation of Malaysian Muslim youth at the micro level is hugely impacted by the larger global identity (*Ummah*/Islamic community) which is situated at a macro level. This reiterates our proposition that factors mainly emanate from macrosystem and exosystem and permeate to microsystem.

Furthermore, the concept of *Ummah* (Islamic community) which emanates from religious and historical beliefs (Hassan, 2011; Nasr, 2003) and call to join in and support their cause is mainly propagated through media and community gathering. For example, CM5 said that "The media continuously reports killing and mistreatment of Palestinian in Gaza which reminds Muslims to their duty." Additionally, P7 remarked that "charity banners, donation demands for Palestinians and Rohingyas at most streets and malls are a constant reminder to the community that we owe to our *Ummah* (Islamic community)." Therefore, the elements at exo level have significantly contributed into bringing awareness of this issue and influenced thoughts and behaviors of the youth in Malaysia. In addition, at the micro level, these behaviors are practiced at schools and homes wherein young people are regularly taught basic Islamic values which includes sparing and sharing financial or other resources to those Muslims who are in need (French, Eisenberg, Vaughan, Purwono, & Suryanti, 2008; Krauss et al., 2012). As NS2 mentioned, "it is common for Muslims to be taught to be kind towards those who are suffering. What we are afraid of is that there are some groups who manipulate religion for their own benefits."

The third theme of "Charismatic Leadership" and its influence is also located at exo and macro level. The leaders of extremist organizations who claimed to be the caliph (sacred leader in Arabic) of Islamic State propagated the idea of having one leader that could govern all Muslims proved to be appealing to most Muslims globally and locally in Malaysia. These messages enforced sociocultural beliefs and historical values among the youth which

influenced their thoughts and behaviors. Furthermore, these leaders introduced the concept of heroism to fight for the cause of religion and get celebrated, and also brought in the spiritual appeal of attaining Jannah (paradise) as a consequence of participation in the fight. These ideas, at the macro system, influenced their environment, social culture, norms, and practices by reinforcing the religious and spiritual values. As a result, youth were allured into joining religious extremist groups. The data informs us how the casual factor of charismatic leadership interacted at exo and macro level to influence the youth, however, the information on how these factors enacted at micro level was absent.

Conclusion

The present study offers an explanation of causes that provoke Malaysian youth into joining religious extremist groups. Three main causes were uncovered, which are "Islamic Ideology-choice & Interpretation," "*Ummah* and Practicality," and "Charismatic leadership." The social-ecological lens offers us understanding of how these causes mainly interacted at macro-ecological and community-level to influence the behaviour of Malaysian youths. The findings highlight the role of macro and exo factors that impacted the ecology of Malaysian youth. However, the information on micro-level elements such as personal and psychological attributes of youth did not emerge significantly. Chung, Hill, Hawkins, Gilchrist, and Nagin (2002), in their longitudinal investigation of criminal offense, also found that family-related variables were non-significant. Similarly, the current study suggests that socio-cultural and larger community contexts affected Malaysian youth's behaviour significantly. This indicates that elements located at macro and exosystem of Malaysian society, such as mass media, social media, social and political campaign, or group influence which has the capacity to enact societal modelling, develop social culture, or shape social and cultural values should be closely monitored and rectified if needed. The findings can also guide the design and development of intervention programs that would promote awareness among youth on the issues discussed in this study. In summary, the nation's effort in shaping the macro and exo environment judiciously will restrain extremist behaviours among the youth.

In terms of methodology, the study provides insights into the expert interview as a data collection method for an investigation into issues where collecting primary data is a challenge. Nevertheless, to increase the validity and reliability of the outcomes of such studies, primary data from those who were directly involved in extremist activities should be also considered (Silke, 2008).

References

Akhtar, S. (1999). The psychodynamic dimension of terrorism. *Psychiatric Annals, 29*(6), 350-355. doi: 10.3928/0048-5713-19990601-09

Aly, A., & Striegher, J. L. (2012). Examining the role of religion in radicalization to violent Islamist extremism. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *35*(12), 849-862.

Ammar, J., & Xu, S. (2018). Who speaks for Islam? Extreme religious groups, the exception that proves the rule. In *When Jihadi ideology meets social media* (pp. 1-16). Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Archambault, I., Janosz, M., Dupéré, V., Brault, M. C., & Andrew, M. M. (2017). Individual, social, and family factors associated with high school dropout among low-SES youth: Differential effects as a function of immigrant status. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 87*(3), 456-477. doi: 10.1111/bjep.12159

Benson, P. L. (2004). Emerging themes in research on adolescent spiritual and religious development. *Applied Developmental Science, 8*(1), 47-50. doi:

10.1207/S1532480XADS0801_6

Bergen, P., Schuster, C., & Sterman, D. (2015). *ISIS in the West: The new faces of extremism*. Washington, DC: New America.

Bogner A., Littig B., & Menz W. (Eds.). (2009). *Interviewing experts (ECPR research methods)*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan

Borum, R. (2007). *Psychology of terrorism*. Washington, DC: Defense Technical Information Center.

Boukhars, A. (2009). Islam, jihadism, and depoliticization in France and Germany. *International Political Science Review, 30*(3), 297-317. doi: 10.1177/0192512109105642

Brauer, J. R., & Coster, S. (2015). Social relationships and delinquency: Revisiting parent and peer influence during adolescence. *Youth & Society, 47*(3), 374-394. doi: 10.1177/0044118X12467655

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1986). Ecology of the family as a context for human development: Research perspectives. *Developmental Psychology, 22*(6), 723-742.

Bronfenbrenner, U., & Ceci, S. J. (1994). Nature-nuture reconceptualized in developmental perspective: A bioecological model. *Psychological review, 101*(4), 568-586.

Budd, T., Sharp, C., & Mayhew, P. (2005). *Offending in England and Wales: First results from the 2003 Crime and Justice Survey*. London, UK: Home Office.

Bunzel, C. (2016). *From paper state to caliphate: The ideology of the Islamic State*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Burke, J. (2016, March 23). Brussels attacks: It is no surprise siblings with past crimes carried out attacks on Brussels. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/23/it-is-no-surprise-siblings-with-past-crimes-carried-out-the-attacks-on-brussels.

Cesari, J. (2018). *What is political Islam?* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner

Chen, P., Voisin, D. R., & Jacobson, K. C. (2016). Community violence exposure and adolescent delinquency: Examining a spectrum of promotive factors. *Youth & Society, 48*(1), 33-57. doi: 10.1177/0044118X13475827

Cheung, S. Y. (2014). Ethno-religious minorities and labour market integration: generational advancement or decline? *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 37*(1), 140-160. doi: 10.1080/01419870.2013.808757

Chew, A. (2015, August 21). ISIS arrests: 6 security personnel among 10 held in Malaysia, *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/isis-arrests-6-security-personnel-among-10-held-in-malaysia

Chiovitti, R. F., & Piran, N. (2003). Rigour and grounded theory research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 44, 427-435. doi:10.1046/j.0309-2402.2003.02822

Christens, B. D., & Peterson, N. A. (2012). The role of empowerment in youth development: A study of sociopolitical control as mediator of ecological systems' influence on developmental outcomes. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 41*(5), 623-635. doi: 10.1007/s10964-011-9724-9

Chung, I.-J., Hill, K. G., Hawkins, J. D., Gilchrist, L. D., & Nagin, D. S. (2002). Childhood predictors of offense trajectories. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 39*(1), 60-90. doi: 10.1177/002242780203900103

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education* (6th ed.). London, UK: Routledge.

Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology, 13*(1), 3-21. doi: 10.1007/BF00988593

Dahl, P. (2016). Factors associated with truancy: Emerging adults' recollections of skipping school. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 31*(1), 119-138. doi: 10.1177/0743558415587324

Dahlberg, L. L., & Potter, L. B. (2001). Youth violence: Developmental pathways and prevention challenges. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 20*(1), 3-14. doi: 10.1016/S0749-3797(00)00268-3

Davis, R. (2016). What do they see? A look at the appeal of IS to young Muslim women raised in the United Kingdom. *The Illini Journal of International Security, 1*(1), 21-41.

Desmarais, S. L., Simons-Rudolph, J., Brugh, C. S., Schilling, E., & Hoggan, C. (2017). The state of scientific knowledge regarding factors associated with terrorism. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, *4*(4), 180-209.

Dzhekova, R., Stoynova, N., Kojouharov, A., Mancheva, M., Anagnostou, D., & Tsenkov, E. (2016). *Understanding radicalisation. Review of literature*. Alexander Zhendov, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy.

Espelage, D. L. (2014). Ecological theory: Preventing youth bullying, aggression, and victimization. *Theory into Practice, 53*(4), 257-264. doi: 10.1080/00405841.2014.947216

Farrington, D. P. (2003). Developmental and life-course criminology: Key theoretical and empirical issues-the 2002 Sutherland Award address. *Criminology, 41*(2), 221-225. doi: 10.1111/j.1745-9125.2003.tb00987.x

Franzosi, R. (1987). The press as a source of socio-historical data: Issues in the methodology of data collection from newspapers. *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History*, *20*(1), 5-16.

French, D. C., Eisenberg, N., Vaughan, J., Purwono, U., & Suryanti, T. A. (2008). Religious involvement and the social competence and adjustment of Indonesian Muslim adolescents. *Developmental Psychology, 44*(2), 597–611. doi: 10.1037/0012-1649.44.2.597.

Gunaratna, R. (2015). The rise of the Islamic State: Terrorism's new face in Asia. In W. Hofmeister (Ed.), *From the desert to world cities: The new terrorism* (pp. 9-20). Singapore: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

Hassan, R. (2011). Modernization, social change and religion: A case study of the Islamic Ummah. *Lahore Journal of Policy Studies, 4*(1), 49-58.

Jenkins, P. H. (1997). School delinquency and the school social bond. *Journal of research in crime and delinquency, 34*(3), 337-367. doi: 10.1177/0022427897034003003

Jore, S. H., Utland, I.-L. F., & Vatnamo, V. H. (2018). The contribution of foresight to improve long-term security planning. *Foresight, 20*(1), 68-83. doi: 10.1108/FS-08-2017-0045

Kassin, S. M., Redlich, A. D., Alceste, F., & Luke, T. J. (2018). On the general acceptance of confessions research: Opinions of the scientific community. *American Psychologist, 73*(1), 63-80. doi: 10.1037/amp0000141

Kessing, M. L., & Ravn, S. (2017). 'It feels as if time has come to a standstill': Institutionalised everyday lives among youth with a mental illness. *Journal of Youth Studies, 20*(8), 959-973. doi: 10.1080/13676261.2016.1273523

Khosrokhavar, F. (2013). Radicalization in prison: The French case. *Politics, Religion & Ideology, 14*(2), 284-306. doi: 10.1080/21567689.2013.792654

Krauss, S. E., Hamzah, A., Ismail, I. A., Suandi, T., Hamzah, S. R., Dahalan, D., & Idris, F. (2012). Religious socialization among Malaysian Muslim adolescents: A family structure comparison. *Review of Religious Research, 54*(4), 499-518. doi: 10.1007/s13644-012-0068-z

Krueger, A. B., & Malečková, J. (2003). Education, poverty and terrorism: Is there a causal connection? *Journal of Economic perspectives, 17*(4), 119-144. doi: 10.1257/089533003772034925

Kruglanski, A. W., Jasko, K., Chernikova, M., Dugas, M., & Webber, D. (2017). To the fringe and back: Violent extremism and the psychology of deviance. *American Psychologist, 72*(3), 217-230. doi: 10.1037/amp0000091

Lombardi, M., Ragab, E., & Chin, V. (2014). *Countering radicalisation and violent extremism among youth to prevent terrorism* (Vol. 118). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: IOS Press.

Maliepaard, M., & Verkuyten, M. (2017). National disidentification and minority identity: A study among Muslims in Western Europe. *Self and Identity, 17*(1), 75-91. doi: 10.1080/15298868.2017.1323792

Mertens, D. M. (1998). *Research methods in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative and qualitative approaches.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Meuser, M., & Nagel, U. (2009). The expert interview and changes in knowledge production. In L. B. Bogner A. & Menz W. (Ed.), *Interviewing experts* (pp. 17-42). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mohammadov, A., & Ashrafi, M. (2017). Investigating the challenges of religious extremism in Central Asia and its Impact on the national security of the surrounding nations. *Revista QUID, 1*(1), 2789-2796.

Murad, D. (2017, May 2). Recurring traits in youths involved in militancy, research finds. *The Star Online*. Retrieved from https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/05/02/recurring-traits-in-youths-involved-in-militancy-research-finds/

Nasr, S. H. (2003). *Islam: Religion, history, and civilization*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins.

Pedersen, W., Vestel, V., & Bakken, A. (2017). At risk for radicalization and jihadism? A population-based study of Norwegian adolescents. *Cooperation and Conflict, 53*(1), 61-83. doi: 10.1177/0010836717716721

Piazza, J. A. (2011). Poverty, minority economic discrimination, and domestic terrorism. *Journal of Peace Research, 48*(3), 339-353. doi: 10.1177/0022343310397404.

Quiggin, T. (2013). Words matter: Peer review as a failing safeguard. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *7*(2), 72-81.

Ramakrishna, K. (2017). The growth of ISIS extremism in Southeast Asia: Its ideological and cognitive features—and possible policy responses. *New England Journal of Public Policy, 29*(1), 1-22.

Samuel, T. K. (2016). *Radicalisation in Southeast Asia: A selected case study of Daesh in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines*. Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Schmid, A. P., & Bowie, N. G. (2011). Databases on terrorism. In A. P. Schmid (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of terrorism research* (pp. 312-358). New York, NY: Routledge.

Schuurman, B. (2018). Research on terrorism, 2007–2016: A review of data, methods, and authorship. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1-16.

Schuurman, B., & Eijkman, Q. (2013). Moving terrorism research forward: The crucial role of primary sources. *ICCT Background Note*, 1-11.

Silke, A. (2008). Holy warriors: Exploring the psychological processes of jihadi radicalization. *European Journal of Criminology, 5*(1), 99-123. doi: 10.1177/1477370807084226

Simon, J. D. (2008). The forgotten terrorists: Lessons from the history of terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence, 20*(2), 195-214. doi: 10.1080/09546550801907599

Sullivan, T. N., Kung, E. M., & Farrell, A. D. (2004). Relation between witnessing violence and drug use initiation among rural adolescents: Parental monitoring and family support as protective factors. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 33*(3), 488-498. doi: 10.1207/s15374424jccp3303_6

The National Department for Culture and Arts. (2018). National Culture Policy. Retrieved from http://www.jkkn.gov.my/en/national-culture-policy

Topalli, V., Brezina, T., & Bernhardt, M. (2013). With God on my side: The paradoxical relationship between religious belief and criminality among hardcore street offenders. *Theoretical Criminology, 17*(1), 49-69. doi: 10.1177/1362480612463114

Walter, W. (1994). Strategien der Politikberatung. Die Interpretation der Sachverständigen-Rolle im Lichte von Experteninterviews [Strategies of policy advice. The interpretation of the expert role in the light of expert interviews]. In R. Hitzler, A. Honer, & C. Maeder (Ed.), *Expertenwissen. Die institutionalisierte Kompetenz zur Konstruktion von Wirklichkeit* [*Expert knowledge. The institutionalized competence for the construction of reality*] (pp. 268-284). Opladen, Germany: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Weintraub, J. (2017). *Factors influencing the movement of Southeast Asian fighters to ISIS: A comparison of Indonesia and Malaysia* (Master's dissertation). Cornell University, Ithica, NY.

Williams, G.-R., Bernard, M. L., & Jeffers, R. F. (2017). Examining the, ideological, sociopolitical, and contextual factors underlying the appeal of extremism. In M. Hoffman (Ed.), *Advances in cross-cultural decision making* (pp. 307-319). New York, NY: Springer.

Yusoufzai, K., & Emmerling, F. (2017). Explaining violent radicalization in Western Muslims: A four factor model. *Journal of Terrorism Research, 8*(1), 68-80.

Zaidise, E., Canetti-Nisim, D., & Pedahzur, A. (2007). Politics of God or politics of man? The role of religion and deprivation in predicting support for political violence in Israel. *Political Studies, 55*(3), 499-521. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00673.x

Zapolski, T. C., Fisher, S., Banks, D. E., Hensel, D. J., & Barnes-Najor, J. (2017). Examining the protective effect of ethnic identity on drug attitudes and use among a diverse youth population. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 46*(8), 1702-1715. doi: 10.1007/s10964-016-0605-0

Zhang, H., Zhao, J. S., Ren, L., & Zhao, R. (2017). Subculture, gang involvement, and delinquency: A study of incarcerated youth in China. *Justice Quarterly, 34*(6), 952-977. doi: 10.1080/07418825.2016.1243254

Author Note

Dr. Norhafezah Yusof is a communication researcher interested in finding patterns of communication involved in terrorism. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: norhafezah@uum.edu.my.

Dr. Amrita Kaur and Professor Rosna Awang Hashim are educational psychologists who are interested to look from a psychological perspective. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: Dr. Kaur at amrita@uum.edu.my; and to Professor Awang-Hashim at rosna@uum.edu.my.

Professor Azizuddin is a researcher in politics and international relations. He is interested in analyzing political perspective of terrorism at the local and global level. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: azizuddin@uum.edu.my.

Article Citation

Yusof, N., Kaur, A., Sani, M. A. M., & Awang Hashim, R. (2019). A qualitative expert interview approach towards understanding religious extremism among Malaysian youth. *The Qualitative Report, 24*(7), 1577-1592. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss7/5