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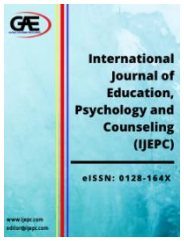

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A PRELIMINARY QUALITATIVE STUDY TO UNDERSTAND HOW THE YOUTH IN URBAN MALAYSIA EXPERIENCE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract:

Many Western studies have shown the associations between attachment and youth depression. However, in the context of a collective culture such as Malaysia, how youth experience the parent-child attachment or relationship is different. It is even less understood from the perspective of youth who are diagnosed with depression. Thus, this study aimed to explore the preliminary understanding of how youth with depression experience the parent-child relationship. Using a qualitative case study design, two participants aged 25 were purposively selected based on age, clinical diagnosis, and family living arrangements. Data from semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that yearning for emotional validation and emotional security in the parent-child relationship seemed to be vulnerable for the youth with depression. Participants have similarly highlighted the distance with fathers due to the societal and traditional role of father as the provider of the family. However, the bonding evolved as more practical support from fathers was involved. The results suggest that emotional security, birth order, practical support and the sickness of parents can be areas for further research in the context of understanding youth depression. The findings cannot be generalized to all youth in Malaysia, since cultural and regional differences are widespread.

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Introduction

Depression among youth is a growing global public health concern, with increasing rates of diagnosis and significant implications for mental well-being. The World Health Organization (2025) reports that suicide is the third leading cause of death among individuals aged 15 to 29, with about 73% of cases occurring in low- and middle-income countries. In Malaysia, depressive symptoms affect about 19% of adolescents (Singh et al., 2023). The increase in cases of depression highlights the need for a deeper understanding of contributing factors. According to the Malaysian Youth Mental Health Index (2023), the domains and indicators for youth mental health consist of lifestyle, surrounding environment, personal characteristics, life experience, social support, coping mechanism and healthy mind. In terms of support from family members, the youth received a satisfactory level of support from family members. However, with the prevalence of mental health concerns among the youth, how the youth with depression experience family support and relationships is still less understood.

In understanding parent-child relationships, attachment theory is often one of the key frameworks in understanding how early caregiver relationships with their children influence emotional regulation and psychological well-being (Bowlby, 1969; Spruit et al., 2016). Attachment theory was introduced by John Bowlby in 1969. It explained how early relationships shape the way people view themselves and relate to others. The emotional bonds formed with caregivers create internal working models, which are mental templates that guide how individuals regulate emotions, views of themselves and perception of others in responding to their needs. Consistent and emotionally available caregiving fosters secure attachment, marked by trust and comfort in relationships. In contrast, inconsistent, neglectful, or frightening caregiving can result in insecure attachment styles such as avoidant, ambivalent, or disorganized, which are linked to greater emotional and psychological difficulties across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1973). Building on Bowlby's work, Ainsworth and colleagues developed the Strange Situation Procedure to observe children's responses to separations and reunions with caregivers, further validating the impact of attachment between the child and caregiver(s) (Ainsworth et al., 2014).

Recent studies have also shown a strong relationship between attachment style and depressive symptoms, particularly when emotional invalidation or lack of caregiver support occurs (Zhang et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2024). Emotional invalidation, where caregivers dismiss or minimize children's emotional experiences, is shown to impair children's ability to effectively regulate

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emotions and seek support when needed (Yu et al., 2024). Children with insecure attachments were significantly more likely to develop depressive disorders in adolescence compared to securely attached peers (Spruit et al., 2019).

In addition, adolescents with insecure attachments are shown to be more likely to internalize distress, perceive low social support (Dozois & Beck, 2008; Yu et al., 2024), demonstrate poor emotion regulation, display higher levels of depressive symptoms and develop maladaptive schemas, which include negative self-perception and expectations of rejection (Chorot et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2021). Longitudinal studies also indicated that attachment insecurity not only predicts greater severity of depressive symptoms but also increases the likelihood of recurrence, especially in the context of interpersonal stress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017).

Secure attachment, on the other hand, remains important beyond childhood. It has been linked to healthier coping strategies, stronger self-esteem, and greater resilience in managing stress (Madihie et al, 2015; Spruit et al., 2019). Adolescents and young adults with secure attachment are more likely to seek emotional support when overwhelmed, which helps them regulate feelings and solve problems effectively. According to Morris (2025), individuals with secure attachment reported more balanced emotion regulation, improve use of adaptive techniques such as cognitive reappraisal, and constructive support-seeking behaviours that helped in psychological adjustment and stress management. This ability to manage emotions is particularly protective against depression, where dysregulation is often a key factor, as individuals with secure attachment tend to maintain better emotional balance and resilience in the face of stress. Recent neuroimaging research has shown that secure attachment influences brain functioning, supporting balanced emotional responses in regions involved in mood regulation (Choi et al., 2018). Based on the studies, the parent-child attachment or relationship is pivotal in the development and mental health of adolescents and youth.

However, in a collectivistic society, such as Malaysia, the family relational dynamic can be widely different from the Western counterparts. Although Malaysia is a middle-income nation, adopting the traditional family roles is still common among many families, where mothers are primary caregivers and fathers are providers. Particularly, fathers' involvement in emotional caregiving remains underexplored in Malaysian families, despite growing evidence suggesting that father-child relationships significantly influence adolescent psychological adjustment (Shek & Dou, 2020). Meanwhile, in the family context, emotional connection is often limited by work demands or societal pressures to uphold certain family roles (Shek & Dou, 2020).

Nevertheless, family harmony and unspoken norms around emotional expression often discourage open communication between parents and children. Parent-child relationships are deeply intertwined by cultural expectations surrounding emotional expression and communication (Sumari et al., 2020). Studies have found that Malaysian adolescents who view their parents as emotionally unsupportive are more likely to internalise their distress, leading to hopelessness and lower well-being (Yahya et al., 2019). Open emotional expression is discouraged to maintain social harmony, such invalidation has shown to be detrimental to youth's mental health (Crowford & Alaggia, 2008). Cross-cultural studies have shown that when parents dismiss or minimise their children's emotions, it can become a significant factor of depressive symptoms among adolescents (Yu et al., 2024).

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Taken together, parent-child relationship is pivotal for the development and mental wellbeing of the youth. However, past studies in the West might not fully reflect the phenomenon of the youth in Malaysia, particularly the dynamics of cultural factors that shape parent-child relationship requires more understanding, since family values and functioning often believed to supersede emotional experiences. In addition, the Malaysian Youth Mental Health Index (2023) has shown that youth in Malaysia have indicated positive ratings towards support from family members. With the dynamics, how the youth with depression experience their family members is even less understood. Thus, this preliminary study aims to understand how youth with depression experience their relationships with both parents. This study provides a preliminary understanding of how youth with depression experience the parent-child relationship. Hopefully, the preliminary understanding can provide glimpses for further research on parent-child relationships that promote the mental well-being of both parents and children.

Methodology

Design

A qualitative case study design was employed to explore Malaysian youths' perceptions of their relationships with parents in the context of depression. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain rich, first-person accounts, enabling an in-depth examination of individual experiences of youth who have depression.

Participants and Location

Two female participants, both aged 25 and residing with their parents in the Klang Valley, Malaysia, were recruited through purposive sampling. Eligibility criteria included being aged 18–25, formally diagnosed with depression by a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist, currently studying or employed, and co-residing with both parents.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process. Transcripts and recordings were repeatedly reviewed to ensure familiarity, and initial codes were generated to capture patterns in participants' perceptions of parental relationships. Codes were then organized into broader themes, which were refined, defined, and named before being reported with illustrative quotes. To enhance credibility, expert review with participants ensured accuracy, peer review with the research supervisor minimized bias, and bracketing techniques helped the researcher set aside personal assumptions. This rigorous process ensured trustworthiness and a meaningful representation of participants' experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the IMU University ethics committee (authorization number: MOC 1-2024 (04), and all participants provided written informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained by removing personal identifiers and storing data on a password-protected device accessible only to the researcher. Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw at any time and could skip questions that caused discomfort. Care was taken to minimize distress during interviews, and participants were encouraged to seek

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additional support if needed, though none requested referrals. These measures ensured responsible conduct and safeguarded participants' wellbeing. Particularly, they might still be considered as a vulnerable population.

Results

Demographic Background of Participants

Both participants were 25-year-old women, classified as youth under the Malaysian Youth Policy (Madya, 2007). Participant 1 (P1) held a bachelor's degree, was employed full-time, and was diagnosed with depression at age 22. Her parents consisted of a housewife mother and a father who was the primary provider. Participant 2 (P2), who held a diploma and was also employed full-time, was diagnosed with depression at 21. She described her father as physically present but emotionally distant, while her mother was a housewife. Residing in the Klang Valley provided both participants with access to mental health services but also exposure to urban stressors. Their co-residence with parents offered ongoing relational dynamics that influenced their perceptions of family support. Table 1 summarises the demographic information of the research participants.

Table 1: Participants' Demographics

	Age	Gender	Employment status	Highest education qualification	Age of diagnosis	Ongoing treatment	Staying with parents in urban area
P1	25	Female	Full time	Degree	22	N/A	/
P2	25	Female	Full time	Diploma	21	N/A	/

Source: Author's work

Thematic Findings

Through thematic analysis, several themes emerged that captured participants' perceptions of their relationships with their parents. The findings are being classified into two main categories: a) Similar themes surfaced based on both participants' experiences with both parents; b) Differing themes between P1 and P2. The findings answer the objectives of this study, that is to understand how youth with depression perceive the experiences of their relationships with parents.

a) Similar Themes surfaced based on both participants' experiences with both parents
Experiences with mothers:

i) Emotional invalidation
ii) Perceived lack of emotional safety
iii) Experiences with fathers
iv) Absent figures
v) Increased parental presence
vi) Interaction during adulthood

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These themes included emotional invalidation, lack of emotional safety, absent figures, increased parental presence and interaction during adulthood. Each theme was supported by verbatim transcripts from the interviews, and the detailed results are presented in Table 2 below.

b) Differing themes between P1 and P2
Based on P1's experiences:

i) Minimising mother's emotional burden
ii) Drawing close to mother through physical presence
iii) Ongoing desire for emotional support
iv) Persistent anxiety from childhood
v) Based on P2's experiences:
vi) Bombarded by mother's questions
vii) Hurt by mother's expectations as the eldest

Table 2: Similar Themes Surfaced Based on Both Participants' Experiences with Both Parents

Theme	Verbatim	Interpretation/remark
	Perceived Experiences with Mothers	
Theme 1: Emotional Invalidation	*"When I'm stressed and she was just saying: "There's nothing to be stressed or something similar, you're only studying." But she… She has high expectation on me but… I'm stressed, but... things that she says: "there's nothing (to be stressed about), take it easy. You don't need… You don't need to worry about money. I give you food. You have a house, so be grateful" and things like that she says." – P1* *"A lot of the times when I cannot take it... I would cry in the car and then I would ask like "why is it always so unfair?" And my mom would always say this is like she would say, "why do you always feel like you are the victim?" I don't think that it's like word for word, but I remember it's like this… this sentence. Like, I hear it a lot. Yeah, so I think that hurts me a lot because like, I'm telling you how I feel. And you are saying that I want to act like a victim." – P2*	Participants describe how they often feel not heard, not understood by their mothers when they express how they feel emotionally. There are times where both felt their mothers unintentionally said something which made the participants felt their emotional experiences were downplayed.

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Theme 2: Perceived Lack of Emotional Safety	*"I don't think I can recall any specific, but it's more like a small little… Uh… Some unintentional, maybe, statements towards me and then it just keeps happening and builds up all the time. Then I... I feel… That I am not safe? Maybe... not safe to share." – P1*	PI felt unsafe as she often worries that her expressions might invite unpleasant reactions from her mother, which hurts her.
	Sometimes with my mom, I think if there is a bad interaction, it's mostly because I think her tone, like how she sets her tone when she talks to me, is kinda aggressive. So, I think that kinda always triggers me to have a like a bad attitude towards her. – P2	P2 highlighted her mother's non-verbal can trigger her bad attitude towards her.
	Perceived Experiences with Fathers	
Theme 3: Absent Figures during childhood	*"He doesn't travel (for work) very far, but like he spends a lot of time outside for work. So, like maybe, early in the morning, then he goes to work and then he comes home very late, like 9pm, 8pm something?" – P1*	Both P1 and P2 recalled their limited engagement with fathers. Even when the fathers were around when they were young, their interactions with fathers are still rare.
	"I don't recall we have a lot of time spent together because when we're young, he was working a lot and sometimes he would fly outstation (for work). So he's not really, present? I would say he would be present like on weekends but not weekdays." - P2	
Theme 4: Increased Presence and Interactions during Adulthood	*"We're not emotionally closed, but he can give advice on things like on my future, it's more about material things. What I need to do… Like a more realistic things that I can discuss with him. Someone I can get advice from. Because my mom, she doesn't really know a lot of things. How I should pay tax, what is good for me, my future plans, something like that. That's when my dad knows, so I will just ask him about these kind of things, credit card or bank things…" – P1*	P1 expressed the connection with father is based on practical and functional aspects of life.
	"With my father, I think it's mostly telling jokes to each other or like, share about our day in the office because he is the one that would pick me up from the train station and then we drive straight home. Yeah. So, it's about 10 or 15-minute drive? We had this time to talk." – P2	P2 notes increased frequency of interactions with her father through casual conversations during commutes. This also reflects the functional aspect where parent and child can connect.

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Theme 5: Perceived Lack of Emotional Safety	*"I have to be very aware of my actions around him, in his eyes I have to do it (a task) quickly. Yea… Like he would lecture me or one day if he is not happy he will yell at me, worse come to worse." – P1*	P1 expressed her fear towards her father's reaction. She tip-toed around when the father was around.
	"Yea, sometimes I don't feel like telling him something, because I feel like, not safe sharing with him." – P2	P2 viewed her father as the strict figure when she was young, as the father was the one who disciplined the children.

Source: Author's work

While both participants share the common experiences towards their parents, they have also share differing experiences, which is depicted in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Different Themes Surfaced Based on Both Participants' Experiences with Both Parents

Theme	Verbatim	Interpretation/remark
Different Themes from P1		
Theme 1: Minimising mother's emotional burden	*"But the thing is, I don't really like to share things with her. I don't know. Like, I don't want to bring any negativity to her." – P1* *"And she will feel stressed and upset and sad, I don't want that." – P1*	P1 concerned her emotional expression may elicit unpleasant reactions from her mother, especially she does not want to add on emotional burden to her mother.
Theme 2: Drawing close to mother through physical presence	*"So she stays at home taking care of us (her and oldest brother) most of the time. So I think. I mean… I am more close to her. I think in the sense that because. She's also… she is always… I'm always with her. I also, basically when I was little, everything, everywhere she goes I will follow." – P1* *"Hmm (nods) With my mum, I think.. Something that I realised growing up is, whenever my mom... even now as an adult, when my mom is not at home, I will go and find, figure out where she is. Like, give… give her a call like, just wanna feel more at ease, like, where are you going? Uh… and curious." – P1*	P1 needs her mother's physical presence while she can't be close emotionally with mother.

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Theme 3: Ongoing desire for emotional support	*"Of course, I feel that I'm not heard and… Not accepted. Yes, I wish someone I wish I could talk to… I wish you can understand my feelings and ease my stress and anxiety. Yeah, that's how I felt. Do something about it like, I mean, just yeah, you don't have to do a lot of grand gestures. You can spend some time with me and do something nice" – P1*	P1 highlights her early and ongoing need for emotional comfort from her mother. During childhood, she cried when she felt unattended to, which brought to maternal comfort. In adulthood, she occasionally expressed her concerns too, to which her mother then comforted her. These behaviours reflect a desire for emotional connection, despite P1 reporting limited emotional expression toward her mother at home environment.
Theme 4: Persistent anxiety from childhood	*"This issue that I've been living, I mean her condition (mother's critical illness) that have been living since I can remember has that big impact on me. Yeah… I didn't know that because I just keep thinking, without knowing. The only thing I knew is that my mom can leave me anytime because she always said, "I'm not sure if I will be there anymore," for a lot of things." – P1*	P1 has experienced persistent loss since childhood due to her mother's critical illness. She grew up with the belief that her mother could leave at any time created persistent fear and anxiety, even before P1 fully understood its impact.
	"I think same thing. She will just leave anytime and I don't know… I can, I will, I cannot… I'm not sure how I can handle that in the future. Very worried and anxious, umm, what to do without her? I just keep picturing, you know, then I break down." – P1	This constant anticipation of loss continues to affect her emotionally, as imagining life without her mother triggers intense worry and emotional breakdowns.

Different Themes from P2

Theme 1: Bombarded	*"Thing I remember one time is like. My mom asked me why am I depressed. And then I'm like, 'I don't know.' I've just been like that for*	P2 shared feeling frustrated when her mother repeatedly

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by mother's questions	*quite a long time that I can remember. 'Like how' again like she was trying to press an answer from me la. So, I'm like, 'I don't know. I just feel that I cannot explain to you how that happened. It just already happened, and then that's how I feel right now.' Then she's like, 'but how?' And then I'm like, 'I don't know.' So, I think maybe she really does not understand sometimes. So, she she's trying to ask, how did I come to this… Kind of conclusion? And then when I tried to explain, she still is like this. Maybe the way I explain also is not to her understanding? So in what she understands, she's like, 'that's not how it happens.'"- P2*	questioning why she was depressed, even after she said she couldn't explain. She felt misunderstood, as her mother seemed dissatisfied with her answers.
Theme 2: Hurt by mother's expectations as the eldest	*"Sometimes I guess... like I feel kind of, neglected, I would say. And because, like I'm the eldest daughter. I feel like sometimes I have to take care of my sister and brother. So it's like I have to put them before myself. Yeah. And sometimes I would think it's not fair. And then I would tell my mom, and then she would be like "why are you always (feel) so 委屈 (unjust treatment)? On little... like small, small stuff?" But then that's how I feel at that time. And then I would cry and then she would say "can you stop crying over this thing?" I feel like at that time when she said that it was like I was trying to be a victim, but when is that? I feel like... I have always, have to put them before me." – P2*	P2 sometimes feels neglected and burdened by the expectation role as the eldest child. She feels pressured to prioritize her younger siblings' needs before her own, and when she expresses frustration or sadness, her mother dismisses her feelings and saying that she's overreacting. This leaves her feeling emotionally invalidated and unfairly treated.
	"*Yeah. And then she would always say, 'cause, they're younger,' and then I have to, like, be the bigger person and then, like, give them everything they want." – P2*	P2 also mentioned that her mother always reminds her to 'the bigger person' and to provide whatever her sibling needs.

Source: Author's work

Discussion

Both participants' descriptions of their relationship with their mothers are aligned with previous research showing that maternal insecurity contributes to increased emotional distress and increases the likelihood of depression (Yu et al., 2024). The findings suggest that emotional insecurity can make it harder for individuals to manage their emotions but also reinforces harmful beliefs about self-worth and the stability of relationships (Zhang et al., 2021).

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In this study, the emotional distance may reflect traditional gender roles in Malaysian families, where fathers are typically expected to provide financially rather than emotionally. However, both participants shared that their interactions with their fathers increased in adulthood, mainly in conversations around career and finances. The evolving relationships suggest that bonding with fathers might not be necessarily based on emotional aspect only. Particularly when fathers offer practical support, it enhances the father-child relationship. This implied the importance of functionality as part of binding the parent-child relationship in the Malaysian context. In other words, apart from investigating the emotional experience between parent-child relationships, how the practicalities or functionalities of parents and children in the family should be examined so that the symptom of depression can be understood in a bigger context of the family dynamics.

The findings of P1 reflected the significant impact of family event, such as mother's sickness, which could negatively affect the parent-child relationship. Particularly, the anxiety towards her mother's sickness and death has a persistent negative emotional experience on her. This study has highlighted the possible association between youth depression in the context of family event, such as illnesses.

Meanwhile, although the emotional burden of expecting a child to be caregiver for the younger siblings varies among the different populations, P2's experiences have shown to be a form of emotional neglect. Her experience illustrates how eldest children, especially in collectivist cultures, often face greater pressure to meet family expectations, a possible issue linked to higher levels of stress and emotional burden (Yahya et al., 2019). This reinstates the importance of birth-order which can contribute to the mental wellbeing of youth.

In terms of framing parent-child relationships using attachment theory, it is not fully reflected from this study whether secure or insecure attachment can be directly associated with depression. However, cultural influence and expectations emerged as crucial.

Limitations

This study provides valuable insights but has several limitations. The most significant is the small sample size of two participants, which limits generalizability to all Malaysian youth with depression. Particularly, recruiting youth who are diagnosed with depression posted to be challenging.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies on parent–child relationships and youth depression in Malaysia should aim to include a more diverse and larger sample. Recruiting participants from different ethnic groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and both urban and rural areas will help capture the wide range of experiences in the local context. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to explore the parent–child relationships and depressive symptoms change over time. Particularly, the impacts of cultural expectations, family events and birth order should be taken into consideration when investigating depression among youth.

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Ethics Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the IMU Joint Committee on Research and Ethics (IMU-JC), approval number [MOC 1-2024 (04)]. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Lim Yen Teng Tracy conducted the study as part of student research, including data collection and initial analysis, under the supervision of Teoh Gaik Kin. Asong Joseph was responsible for manuscript writing, including drafting and organization of the content. Teoh Gaik Kin and Foo Fatt Mee provided supervision, as well as critical review and editing of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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