YOUTH PERCEPTION ON NATIONAL SECURITY IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

This article examines Malaysian youth's perception of national security within the context of contemporary threats and societal transformation. Youth represent a large and influential demographic in Malaysia, yet their role in security discourse remains underexplored. Using a qualitative approach supported by selected case studies, the study analyses the level of awareness, trust, and engagement of youth in national security matters. Findings indicate that while Malaysian youth demonstrate high concern regarding issues such as cyber threats, social cohesion, and political instability, their understanding of the national security structure and their roles within it remains limited. The study also finds that formal government programmes like the National Service Training Programme (PLKN) and the Police Undergraduate Voluntary Corps (SUKSIS) yield mixed outcomes in fostering security awareness. Meanwhile, informal initiatives—such as youth-led cyber defence movements—reflect the potential of youth as key stakeholders in non-traditional security domains. The article proposes several policy recommendations including the institutionalisation of security literacy, expanded youth participation in strategic communication, and the development of inclusive security policies that reflect the voice and needs of Malaysia's younger generation.

Keywords:

Cyber Threats, National Security Malaysia, Security Literacy, Youth Perception

Introduction

National security is a broad and multifaceted concept that encompasses a nation's ability to safeguard its sovereignty, territorial integrity, national interests, and the well-being of its citizens from a wide range of threats whether physical, political, economic, social, or cyber in nature. In the current era of globalisation and geopolitical uncertainty, the landscape of national security has shifted from conventional military-based threats to complex and hybrid forms of non-traditional threats, including cyberattacks, online extremism, disinformation, and internal socio-political instability. In the Malaysian context, threats to national security are increasingly transnational and hybrid in nature. Key concerns include data breaches, human trafficking, ideological radicalisation, foreign influence in domestic politics, and the rise of cross-border organised crime. These evolving challenges necessitate a whole-of-society approach to security—one that extends beyond the domain of formal security institutions such as the military and police, and actively involves all sectors of the population, particularly youth (National Cyber Security Agency [NACSA], 2023; Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2023; National Cyber Security Agency [NACSA], 2024).

Youth, who comprise over 45% of Malaysia's population under the age of 40 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023), represent the most dynamic and influential demographic. They are not only the most active users of information and communication technologies, but also serve as shapers of public discourse, drivers of social mobilisation, and connectors between the state and society. Yet, a critical question remains: to what extent are Malaysian youth aware of, concerned about, and engaged in national security issues? Do they view national security as an elite-driven, distant concern beyond their daily lives, or do they see it as a shared responsibility requiring their attention and action? Previous studies have highlighted a significant disconnect between national security policies and youth perception. Issues such as low security literacy, distrust in security institutions, and limited avenues for youth participation in policymaking contribute to this gap (Ahmad & Lee, 2021). Furthermore, socio-political challenges such as policy inconsistency, ethnic polarisation, and the limited outreach of national youth programmes have influenced the level of youth awareness and engagement in national security matters (Suhaimi et al., 2025).

Despite the growing body of scholarship on youth and national security, most existing studies tend to emphasize either technological aspects such as cyber threats and digital literacy (Zulkifli et al., 2020; NACSA, 2023) or socio-political activism during times of political uncertainty (Sidek et al., 2020). However, there remains limited scholarly attention on how youth perceptions of national security align—or at times conflict—with Malaysia's formal security frameworks and government-led initiatives. This disconnect creates a critical research gap, as understanding youth perspectives is essential for ensuring that national security policies are not only state-centric but also reflective of grassroots realities and generational aspirations.

Accordingly, this study pursues three main objectives: (1) to explore the level of awareness, concern, and engagement of Malaysian youth in national security issues; (2) to examine how youth perceive and interact with both formal government programmes and informal, youth-driven initiatives; and (3) to identify gaps between policy intentions and youth expectations, with the aim of proposing more inclusive, participatory, and youth-responsive security strategies for Malaysia.

This article seeks to explore and analyse the perception of Malaysian youth towards national security by drawing upon empirical findings, case studies, and policy analysis. The discussion will focus on key dimensions such as youth security literacy, perceived threats, trust in institutions, and modes of youth engagement. By understanding youth perspectives and concerns, the study aims to contribute towards more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable security frameworks that reflect the voice and agency of Malaysia's future generation.

Literature Review

Youth Engagement in National Security

Recent studies show that Malaysian youth are increasingly aware of and engaged in national security issues, particularly in relation to cyber threats, disinformation, governance, and political instability. For instance, Wong et al. (2023) found that young Malaysians view digital misinformation as one of the most significant risks to social cohesion, while Jamal et al. (2025)

emphasized that trust in governance and security institutions plays a critical role in shaping youth attitudes toward national security. Earlier research also highlighted the importance of early cybersecurity education, with Zulkifli et al. (2020) stressing the need to instill digital safety knowledge among secondary school students to prepare them for emerging challenges. Similarly, Suhaimi et al. (2016) noted that youth participation in decision-making processes fosters leadership skills, strengthens civic responsibility, and enhances good governance. Collectively, these findings suggest that security awareness among youth must evolve in step with rapid technological and political changes, and that effective governance structures are essential to institutionalize youth participation in national security strategies.

Cyber Threats and Social Cohesion

The growing influence of digital platforms has transformed the way national security is understood, introducing new and complex risks in the areas of cybersecurity and social stability. Challenges such as online misinformation, extremist content, and disinformation networks are becoming more widespread, demanding strategies that go beyond traditional state security measures. In response, young people in Malaysia have taken the lead through initiatives like digital awareness programmes, campus-based cyber defence groups, and online campaigns against radicalisation, showing that they are active partners rather than passive observers of security policies (Zulkifli et al., 2020; Abdullah & Latiff, 2022; NACSA, 2023). Similar trends are evident across the region: in Indonesia and the Philippines, youth participation in digital resilience projects has proven crucial in countering extremist narratives and strengthening social cohesion online (Santoso, 2022; Reyes, 2023). These developments highlight the importance of cultivating critical thinking skills and responsible digital behaviour among young people, not only to safeguard Malaysia's digital space but also to reinforce resilience against cyber risks at the wider ASEAN level.

Political Instability and Youth Activism

Periods of political uncertainty often stimulate greater youth participation in activism, with young people turning to digital platforms as spaces for expression and reform. In Malaysia, youth actively engage in political conversations through platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter/X, using these channels to disseminate information, initiate dialogues, and influence decision-making processes (Sidek et al., 2020; Rahman & Hassan, 2022). This trend mirrors developments in Thailand, where youth-driven digital protests have reshaped national political discourse and challenged traditional governance structures (Phongpaichit & Baker,

2023). Such rising digital activism underscores the urgent need for policies that institutionalize youth voices in national security and governance frameworks, ensuring that generational perspectives are not excluded from strategies aimed at maintaining stability and resilience.

Government Programs and Security Awareness

Government initiatives such as the National Service Training Programme (PLKN) and the Police Undergraduate Voluntary Corps (SUKSIS) were introduced to build civic responsibility and increase youth involvement in national security. While these programs have contributed to raising awareness and fostering patriotism among some participants, evaluations reveal mixed effectiveness. Abdullah and Latiff (2022) note that although the initiatives enhance engagement for certain youth, they often fall short in addressing contemporary challenges such as cybercrime, disinformation, and digital radicalisation. Similarly, Sidek et al. (2020) found that program outcomes vary widely depending on delivery and youth interest, underscoring the need for continuous evaluation and adaptation. By comparison, Singapore's Total Defence framework and Indonesia's Bela Negara program have more systematically integrated youth into national security planning, offering regional best practices that Malaysia can learn from (Lim, 2022; Santoso, 2022). These insights highlight the importance of rethinking and updating national youth programs to remain relevant, impactful, and responsive to the evolving security environment.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, lived experiences, and viewpoints of Malaysian youth regarding national security. This research design was selected as it enables the researcher to explore the meanings, interpretations, and subjective understandings that youth attach to the concept of security—often characterised by its complexity and multidimensionality (Merriam, 2009).

A qualitative approach is also suitable for identifying underlying themes, cognitive frameworks, and behavioural patterns that may not be readily captured through quantitative methods alone. The study places strong emphasis on the social context, personal narratives, and the interactions of youth with key influencing factors such as media, security institutions, and the broader political environment (Yeon et al., 2016).

Case Study of Policy Documents

To complement the empirical findings, this study also undertakes an in-depth analysis of official government policy documents related to national security and youth development in Malaysia. This qualitative document-based case study aims to examine how the Malaysian government defines, formulates, and implements strategies involving youth in national security agendas. It also seeks to identify the degree to which these policies align with the actual perceptions, expectations, and realities experienced by Malaysian youth at the grassroots level.

Four core policy documents were selected for analysis:

Malaysian Youth Policy (2021–2030)

This national policy outlines the strategic direction of the government in empowering Malaysian youth as active partners in nation-building. The analysis focuses on how national security is explicitly integrated into the policy, particularly within the domains of civic literacy, patriotism, leadership development, and volunteerism. Special attention is paid to the framing of youth as partners in national development, including their potential roles as non-state security actors.

National Security Policy (DKN 2021)

This strategic document outlines a comprehensive and holistic approach to national security, encompassing six core domains—political, economic, social, cyber, environmental, and public health security. The analysis evaluates the extent to which public and youth engagement is embedded within this framework and assesses the mechanisms for youth inclusion in early warning systems, prevention efforts, and threat mitigation.

Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMK-12)

As Malaysia's five-year national development blueprint (2021–2025), this document contains several chapters relating to youth empowerment, public safety, and digital security. The study examines the intersections between youth development strategies and national security concerns, especially in response to emerging threats such as cybercrime, the spread of extremist ideologies, and risks of digital radicalisation among youth populations.

National Cybersecurity Strategy Action Plan 2020–2024 (developed by CyberSecurity Malaysia and the National Security Council)

This plan addresses the protection of Malaysia's digital infrastructure and promotes cyber resilience. The analysis explores initiatives aimed at youth, including awareness campaigns, e-security training, digital resilience programmes, and the integration of youth organisations and higher education institutions in promoting national cybersecurity awareness.

Implications of Policy Document Analysis

Findings from the analysis reveal that while youth are increasingly recognised as important stakeholders in national security, the current policy landscape remains fragmented, top-down, and often poorly coordinated across agencies. Several structural gaps have been identified:

i.   A lack of direct youth participation in policy formulation, particularly in emerging security domains such as digital security and ideological threats.
ii. A dominant top-down approach that often marginalises youth voices from underrepresented or rural communities.

iii. Resource constraints and limited outreach in national awareness programmes targeting youth.
iv. The absence of measurable indicators and performance frameworks to assess youth engagement in national security.

This analysis reinforces the need for a more inclusive, participatory, and community-driven policy framework—one that positions youth not merely as policy recipients, but as co-creators, implementers, and evaluators of Malaysia's national security agenda.

Results

The findings of this study reveal that Malaysian youth perceive national security as a complex, evolving, and multifaceted construct, shaped by structural conditions, sociopolitical realities, and digital culture. Far from being passive observers, today's youth are emerging as critical stakeholders who actively interpret, challenge, and reconstruct the meaning of security in a highly interconnected and media-saturated environment.

Firstly, youth understanding of national security tends to be partial and uneven, with an emphasis on personal safety and localised threats rather than broader concerns such as geopolitical dynamics or strategic defence. This fragmented comprehension can be attributed to the absence of a systematic national security education curriculum and the limited presence of open, intergenerational discourse on security as a public good. As a result, youth tend to associate security with immediate, tangible risks rather than abstract or long-term threats.

Secondly, Malaysian youth display a growing awareness of contemporary security threats, including cybercrime, online radicalisation, political instability, and foreign influence. However, their grasp of these issues often lacks strategic integration, as they struggle to link individual experiences with state-level policy responses. Their perceptions are largely constructed through everyday encounters with digital platforms, peer discourse, and popular culture, rather than through formal civic education or institutional engagement.

Thirdly, social media emerges as the dominant source of security-related information, serving both as a vital communication tool and a source of risk. While digital platforms enhance access to diverse viewpoints, they also expose youth to misinformation, disinformation, and extremist content, further complicating their ability to critically assess the reliability of information. This dependency on digital media without adequate media literacy creates a widening knowledge-practice gap, where the abundance of information does not necessarily translate into informed action (Suhaimi et al. 2020; Abu Bakar, 2020).

Fourthly, youth trust in national security institutions is varied and conditional. The Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM) continue to enjoy relatively high levels of respect and legitimacy. In contrast, institutions such as the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) face public scepticism due to perceived issues of integrity, accountability, and politicisation. This erosion of institutional trust weakens civic confidence and contributes to a growing sense of disconnect between youth and the national security apparatus.

Finally, although direct youth participation in security initiatives remains limited, the study identifies a strong appetite for alternative modes of engagement particularly through community-based activism, digital advocacy, and civic volunteerism. Initiatives such as cyber volunteer programs and online campaigns against misinformation demonstrate the potential for constructive youth involvement, if engagement pathways are inclusive, transparent, and responsive to the realities of youth culture (Suhaimi, 2021).

Conclusion

This study highlights the evolving perceptions of Malaysian youth toward national security in the face of modern threats and societal change. While young people express significant concern over issues such as cyber threats and political instability, there remains a clear gap in their understanding of formal security frameworks and their roles within them. Government-led programs like PLKN and SUKSIS show varying levels of effectiveness, whereas grassroots, youth-driven initiatives demonstrate promising potential in addressing non-traditional security challenges.

To harness this potential, several policy actions are recommended. First, embed security literacy within the national education curriculum, beginning from secondary schools, to equip young Malaysians with the knowledge and critical thinking skills needed to navigate complex security environments. Second, establish youth councils and advisory panels within national security policymaking structures, ensuring that young voices directly inform strategies and decisions. Third, strengthen multi-stakeholder collaborations between government agencies, civil society, and digital platforms to counter misinformation and online radicalisation. Finally, improve institutional trust-building mechanisms, such as transparency initiatives and accountability reforms, to address the scepticism that many youth express toward security institutions.

The long-term significance of these measures extends beyond short-term threat mitigation. By systematically engaging youth as partners in national security, Malaysia can build a generation that is not only security-aware but also proactive in sustaining national resilience. Linking back to the identified research gap, this study underscores that bridging the disconnect between policy frameworks and youth perceptions is critical. A more inclusive, participatory, and forward-looking security strategy will ensure that Malaysia's national security governance evolves in line with the aspirations, capacities, and voices of its younger generation.

However, this study is not without limitations. The findings are based on a specific sample that may not fully represent the diversity of Malaysian youth across different regions, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias, while the study's focus on perceptions limits its ability to measure actual behavioural engagement with security initiatives. Future research should therefore consider a broader and more representative sampling approach, as well as employ mixed-method or longitudinal designs to explore how youth perceptions and participation evolve over time. Comparative studies across Southeast Asian nations could also provide valuable insights into regional differences and shared challenges. In addition, examining the influence of digital media, emerging technologies, and civic education on youth security awareness would enrich understanding and support the development of more targeted national security engagement strategies.

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