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Single Case Study: Malaysian Male Chinese Young Adult's Decision to Leave Abusive Romantic Relationship

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ABSTRACT

With an emerging phenomenon of emotional abuse among Malaysian male young adults in romantic relationship, this single case study aims to explore the experiences and decision-making processes of Malaysian Chinese male young adult who decided to terminate an emotional abusive relationship. Case study method allows the full coverage and in-depth investigation towards this current phenomenon. This study utilizes three data collection methods, they are semi-structured interview with follow-up interview, psychometric tests, and social media texts analysis. The theoretical framework of this study includes FOG – Fear, Obligation, Guilt, Four Horsemen of Apocalypse, and Choice Theory Reality Therapy. Seven themes emerged to capture the experiences during and after the abusive romantic relationship, which are 'interactive abuse', 'over thinking', 'emotional distress – guilty, helplessness, and fear', 'progressive abuse', 'positive and negative self-condition', 'internal conflict', and 'prioritization of self-value'. Three themes are pointed out to explain the decision-making process of Malaysian male young adult, which are 'self-centred decision', 'fear of losing', and 'prioritization of mental health'. The implications of findings, limitations of the study and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature on in-depth single case study methodology (i.e., methodological triangulation), adding empirical evidence regarding male victims of emotional abuse in romantic relationship.

1. Introduction

Current years of report revealed that domestic violence among men as victims in Malaysia has started to rise (Yuen & Clarissa, 2019), and research further showed emotional abuse being the major common violence among romantic partner (Shahar et

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al., 2020). From this growing trend, the rise of men' emotional abuse rates can be witnessed, but limited research has been carried out in investigating males' victimization. With the emerging of emotional abuse among Malaysian heterosexual men and its' limited related research, there is a need of in-depth study in this topic. Hence, the current study aims to explore men's perspectives and experience in this domain, i.e., emotional abuse in a romantic relationship, and the decision-making process of terminating (i.e., leaving) this abusive romantic relationship.

The research questions of this study include: (1) What were the experiences of Malaysian Chinese male young adult (single case study) who has chosen to leave a romantic relationship? and (2) What were his decision-making processes of leaving the romantic relationship? Social constructionism approach is utilized in this study. This approach positioned that social interactions between individuals make up the knowledge that existed over the history and form the understandings of this current world (Burr, 2015). In this study, emotional abusive relationship can be seen as a product of social interactions between two romantic partners, which the perception of everyone was the truth for themselves (Burr, 2015).

2. Literature Review

Emotional abuse could be in the form of verbal and non-verbal. Explicit ways of emotional abuse include: restrictive engulfment (e.g., controlling partner's social activities and tracking), hostile withdrawal (e.g., emotional avoidance and emotional withholding), denigration (e.g., humiliating and insulting on partner's self-esteem), and dominance/intimidation (e.g., threatening and verbal aggression). These abusive behaviours are significantly linked to several adverse consequences, such as attachment insecurities, experiencing negative state (e.g., anxiety, overwhelmed), low emotional awareness (e.g., identifying emotions), and personal dysfunction (e.g., destruction of sense of self) (Neumann, 2017; Vidourek, 2017). To a severe extent, such psychological maltreatment could lead to suicidal ideation suffering from verbal aggression, threatening, and emotional blackmail (Vidourek, 2017).

In relation to emotional abuse, individual differences matter in the vulnerability to emotional abuse, such as parenting style and attachment style. Authoritarian parenting style appeared to contribute in abusive relationship (Beyarslan & Uzer, 2020; Espinoza et al., 2012). Authoritarian parents tend to use high and strict behavioural control, such as corporal punishment (Espinoza et al., 2012). Such absolute parenting style would influence the children in exhibiting psychological impairment and practising poor emotional adjustment (Sartaj & Aslam, 2010). It was shown the characteristics of authoritarian parenting style would directionally promote emotional abuse (Beyarslan & Uzer, 2020). In the Malaysian context, majority of parents utilized the authoritarian parenting style in setting up milestones for children (Masiran, 2022).

Besides that, avoidant attachment style also has been shown to be the prevalent attachment style in experiencing emotional abusive events, such as verbal aggression (Aloia & Solomon, 2015; Basting et al., 2022). Similarly, this attachment style happened on Malaysian young adults, which avoidant attachment was commonly exhibited, especially male (Khodarahimi et al., 2016; Ng et al., 2013). Avoidantly attachment adults perceived their stress to be severe due to lower perceive of social supports (family, friends, and significant others) (Khodarahimi et al., 2016). Additionally, in a romantic

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relationship, they tend to have a poorer relationship quality and relational problems (friends) (Yahya et al., 2021).

2.1. Emotional Abuse among Young Adults in Romantic Relationship

Malaysians behaved in a collectivistic and patriarchal way. Malaysian societal norm conveyed a value of having a right behaviour and attitude, such as practising unity and conformity to any rules, which it was perceived as 'traditional' that has higher prioritization given (Mustafa et al., 2012). The obligation in society played by the role of hierarchy in Malaysia as higher rank or seniority would have the highest authority (Hoh, 2018). For males, parents would rather socialize them to be independent by having masculine images, such as avoiding from help-seeking behaviours, physical toughness, and social responsibilities, which might further lead to low awareness of mental and physical health (Ainslie, 2017). This can be understood as parents set up expectations towards their children, originating from a parenting style with high demandingness, control, and supervision (Cong et al., 2020; Hoh, 2018).

Besides gender socialization, it is beneficial to understand how emotional abuse from the perspective of communication pattern and conflict management in Malaysia. Indirectness of words use and prohibition of violating the social values and social norms are part of communication styles among Malaysians (Halford et al., 2018). In terms of conflict management, open conflict was avoided in family, workplace, and relationship settings (Mustafa, 2012; Sumari et al., 2020). This pattern of avoiding interpersonal conflict served as a contributor of emotional abuse and predicted an unhealthy and destructive relationship (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019; Gottman, 1993).

Karakurt and Silver (2013) found evidence that there is a decline of tendency in experiencing emotional abuse with age. Hence, there is a possibility that young adults have been stressed and placed in a high prioritized position as they have a higher possibility in experiencing emotional abuse (Ahmadabadi et al., 2021; Vidourek, 2017). There are several reasons why young adults should be prioritized in this domain, such as adverse consequences of emotional abuse, mental health and healthy love relationship. For example, it was shown a pattern of internalizing symptoms of depression and anxiety as the aftermath of emotional abuse (Bushong, 2018). To a severe extent, suicidal ideation might be provoked in the population of younger adults, including males (Medzani, 2019).

2.2. Decision-making of Leaving Abusive Relationships: Male's Perspective

Decision-making to leave a relationship can never been simple to be made as multiple considerations involved for the decision-maker. In such complex of relationship, male victims might not adapt and often times the solution is complex too, taking in the aspects on rumination of positive and negative elements in relationships, the subjective norms, and self-capabilities in leaving (Murta & Parada, 2021). In the Malaysian context, there is a concept of saving face needs to be considered (Liang & Matthews, 2021). There are two major considerations that are emphasized regarding whether to stay or leave the abusive relationship. First, societal norms. Societal norms included masculine portrayal image, which society would see the complaint or help-seeking behavior by men was an indication of weaknesses, embarrassment as a man, and not being allowed to lash out (Gueta & Shlichove, 2022). Furthermore, society might be acting disregard or disbelief and stigmatized towards the testimonies by men in reaching out for external help, such

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as being treated as liars (Jovanoski & Sharlamanov, 2021; Taylor et al., 2021). Reversely, the 'correct' portrayal to be masculine in Malaysia, such as strong in physical, high capabilities in taking up responsibilities, and wealthy (Endut et al., 2020). These masculine images might be detrimental for men as in rejecting to initiate help-seeking behaviours (Cheong et al., 2020).

Next, males' commitment towards the relationship. It was justified that giving excuses to partners after being abused was the common resolution strategy by men (Eckstein, 2010). The excuses included the acceptance and justification as joke towards partner's abusive actions, the hope towards future as male victims made promises to not leave and hoping their partners would eventually change over time (Joseph-Edwards & Wallace, 2021; Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2022). Thereby, men would hold positive emotions toward it and constantly being blinded to abuse happened (Eckstein, 2010). Eventually, this promotes future emotional abuse incidents (Jovanoski & Sharlamanov, 2021). The decision-making processes were largely focused on the decision of staying instead of leaving. And there was no research focused on the Malaysian male young adults in the process of leaving. Hence, this study takes an initiation to investigate from the perspective of male who made decision to leave.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework is the structure that serves as the support to the taken data coding and results revealing process (Collins & Stockton, 2018). The three theories used in this study are: FOG – Fear, Obligation, and Guilt, Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and Choice Theory.

FOG – Fear, Obligation, and Guilt described the inner feelings that would likely to be experienced as the victim. There are three keywords in explaining this abusive relationship, which are 'F' for 'Fear', 'O' for 'Obligation', and 'G' for 'Guilt'. 'Fear' can be interpreted as the feelings of victim caused by the threatening actions of the abuser. Additionally, Forward and Frazier (2019) mentioned 'fear of anger', which describes someone's anger could expand the targets' fear and activate our flight and fight bodily reaction, such as anger evolved from the actions of losing control, yelling or mad micro and macro expressions. Th next element is 'Guilt', which described as the feeling of a conscience person by believing what individual did was wrong as this kind of guilt embedded by the layers of blame, accusations and paralyzing self-flagellation. Next, 'O' stands for 'obligation', which described the rules obeyed by blackmail targets which allowed blackmailers to make targets tolerate to them. Targets used to obey to these rules and perceived them as own responsibilities or duties.

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse explained how 'criticism', 'contempt', 'defensiveness' and 'stonewalling' in interaction between romantic partners lead to the dissatisfaction of a relationship and finally the disruption of relationship (Gottman, 1993). The description of four horsemen would be the following: (1) Criticism – The attack on someone' personality or putting down partner's character; (2) Contempt – The attack on someone with the intention to perform any activities that insult or abuse the partners; (3) Defensiveness - Happens when one is acted scornfully and the other acted defensively, which pretends to be innocent and not taking any responsibilities in taking the initiative to resolving issues; and (4) Stonewalling – Metaphoring the partner being silence like acting or pretending him/herself like a 'stone' that is unable to reply. All Four Horsemen of Apocalypse elements are similar with emotional abuse's components.

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Choice Theory emphasizes the responsibilities that everyone carried in deciding or impacting the direction of their life. Individuals had the control in deciding anything to be happened, including misery. Five basic needs have been derived, they are 'survival', 'love and belonging', 'power', 'freedom' and 'fun', to fit the 'quality world – the subjective world' (Glasser, 1999). In the Malaysian context, male young adults are aware of what they want in a romantic relationship. Malaysian male young adults understand how choices can be made by them and the actions were within their area of control and responsibilities. For instance, Malaysian male young adults are highly practical on how to choose their future partners and what should be done to secure their romantic relationship (Wan Shahrazad et al., 2012). Similarly, Malaysian male young adults understand the way to maintain their relationship and adopt more maintenance strategies by expressing self (Baptist et al., 2012; Yum et al., 2015). These findings highly focused on the available choices that presented to Malaysian male young adults when comes to selection.

3. Methodology

This study utilizes the case study research design as the methodology. Case study is an intensive investigation on a single phenomenon, allowing a detailed and full coverage analysis of a phenomenon, that can possibly be a specific event, situation, organization or an individual unit (Mills et al., 2010). This study utilised one-to-one semi-structured interview to the selected case's participant, documental analysis, such as private and public records (chat records & social media's post), and instruments (survey & questionnaire) (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). With multiple methods of investigation, it increases the reliability and validity of the collected results by the methodological triangulation (Guion, 2002). In short, a case study is an intensive investigation of contemporary phenomenon by using multiple sources of proofs (Yin, 1994).

3.1. Reflexivity

The first author of this study acknowledged that he himself experienced past emotional abusive romantic relationship. He aims to study the reasons on how his past abusive relationship differs from normal love relationship, and further proves male adults can be the targeted victims in Malaysia. Eventually, it will benefit towards male population who placed in a vulnerable state and raise awareness in society by recognizing the pattern of abusive relationship. With this past experience, it enables him to have better interpretation towards the obtained data. To avoid interpretation bias from the first author, the validity and reliability has been ensured through theoretical and data triangulation. In addition, this study is under supervision by the second author, which helps in reducing the bias through inspection and discussion of the listed themes. The report has been reported in a scientific way to provide objective empirical evidence.

3.2. Sample (Case)

The sample in this study was recruited by utilizing purposive sampling as few qualities or requirements were strictly needed to be adhered for the determination of eligible participant. First, current study focuses on Malaysian male young adults who age-ranged between 18 years old to 30 years old, according to the definition by Erikson (1977). Secondly, sample has to fulfil the requirement of 'involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship for at least one year'. Thirdly, 'self-admission of self-choosing to leave the

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romantic relationship' and 'self-admission of involved in an emotionally abusive romantic relationship' have to be as the criteria of the chosen sample. In addition, several platforms have been chosen for recruitment process, which are WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram. Recruitment process is about three weeks. There is one participant, Taka (pseudonym) has been identified and the participant passed the requirements, filtered by researcher. Researcher identifies the phenomenon or case of the participant and perform an in-depth investigation. Taka is currently 21 years old, a full-time undergraduate in a private university in Malaysia. He experienced an emotional abusive romantic relationship, which lasted for two and a half years (900 days). His past relationship status accounts as one, and has a complete nuclear family (father, mother, one younger sister, and one younger brother).

3.3. Procedures

In case study, data collected would be based on multiple methods and instruments. This study utilizes semi-structured interview, psychometric test and content analysis to achieve data triangulation for consistent result (Guion, 2002). From selected data collection methods, combination of various data collection formed a 'pattern-matching' with a strong explanation base (Yin, 1994). Data collection took place between 8th April to 22th May 2022 through Zoom platform (interviews) for recording purpose and further transcribed afterwards.

In short, there were a total of nine steps in the research procedure. First, the information sheet and consent form were distributed to understand the research and agreement of participation. Second, a one-to-one semi-structured interview was conducted via Zoom meeting and video recorded. Four sets of open-ended questions comprised the category of self-introduction, past relationship status, experience of emotional abuse in romantic relationship, and decision-making process in choosing to leave the abusive relationship. Additionally, follow-up questions were encouraged for clarification and elicit more specific information. The duration of this interview was about 1 hour on 8th April 2022.

Third, within the one week of the interview session, the compilation of psychometric tests was distributed to participant to prevent desensitization of participant towards the study, and evaluated afterwards. Six psychometric tests were completed: (1) Mini International Personality Item Pool scale (Mini-IPIP) (Donnellan et al., 2006); (2) Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) (Buri, 1991); (3) Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ) (Simpson et al., 1996); (4) Gender-Equitable Men Scale (GEMS) (Pulerwitz & Barker, 2007); (5) Patriarchal Belief Scale (Yoon et al., 2015), and (6) Masculine Behavior Scale (MBS) (Snell, 1989) by the participant in this study. These tests were compiled into one document and has been given to participant. Then, the document was returned back for further investigation. The psychometric tests served as another method to analyse.

Fourth, follow-up interview. The follow-up interview seeked for the confirmation of psychometric tests scores and clarification of data obtained from semi-structured interview. Follow-up interview was conducted in this study on 22th May 2022 to clarify and confirm the data obtained through the semi-structured interview and psychometric test. With a follow-up interview, the reliability of the result can be established by having a sufficient explicit information with additional explanation (Hopf, 2004). The first interview and follow-up interview were recorded in an online platform, Zoom meeting with the researcher's and participant's video cameras on. English language with a mix of

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Chinese language were used during the interviews. Fifth, thematic analysis were conducted on the two interview transcripts.

Sixth, the social media texts were analysed through content analysis. The social media texts were the past conversations between the participant and participant's friend during and after the experience of emotional abusive relationship. The screenshots of the conversations were received by the researcher along with the consent from participant's friend. Overall, data triangulation was achieved by utilizing these three methods, which were interviews, psychometric tests, and social media texts. Seventh, inter-coder rating was done to validate the analysis by having multiple investigators. Eighth, researcher double-checked the understanding of the codes from transcription with the respective participant. Lastly, the data from the thematic analysis (two interviews), content analysis (social media texts) and results of psychometric tests were mapped and discussed by both authors.

4. Result

Thematic analysis on the two interviews shall be presented, accompanied with content analysis on two social media texts, followed with validation on the 6 psychometric tests. Refer Table 1 below on main themes that answered the two research questions of the study.

Table 1: Research questions with interview results (themes).

Research questions	Theme
RQ1: What were the experiences of Malaysian Chinese male young adult (single case study) who has chosen to leave a romantic relationship?	Experiences (During): 'Interactive Abuse', 'Over Thinking', 'Emotional Distress – Guilt, Helplessness & Fear' & 'Progressive Abuse' Experiences (After): 'Positive and Negative self-condition', 'Internal Conflict' & 'Prioritization of mental health'
RQ2: What were his decision-making processes of leaving the romantic relationship?'	Decision-making processes: 'Self-centered Decision', 'Fear of Losing' & 'Prioritization of mental health

Table 2 presents the themes and subthemes of experience of Malaysian Chinese male young adult during the emotional abusive relationship. There are a total of four themes and ten subthemes emerged from the data analysis. Evidence from the data analysis supporting the themes and subthemes and are being discussed in the following. Due to limited word count, not all subthemes are being addressed here.

Table 2: Themes and subthemes (Experience of Malaysian Male Young Adult – During the Emotional Abusive Relationship)

Themes	Subthemes
'Interactive' Abuse	1. Active Abuse 2. Passive Abuse 3. Allowance to be Abused

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Over Thinking	1. Over-reflection 2. Self-correction/Self-change 3. Extensive Search of Solutions
Emotional Distress – Guilt, Helplessness, Fear	1. Guilty 2. Hopeless and Helpless 3. Fear
Progressive Abuse	1. Slow Process

Active Abuse. On the side of abuser, active abuse is the initiation of abusive action by the abuser. This includes controlling, stalking, tracking, and monitoring the activities of participant.

> *"She she wants to know, past conversation that I have with all the girls, and when I pass my phone to her, she use literally use nine hours from, from fucking 12 o'clock, until morning 8am to check all the past conversation that I have with all the girls. With with any women that she saw WhatsApp, or Messenger, Wechat, Line. Every fucking platform she wants to check. And she scroll until 2014 years chat."*

Passive Abuse. In this study, passive abuse means the abusive actions that are unintendedly done by abuser, such as micro-behavior and tone.

> *"I felt emotional abuse hmm hmm … [laugh] I never think of that before [laugh] And … mmm small gesture [laugh] I think is flipping her eyeball up [laugh]. Is one of the ges gesture that she did to me that I felt emotional abuse."*

Allowance to be Abused. In this subtheme, it explains how participant allows himself to be abused by the abuser from internal factor. The internal factors identify as having low relationship baseline and low self-value. Low relationship baseline can be seen as participant chooses to leave the relationship only when the relationship affects his mental and physical health in a severe extent.

> *"In my past relationship, I see myself valuing is very very low, lower than my partner. I put my, you can say I put my heart on her more than myself, and during that time I wouldn't care whether am I injured or not."*

Over Thinking. In this subtheme, Taka tends to overthink the fault and blame and make changes towards his future behavior. From here, he exhibits the behavior of over reflection towards his fault.

> *"From my perspective, no matter is her fault or my fault. no matter who's wrong, even if I am correct, I will still reflect on myself, whether I can change something or correct something on myself to maintain the relationship or making a peace."*

Due to overthinking, he tends to blame himself by taking all responsibilities from the conflict or fight with the abuser. Moreover, the participant would search for any

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solutions to solve the issues emerged from the fight and conflict. He explains that he has been clueless in finding solutions, which causes him to stress out. He spent a lot of time seeking validation from friends on what next to do (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Example on social media texts (content analysis) to accompany the interview transcripts (thematic analysis).

Dialogue:

"Victim: Let me ask you something. If she doesn't reply, should I call her or leave her alone?"

"Victim's friend: Wait for her to read and seen the message"

"Victim: Okay"

Emotional Distress – Guilt, Helplessness, Fear. As a victim of emotional abuse, the participant experiences emotional distress in the relationship, which includes feelings of guilt, helplessness, and fear. First, guilt. The sense of guilt origins from the accusation by abuser even if he is correct.

> *"Err even if I think it was not my fault, my ex-partner will think of a way, that is my fault, and I can tell you when when arguments happen, if ten times there will be nine times is my fault, no matter how I tried to tell her to understand me."*

Next, the fear comes from the internalization of emotional abuse incidents and afraid in doing triggering stimulus that will provoke further abusive incidents. Besides that, the emotional abuse also persists after the termination of relationship that manifested as traumatized fear.

> *"She's starting to hit me, pull my shirt, hit me, and used can to throw at me during that night. She felt very angry. She she asked, Why, why am I doing this to her. These days where is the time when she starting to make me terrified about the relationship."*

Table 3 presents the themes and subthemes of the decision-making processes of Taka in terminating the abusive romantic relationship. There are a total of three themes and six subthemes emerged from the data analysis. Evidence from the data analysis supporting the themes and subthemes and discuss in the following. Due to limited word count, not all subthemes are being addressed here.

Table 3: Themes and subthemes (Decision-making Processes of Malaysian Chinese Male Young Adults Leaving Romantic Relationship).

Theme	Subtheme
Self-centered Decision	1. Clear Awareness in Termination 2. Recognition of Reality 3. Self-love

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Fear of Losing	1. Loss of Ideal Romantic Scenario
Prioritization of Mental Health	1. Life and Death Viewpoint 2. Awareness of own Limitation of Mental Illness

Recognition of Reality. The participant explains that he recognizes the reality that he is facing. Hence, he decides to terminate the romantic relationship for a better personal life.

> *"Umm, I'm starting to have anxiety attack. Every night at eight o'clock, my heart was start to pumping, my whole body will be shaking and I can't breathe very very frequently during the time and I will pass out. And I can't I have I'm facing insomnia I can't sleep every day."*

In addition, he decides to leave the romantic relationship to take care of the surrounding persons whom he cared about, such as friends and family.

> *"I want my family to start to stop worrying about me, because I, I knew they know. I knew they knew that. I'm having trouble to in this relationship"*

Self-love. Moreover, the participant explains that he decides to leave because he chooses to love himself for once and not to further worsen his mental and physical condition. His friends advise him to prioritize in taking care of his mental and physical health too

Prioritization of Mental Health. In the relationship, Taka sees his mental health as important matter that he should take care of for better overall well-being. There are two subthemes explain the perspective of participant in prioritizing his mental health.

Table 4 presents the themes and subthemes of the experience of Taka after the relationship. There are a total of three themes and six subthemes emerged from the data analysis. Evidences from the data analysis support the themes and subthemes and are being discussed in the following. Due to limited word count, not all subthemes are being addressed here.

Table 4: Themes and subthemes (Experience of Malaysian Chinese Male Young Adults – After the Emotional Abusive Relationship).

Theme	Subtheme
Positive and Negative of Self-condition	1. Positive Condition 2. Negative Condition
Internal Conflict	1.Acknowledgement and Comprehension of Abuser's Difficulties 2. Crave for Recognition
Prioritization of Self-value in Future	1. Strategy of Self-prioritizing 2. Refinement of Love Principle

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Positive Condition. Taka gets relieved after terminating the relationship as he mentions he escaped from a pool of fire that keeps suffer him.

> *"The ups will be, I am really relief towards that situation. I like, like umm I finally escaped from a pool of fire."*

Taka explains that his sleep problem, such as insomnia improved overtime with by the help of learning musical instrument (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Example on social media texts (content analysis) to accompany the interview transcripts (thematic analysis).

Dialogue:

"Victim: By the way, learning guitar is freaking hard [laugh], {guitar-related knowledge/information}"

"Victim's friend: Ya, it is great that you understood"

"Victim: My right brain felt being strained [laugh] "

Acknowledgement and Comprehension of Abuser's Difficulties. This explains the comprehension of abuser's difficulties by the participant, which is the past trauma experienced by abuser. This serves to be an excuse for the abuser.

> *"I think there's nothing wrong with her at the end, because … the way she acts is the majority comes from her family, because she lost her mother during Form five. And I think that's the moment where, where she lost a lot of securities, and she wants to gain the securities, but she doesn't know that securities is what you gain for yourself, instead of gaining from others."*

Refinement of Love Principle. After the termination of relationship, Taka focuses on his own love principle, by knowing what should be placed at first and the communication style, such as reciprocal adaptation (adaptation from both partner).

> "*I think, in order for you to properly love someone, You have to love yourself first. This is the one thing that I learned: you have to love yourself so you can bring the happiness towards the someone you love."*

Personality and Environmental Factors. This study collects the data not only from interview sessions and social media texts, but there are psychometric tests involving in data analysis. First, the results from Mini International Personality Item Pool scale (Mini-IPIP) indicates that the participant exhibits a high level of 'Agreeableness' and 'Openness/Intellectual' (Donnellan et al., 2006). Second, Taka lives in the environment of authoritarian parenting style and has an avoidant attachment style, showed by the outcome evaluation of Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) and Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ) respectively. Third, the participant supports gender equality,

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indicated by the Gender-Equitable Men Scale (GEMS). Fourth, the outcome evaluation of Patriarchal Belief Scale is negative, which shows that the participant has a low patriarchal belief. Lastly, Taka exhibits a high level of masculine behavior or image in 'Restrictive Emotionality' and 'Success Dedication' of Masculine Behavior Scale (MBS) (Snell, 1989). These psychometric results serve as validation upon the one-to-one interviews data and social media texts content analyses.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study is to explore men's perspectives and experience in this domain, i.e., emotional abuse in a romantic relationship, and the decision-making process of terminating (i.e., leaving) this abusive romantic relationship. From the lens of emotional abused victim, the victim tended to see conflict disadvantageous most of the time. Hence, he actively chose to avoid the conflicts or let the conflict remain unresolved. This behavior can be explained using the components of 'Defensiveness' and 'Stonewalling' by the victim (Gottman, 1993). Surprisingly, Taka allowed himself to be abused by exhibiting certain characteristics and behaviors. He possessed a low relationship baseline. The victim perceives himself to be ranked below the abuser, which can be interpreted as having low self-value.

Besides that, Taka internalized the accusations of the abuser. This can be interpreted as his passive action done in the relationship. By using the concept of FOG by Forward and Frazier (2019), the component of 'Obligation' can explain the reasons of the victim's behaviors. In this abusive relationship, Taka might perceive the sense of obligation towards the abuser in take caring her. Hence, he viewed the importance of obligating her more than self-caring and self-love. As time passes by, the obligation increases and makes the victim owe the abuser a lot of 'debts' and continues to obey in a meaningless manner (Forward & Frazier, 2019).

5.1. Behaviors and Innermost Feelings of Emotional Abuse

Overthinking is the behavior that Taka done in a great manner. He kept on to over reflect on his mistakes and fault in resulting the conflict in the relationship. Self-blaming can be constantly seen in the victim's behavior. This pushes him to further behaviors, which the victim wanted to make some corrections or changes on his mistakes to improve the relationship. Practically, he extensively searched for any solutions from friend, but there were no solutions. As a consequence, Taka was clueless which resulted in him stressing out.

From FOG concept, this progressive behavior can be explained through the components of 'Obligation' and 'Guilt' (Forward & Frazier, 2019). The victim might perceive himself was on the duty of maintaining relationship, hence, he searched for numerous solutions to solve the conflict. Simultaneously, a sense of guilt emerged as the conflict was unable to be solved and to fulfill abuser's request. And the victim began to self-blame as he thinks he had the responsibilities to take care of her. Consequently, the self-blame increased the responsibilities as a romantic partner and created a deeper sense of guiltiness. Lastly, it formed an endless cycle to repeatedly search for solutions to reduce the conflicts.

Emotional distress describes the inner feelings of emotional abused victim. First, the fear initiated by the abuser and plant the fear into Taka. Forward and Frazier (2019)

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mentioned the 'fear of anger', which meant afraid of cuing or provoking anger in the abuser. And this made Taka to understand by not crossing the line of abuser to not get punished. Next, more emotional abuse incidents had been experienced, hence the victim tend to obey to the order or fulfill the abuser's requirements. The findings indicate that the abuser was unreasonable and unarguable actions, and restricting victim's activity. It was a must to maintain the relationship and not further trigger any abusive events. In this dilemma, Taka did not have other choices and learned helplessness was the outcome. Guilt was one of the FOG concept's components and it matches what has been found from the study.

5.2. Process of Emotional Abuse in Relationship.

Overall, the experience of emotional abusive relationship can be seen as a slow process, which it has certain conflicts that remained unresolved between partners. Hence, those issues became the layers of emerging emotional abuse incidents. First, it has unresolved fundamental issues, such as conflicts and arguments. Secondly, the victim gave his efforts to compensation those issues, but all his efforts were wasted as there were no improvements. Thirdly, the emotional abuse was getting more intense and intense in the relationship. Fourth, the victim was unable to withstand with the pressure and he internalized those incidents simultaneously. It can be seen the high vulnerability was being placed and lastly leading to breaking down.

5.3. Decision-making Process in Leaving the Abusive Romantic Relationship

Overall, the decision made was based on the major consideration of self. Recognition of reality and prioritizing self-love are the reasons behind the decision. Hence, it was believed that Taka was having rational thoughts in leaving the relationship to benefit his future life, such as improving his sleeping problem and mental health and not wanting to disclose his issues to his friends and family. This finding was surprising as past studies indicated that the victim would stay in the abusive relationship rather than leave (Bates, 2020; Talbot, 2021). To note, this perception might only be applicable for those who chose to quit the relationship.

On the other hand, 'Fear of Losing' is another theme emerged from decision-making process. This theme can be interpreted as the struggle and consideration that have gone through by the victim. Taka was fearful in losing some ideal scenarios, such as discontinuation of current relationship, discontinuation of love memories, and discontinuation of planned plan. It was never easy to give up a romantic relationship that someone has already put many efforts in nurturing it. Using Choice Theory (Glasser, 1999) as an explanatory model, the victim who self-chosen to leave the abuser indicated that he intends to keep in his 'quality world', such as 'survival', love and belonging', 'power', 'freedom', and 'fun'. Taka prioritizes survival as he experienced some threatening harms, such as sleeping problems and mental illness. Love and belonging describes the self-love that the victim chooses for himself.

5.4. Experience of Abusive Romantic Relationship (After)

After leaving the relationship, experience of male victim can be classified into first phase (Reaction phase) and second phase (Recovery phase). In the reaction phase, Taka reacted to those negative self-condition in terms of social functionality. Specifically, Taka went through the condition of lacking confidence in socializing, low self-esteem, and fear

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in socializing with others. These negative conditions can be seen as the carry effects or side effects persisted from the abusive relationship. The victim might use some personal time to go through and desensitize with those disruptive effects.

In the recovery phase, Taka returned to a self-oriented life, which he 'removed' the consideration of love partner from his mark list. Hence, Taka was back into his normal life, which reflects his daily routines and hobbies, such as spending time with family members and friends. In addition, he explored some possibilities for his personal life, such as picking up a new hobby, which is learning guitar. Throughout the experience of picking up a new hobby, his sleeping problem, which was insomnia, improved and lean towards a better and healthy personal life. Overall, this can be seen as the processes and phases of male victim after leaving the abusive relationship.

5.5. Parenting Style and Attachment Style.

Taka exhibited an avoidant attachment style with an authoritarian parenting style by his parents. These findings were consistent with previous studies, as authoritarian-parented children in general have poorer emotional adjustment and directly promote emotional abuse incidents (Sartaj & Aslam, 2010). Children who exhibit avoidant attachment style would likely to have rejecting and withdrawal behavior and have a poor mental condition, and likely to be involved in emotional abuse incidents (Aloia & Solomon, 2015). These findings served as the underlying condition that indirectly promotes the vulnerability in receiving emotional abuse.

5.6. Agreeableness and Openness Personality

In terms of personality, interpersonal conflict is evident in Taka as part of the experienced emotional abuse originated from 'unresolved fundamental issue'. The victim with high agreeableness and openness has similarities as in using the conflict management style of 'compromising' and 'integrating' (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). Previous studies found that 'comprising' style was the management style of tolerating others, complying to higher authority, and self-sacrificing (Yuan, 2010). These characteristics well-explained how Taka tolerated (fulfill her requirements) the abuser by self-sacrificing (increasing his vulnerability towards mental illness).

5.7. Masculine Behavior Image of Victim.

Taka exhibited the masculine behavior image as in 'restrictive emotionality - restricting and not showing up emotions to others' and 'success dedication – having an ambition to achieve a successful life by accomplishing goals. The perception of masculine as 'Restrictive Emotionality' increases the vulnerability towards mental illness, as victim reserving own emotions can be self-disruptive and not to disclose own weaknesses or vulnerability (Fyfe, 2021). This reflects the cultural context as Malaysians tend to be conservative and stigmatized to not disclose own emotions.

5.8. Practical Implications

In this study, case study works as a reference to examine the perspective of Malaysian Chinese male young adults. Practically, this study implies that there should be an exhibition of awareness in recognizing of Malaysian men' vulnerability to emotional abuse. Thereby, peers and families can work as a support system for the victim in giving

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emotional support. One of the major findings in this study is the understanding of how a male victim exhibits a tendency and decides in leaving emotional abusive relationship. Hence, it is recommended to implement intervention in helping Malaysian male young adults population to have a better emotional adjustment during and after the experience of emotional abuse. Overall, this study gives an idea in arousing the awareness of Malaysians by looking in the mental health sector such as individual and couple counselling.

6. Limitations

In this study, several limitations have been identified. First, the methodology. Case study is an in-depth analysis of a phenomenon, but single case study is not impactful to assume of generalizing findings to a bigger population in society. Second, cultural context in comprehending emotional intelligence and having emotional awareness. In Malaysia, due to the patriarchal norm, participant explicitly exhibits the difficulties in explaining how emerged emotions from the experience and concept of emotional abuse during interview (Selamat & Endut, 2020), which might cause only superficial understanding on the phenomenological experience of the participant. Lastly, desensitization of past emotional abusive memories. In this study, it is certainly crucial to have a precise and vivid emotional abusive memory, to better capture the nature of phenomenon. But Taka has a blur impression about the past traumatic events.

7. Conclusion

In this emerging phenomenon of emotional abuse among Malaysian young adults population, this study utilizes the method of case study to investigate the phenomenon from the male perspective. This study investigated the experiences of emotional abuse of one Malaysian Chinese young adult and his decision-making process. Three theories (FOG – Fear, Obligation & Guilt, Four Horsemen of Apocalypse & Choice Theory) utilized in this study validated the male victim on emotional abusive romantic relationship in the Malaysian context. This study might contribute in raising awareness of men being emotional abused in a romantic relationship and strengthening mental health intervention to male victims. Future studies could consider multiple case studies or in-depth phenomenological study design to further investigate this topic.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Taylor's University. The participant first signed the consent form that was distributed before interview session to ensure participant's acknowledgement the nature of this study. The informed consent form entailed acknowledgement of methodology, possible adverse effect of this study, the rights of participant to withdraw from this study, the dissemination of result of this study, confidentiality and anonymity of participant, and sign-post participant to mental health services if needed.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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