

FROM AWARENESS TO PEACE: EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOUTH DIGITAL LITERACY AND A CULTURE OF PEACE IN THE CONTEXT OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates Malaysian youth's awareness of manipulative language used in human trafficking content on social media and examines how this awareness relates to digital literacy and peace-oriented online attitudes. Social media has increasingly become a tool exploited by traffickers who use deceptive language, false promises, and emotional manipulation to lure vulnerable users. Despite growing digital engagement, many young users lack the critical skills to identify linguistic red flags or understand the traffickers' modus operandi online. This research adopts a quantitative cross-sectional survey design involving 151 students in higher education institutions (IPTs) aged 18 to 25, selected through purposive sampling from both public and private higher education institutions. A self-developed structured questionnaire measured four constructs: general knowledge of human trafficking, understanding of traffickers' online strategies, digital literacy, and attitudes toward a digital culture of peace. Descriptive results revealed that youth reported high levels across all domains, particularly in attitudes toward peace ($M = 4.04$), followed by understanding of modus operandi ($M = 4.00$), and both general knowledge and digital literacy ($M = 3.80$). Pearson's correlation analysis showed strong, statistically significant relationships between all core variables: general knowledge, modus operandi understanding, and digital literacy. These findings indicate that increased awareness contributes to stronger critical evaluation skills and ethical online behavior. The study highlights the urgent need for educational interventions that are culturally relevant and focus on critical discourse awareness, digital safety, and peace-building values. Such efforts can strengthen youth digital resilience and reduce their vulnerability to online human trafficking tactics.

Keywords: youth awareness; human trafficking; digital literacy; social media; digital culture of peace

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media has become a central platform for communication, self-expression, and social engagement among youth. While these digital platforms offer countless benefits, they have also been misused by human traffickers to target vulnerable individuals using manipulative and emotionally charged language. Through fake profiles and false promises of love, friendship, or lucrative jobs, traffickers disguise coercive intent behind seemingly innocent messages and content (IOM, 2022; Salamena et al., 2023). Studies have shown that traffickers often adapt their language to appeal to cultural norms and social trends, making it harder for young users to identify potential dangers (Tzanetakis & South, 2023; Widodo et al., 2022). In this context, critical language awareness and digital literacy become essential tools for protecting youth from online exploitation.

Despite the growing awareness of human trafficking risks on social media, many young people still lack the necessary competencies to recognize and resist manipulation. While some possess basic digital skills, they often struggle to evaluate online content critically or to identify linguistic red flags such as euphemisms, false urgency, and persuasive language used by traffickers (Fonseca & Tiago,

2024; Furqon, 2023). This challenge is further compounded by the absence of context-specific educational interventions that focus on decoding manipulative language within the Malaysian cultural setting. A stronger understanding of how youth interpret trafficking-related content, along with their current levels of digital literacy and awareness, is necessary to design more effective and inclusive prevention strategies (Alistratova, 2023; Langer et al., 2020; Morrison, 2018).

This study is guided by two main research objectives, which are to assess the levels of general knowledge about human trafficking, understanding of traffickers' *modus operandi* on social media, digital literacy, and attitudes toward a digital culture of peace among students in higher education institutions (IPTs) and to examine the relationships between general knowledge, *modus operandi* understanding, and digital literacy.

2. METHODS

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to explore youth awareness of manipulative language in human trafficking content on social media, and to examine the relationship between their knowledge, understanding of traffickers' online strategies, and digital literacy. A self-administered structured questionnaire was used to allow statistical analysis of levels and relationships between key variables. The target population comprised students in higher education institutions (IPTs) aged 18 to 25 enrolled in higher education institutions. A total of 151 participants were selected through purposive sampling, including students from both public and private universities. This age group was chosen due to their high social media usage (DataReportal, 2023) and their vulnerability to online grooming (IOM, 2022). Additionally, they were easily reachable through institutional student networks.

The questionnaire included five sections: demographic details; general knowledge of human trafficking; understanding of *modus operandi* on social media; ability to identify manipulative messages (digital literacy); and attitudes toward a digital culture of peace. Sections B to E used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). All items were self-developed to reflect constructs relevant to the Malaysian context. Reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha showed strong internal consistency: $\alpha = 0.820$ (awareness), 0.892 (*modus operandi*), 0.823 (digital literacy), and 0.915 (culture of peace). Data were collected via Google Forms and distributed through student channels. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained. Respondents remained anonymous, and data collection lasted one week.

Data was analyzed using Jamovi software. Descriptive statistics (mean, SD, frequencies, percentages) were used to address the first research objective and question regarding youth levels of knowledge, digital skills, and peace attitudes. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to address the second objective and question, examining relationships between general knowledge, understanding of *modus operandi*, and digital literacy.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study based on data from 151 students in higher education institutions (IPTs) aged 18 to 25. Most respondents were female (77.5%), and nearly half were 18–19 years old (49.0%). The majority were diploma students (78.1%) and enrolled in private institutions (58.3%). A large portion lived in urban areas (78.8%) and were active social media users, with 33.8% spending more than 6 hours daily on social platforms.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistic and Normality Test for Key Variables (N = 151)

Variable	Mean (M)	SD	Min	Max
General Knowledge (AW)	3.80	0.71	2.17	5.00
Modus Operandi (MD)	4.00	0.76	2.40	5.00
Digital Literacy (DL)	3.80	0.72	2.00	5.00
Digital Culture of Peace (DP)	4.04	0.81	1.60	5.00

To address the first research question, descriptive statistics were used to examine four main variables: general knowledge of human trafficking (AW), understanding of modus operandi on social media (MD), digital literacy (DL), and attitudes toward a digital culture of peace (DP). Overall, youth in the sample showed high levels of awareness and positive attitudes across all domains. The mean score for AW was 3.80 (SD = 0.71), for MD was 4.00 (SD = 0.76), for DL was 3.80 (SD = 0.72), and DP was the highest at 4.04 (SD = 0.81). These results indicate that participants were generally aware of online trafficking strategies, moderately skilled in identifying manipulative content, and supportive of peace-oriented digital engagement.

Table 2: Pearson's Correlation Matrix for AW, MD, and DL (N = 151)

Variable	1	2	3
1. AW (General Knowledge)	-		
2. MD (Modus Operandi)	.777**	-	
3. DL (Digital Literacy)	.711**	.760**	-

Note. * $p < .001$ for all correlations.

AW = General Knowledge on Human Trafficking; MD = Understanding of Modus Operandi on Social Media; DL = Digital Literacy.

To answer the second research question, Pearson's correlation analysis revealed strong and statistically significant relationships between the core constructs. General knowledge (AW) was strongly correlated with understanding of modus operandi (MD), $r = .777$, $p < .001$, and with digital literacy (DL), $r = .711$, $p < .001$. Similarly, MD showed a strong correlation with DL, $r = .760$, $p < .001$. These results suggest that the more knowledgeable youth are about trafficking, the better they understand online manipulation tactics, and the more digitally literate they tend to be.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined Malaysian youth's awareness of manipulative language in human trafficking content on social media and explored how this awareness relates to digital literacy and attitudes toward a culture of peace online. The four key constructs investigated were general knowledge of human trafficking, understanding of traffickers' modus operandi, digital literacy, and supportive attitudes toward peace-oriented online behavior.

Descriptive findings revealed that youth reported relatively high levels across all variables, with the strongest response observed for attitudes toward a digital culture of peace ($M = 4.04$), followed closely by understanding of modus operandi ($M = 4.00$), and then general knowledge and digital literacy (both $M = 3.80$). These results indicate that most participants not only recognize digital threats but also value ethical and prosocial engagement online. This is consistent with previous studies, such as Morlett-Villa et al. (2024) and Rico (2022), which highlight how emotional

intelligence and discourse-based peace education promote respectful digital spaces and empower youth to resist manipulation.

The study also found strong and statistically significant correlations among the three core variables, such as general knowledge, *modus operandi* awareness, and digital literacy. The strongest relationship was between *modus operandi* awareness and digital literacy ($r = .760$), followed by general knowledge with digital literacy ($r = .711$), and general knowledge with *modus operandi* awareness ($r = .777$). Fonseca and Tiago (2024) further reinforced this view by arguing that meaningful and safe digital engagement arises not merely from digital fluency but from the ability to evaluate risks, identify manipulation, and respond critically to persuasive or coercive content.

In summary, the findings suggest that equipping youth with both factual knowledge and critical discourse awareness, particularly within their cultural context, can strengthen their digital resilience. This supports the call for education strategies that blend digital skills, emotional awareness, and issue-specific content, as emphasized by Fonseca and Tiago (2024) and Widodo et al. (2022).

5. CONCLUSION

Findings revealed that while participants generally demonstrated moderate to high awareness, their capacity to detect subtle linguistic manipulation such as emotionally charged or deceptive language, remains limited. The high mean score for attitudes toward digital peace suggests a readiness among youth to engage ethically online; however, this positive orientation must be supported by stronger critical literacy skills to effectively recognize and resist exploitation. As awareness alone is insufficient, youth must be equipped with analytical tools that allow them to question, interpret, and evaluate online messages critically.

These results highlight the need for a multi-stakeholder approach involving educators, policymakers, and civil society actors. Critical literacy should be embedded in both formal education and community-based initiatives, particularly through contextual examples of manipulative content and reflective learning activities. Empowering youth with cognitive and emotional tools such as discourse analysis, emotional intelligence, and digital ethics that can help foster resilience and social responsibility in the digital space. In doing so, we move beyond surface-level awareness toward a more informed, vigilant, and compassionate generation that actively upholds justice and peace while navigating the online world.

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