

NEGATIVE NICKNAMING PATTERNS, POSSIBLE CAUSES AND EFFECTS AMONG YOUTHS IN MALAY COMMUNITY

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Abstract. Negative nicknaming is a pervasive form of verbal bullying that significantly impacts the psychological and social development of youths. This study investigates the patterns, underlying motivations, and emotional consequences of negative nicknaming among Malay youths, with a focus on how these experiences influence identity, confidence, and peer relationships. Using a mixed-methods survey distributed to 100 students at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Pulau Pinang, the findings reveal that 66% of respondents had received negative nicknames, most commonly from friends (61%). The most prevalent nickname themes were related to physical appearance (69.45%), followed by derogatory terms targeting behavior, intelligence, sexual references, and ethnicity. Notably, motivations for negative nicknaming included teasing or mocking (48.2%), lowering self-confidence (24.4%), asserting dominance (12.9%), and expressing disapproval (11.9%). The psychological impact is evident, with many participants reporting feelings of hurt, embarrassment, and reduced self-esteem. These findings align with existing literature that frames name-calling as a mechanism of social control, exclusion, and identity distortion. Future research should explore the longitudinal impacts and cross-cultural comparisons to deepen understanding of this issue.

Keywords: *negative nicknaming, Malay youth, verbal bullying, peer relationships, self-esteem*

Introduction

Naming is a fundamental linguistic and cultural process that signifies personal, social, and cultural identity. According to Sivaraman and Barnes-Holmes (2023), naming refers to a specific instance of verbal behaviour that links objects and their labels, forming an integral part of human cognition and communication. Kroskrity (2021) further explains that naming practices vary across cultures and are influenced by historical, social, and linguistic factors. While positive nicknaming can reinforce identity (Olajimbite, 2024; Wiium and Uka, 2021), foster resilience (Wang et al., 2024), and promote social bonds (Vifah et al., 2023; Haritha and Bilquis, 2022), negative nicknaming can have significant repercussions.

Negative naming

Negative naming refers to the assignment of derogatory, stigmatising, or demeaning names that often carry social implications. It is a widespread social phenomenon that affects various age groups such as children and adolescents (Carranza-Pinedo, 2024), adults (MacLean and Strong, 2022) and elderly (Machado and Sousa, 2020). Mensah and Ndimele (2020) discuss how university students in Nigeria use negative nicknames to lampoon lecturers, reinforcing social hierarchies and evaluations of authority figures. Taji (2024) analyses Swahili nicknames, showing that they are often based on observable characteristics and serve to either praise or ridicule individuals. Similarly,

Amelia and Lestari (2024) report that verbal bullying, including name-calling, significantly affects students' confidence and social integration in schools.

Youth

For statistical purposes, the United Nations delineates 'youth' as individuals aged between 15 and 24 years, with due recognition given to alternative definitions established by Member States (UN, 2025). In the context of Malaysia, The Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia and the Malaysian Youth Council have established the age bracket for youth, ranging from 15 to 40 years following the enactment of the Youth Organizations and Youth Development Act (Act 688). Nevertheless, the enforcement of the youth age limit at 30 will only commence on January 1, 2026 (MKN, 2024).

Problem statement

There are no direct studies specifically on negative nicknaming among Malay youth in Malaysia, but related research highlights issues of verbal bullying, identity formation, and ethnic socialization that support the need for further study. One of them is by Sabramani et al. (2021) which indicates that verbal bullying is the common form of bullying among adolescents. This study highlights that 50.9% of students have experienced verbal bullying, surpassing physical, relational, and cyberbullying incidents. In addition, nicknames significantly influence personal identity and social interactions. Another by Ting (2022) exhibits peer labeling and verbal interactions among youths can significantly impact their self-esteem. While these studies do not exclusively focus on negative nicknaming among Malays, they provide a foundational understanding of how verbal interactions and naming conventions can influence social and personal dynamics in this country. This gap in research highlights the urgent need to examine negative nicknaming among Malay youth specifically, as it may have profound implications on their psychological well-being, social relationships, and identity formation. While verbal bullying has been documented, the nuanced ways in which negative nicknaming operates within Malay cultural and linguistic contexts remain underexplored in academic research.

Purpose and scope of the study

The purpose of this study is to examine the prevalence, underlying causes, and psychological and social impacts of negative nicknaming among Malay youths. While verbal bullying and derogatory labeling have been extensively studied in various cultural contexts such as in South Africa (Khetoa and Mokala, 2022), Indonesia (Dianitami et al., 2023), the United Arab Emirates (Al-Ketbi et al., 2024), the United States (Tiburtino, 2023), and Nigeria (Olajimbiti, 2024), limited research exists on how negative nicknaming manifests within the Malay linguistic and socio-cultural framework. This study seeks to fill that gap by identifying the common patterns of negative nicknaming, the motivations behind its use, and its consequences on youth self-identity, peer relationships, and emotional well-being. Specifically, it aims to explore the types of derogatory names used among Malay youths, the contexts in which they occur, and the social and psychological factors that contribute to their usage. Finally, the study investigates potential strategies to mitigate the negative effects of nicknaming and to promote a more respectful and inclusive social environment. By addressing these objectives, the research offers valuable insights into the role of

negative nicknaming in shaping youth experiences and contributes to the development of strategies to foster a healthier social climate within the Malay community.

Research question

The Research questions are include: (1) What are the common patterns and types of negative nicknames used among Malay youths? (2) What are the possible motivations and social factors influencing negative nicknaming? (3) What are the psychological and social effects of negative nicknaming on self-identity, emotional well-being, and peer relationships?

Literature review

Examples and patterns of negative naming

The primary motivations behind negative naming include social control, ethnocentrism, discrimination, and resilience-building. In many societies, derogatory nicknames are used as tools to enforce behavioural norms. Basotho communities, for instance, assign negative names to individuals engaged in criminal or immoral activities to publicly shame them and deter similar behaviour in others (Khetoa and Mokala, 2022). Likewise, in Javanese culture, nicknames can be used to mock individuals for their physical traits or personality, reinforcing certain beauty standards and behavioural expectations (Dianitami et al., 2023). In UAE, the most common types of verbal and emotional bullying include bad name-calling, experienced by 84% of bullied students in private schools and 78% in public schools (Al-Ketbi et al., 2024). Ethnocentrism and internalized racism also play a significant role in negative naming. In Western societies, individuals with ethnically distinctive names often face discrimination, leading them to modify or shorten their names to align with dominant cultural norms. Tiburtino (2023) discusses how this phenomenon reflects broader power structures, where Anglo-centric naming conventions are favoured in professional and academic settings. Studies show that job applicants with non-Western names receive fewer interview callbacks, reinforcing racial bias in employment (Tiburtino, 2023). Additionally, negative naming can serve as a form of psychological adaptation among marginalized groups. Nigerian street children adopt nicknames that highlight strength and resilience, using these names as psychological shields against the adversities of street life (Olajimbiti, 2024). While these names help foster a sense of belonging, they also reinforce the harsh realities of street culture, where only those perceived as strong are accepted. This paradox highlights the complex role of negative naming as both a coping mechanism and a perpetuator of social exclusion.

Causes of negative naming

The primary motivations behind negative naming include social control, ethnocentrism, discrimination, and resilience-building. In many societies, derogatory nicknames are used as tools to enforce behavioural norms. Basotho communities, for instance, assign negative names to individuals engaged in criminal or immoral activities to publicly shame them and deter similar behaviour in others (Khetoa and Mokala, 2022). Likewise, in Javanese culture, nicknames can be used to mock individuals for their physical traits or personality, reinforcing certain beauty standards and behavioural expectations (Dianitami et al., 2023). Similarly, Al-Ketbi et al. (2024) in their study

among UAE students found that around 25% were verbally bullied due to their facial appearance, 18% were targeted for their weight and 19% were verbally harassed for being weak or nerdy. Previous study found similar patterns as non-conformity in terms of appearance, physical traits and behaviour became the reason why negative labelling was given. Ethnocentrism and internalized racism also play a significant role in negative naming. In Western societies, individuals with ethnically distinctive names often face discrimination, leading them to modify or shorten their names to align with dominant cultural norms. Tiburtino (2023) discusses how this phenomenon reflects broader power structures, where Anglo-centric naming conventions are favoured in professional and academic settings. Studies show that job applicants with non-Western names receive fewer interview callbacks, reinforcing racial bias in employment (Tiburtino, 2023). Additionally, negative naming can serve as a form of psychological adaptation among marginalized groups. Nigerian street children adopt nicknames that highlight strength and resilience, using these names as psychological shields against the adversities of street life (Olajimbiti, 2024). While these names help foster a sense of belonging, they also reinforce the harsh realities of street culture, where only those perceived as strong are accepted. This paradox highlights the complex role of negative naming as both a coping mechanism and a perpetuator of social exclusion.

Effects of negative naming

The consequences of negative naming extend beyond individual psychological distress to broader social and economic disadvantages. Studies indicate that individuals subjected to derogatory nicknaming often experience lower self-esteem, increased anxiety, and depression. Ethnic minorities who face frequent mispronunciations or forced name changes report feelings of embarrassment and exclusion, leading to decreased participation in educational and professional settings (Tiburtino, 2023). Similarly, individuals given stigmatizing nicknames based on their health status or behaviour face social isolation and reduced access to support networks (Khetoa and Mokala, 2022). Al-Ketbi et al. (2024) also reported similar effects as the UAE students who were verbally abused were found to be emotionally disturbed as they were enveloped in distress and sadness. Economically, negative naming can result in discrimination in hiring and workplace advancement. Research on employment discrimination reveals that applicants with traditionally non-Western names are less likely to be hired, even when their qualifications are identical to those of applicants with Anglo-sounding names (Tiburtino, 2023). This systemic bias forces individuals to alter their names, often at the cost of losing their cultural identity. Furthermore, negative naming contributes to cultural displacement and identity struggles. Ethnic minorities who modify their names to assimilate into dominant cultures often experience internal conflicts, as they navigate between their given names and adopted identities depending on social contexts. This phenomenon highlights the long-term psychological impact of negative naming, as individuals feel pressured to distance themselves from their cultural heritage to gain social acceptance (Tiburtino, 2023).

In marginalized communities, negative naming can also perpetuate social exclusion. Basotho individuals labeled with derogatory nicknames often face ostracization, limiting their access to social and economic opportunities (Khetoa and Mokala, 2022). Similarly, in Nigerian street culture, children with names that signify weakness or vulnerability are often targets of bullying and exploitation (Olajimbiti, 2024). These patterns demonstrate how negative naming reinforces existing social hierarchies and

deepens inequalities. Labelling theory, originally formalised by Lemert and later expanded by scholars such as Lilly et al. (2007), emphasizes how individuals are identified and categorised based on behaviors deemed deviant or non-conforming by society. The theory outlines two fundamental stages: the processes that lead to the application of a label and the consequences that follow (Thomson, 2008). It particularly focuses on the power dynamics of who assigns the label and how this affects the labelled individual's self-concept and behaviour (Thomas, 1997). Once label is applied, individuals often conform to the expectations associated with it resulting in what is known as self-fulfilling prophecy (Lilly et al., 2007). This dynamic can profoundly shape a person's self-identity, as labels assigned influence how a person perceive himself and herself and behave accordingly.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a survey research design to explore the patterns, causes, and effects of negative nicknaming among students at UiTM Pulau Pinang. A survey approach is appropriate for gathering quantitative and qualitative data from a large sample (Taherdoost, 2021). This allows for the identification of trends, attitudes, and experiences related to nicknaming. By using both closed-ended and open-ended questions, the study ensures a structured yet flexible approach, enabling respondents to express their perspectives beyond predefined options. The study utilizes a random sampling method to ensure an unbiased representation of students from both diploma and degree levels at UiTM Pulau Pinang. According to Noor et al. (2022), this approach "ensures unbiased, representative, and equal probability of the population". A total of 100 students participated in the survey, providing a diverse dataset reflective of different academic backgrounds, experiences, and exposure to nicknaming practices. Random sampling enhances the generalizability of the findings, allowing for insights that are applicable to the broader student population. Data collection is conducted using a Google Form survey, which includes both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions capture quantitative data regarding common nicknaming practices, their frequency, and students' perceptions of their impact. Meanwhile, the open-ended section allows respondents to elaborate on their experiences, providing qualitative insights that might not be covered in the structured response options. This mixed-method approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon by combining statistical trends with personal narratives (Dawadi et al., 2021). The collected survey data undergoes both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The closed-ended responses are analysed using descriptive statistics to identify common nicknaming patterns and prevalence rates among students. The open-ended responses are subjected to thematic analysis, where key themes are identified to explore the factors contributing to negative nicknaming. Additionally, the study examines the causes and effects of negative naming on respondents, highlighting its psychological, social, and academic implications. By integrating both numerical and thematic analysis, the study provides a holistic view of negative nicknaming and its impact on university students.

Results and Discussion

The common patterns and types of negative nicknames used among Malay youths

Out of the total respondents, 66 individuals (approximately 66%) reported that they had received a negative nickname, while 34 individuals (around 34%) stated that they had not. This data highlights that a significant majority of respondents have experienced negative naming, suggesting that such labeling is a prevalent issue within the group surveyed. Additionally, from data collected, the majority of negative naming incidents come from friends (61%), followed by family (10%), strangers (10%), and teachers (1%). From the qualitative analysis nicknames can be categorized into several themes, primarily targeting physical appearance, intelligence, behaviour, animal references, sexual terms, ethnicity, and other random or unclear classifications. The most common category given at 69.45% is physical appearance, where terms such as *demok*, *gemok*, *gendut*, *lebar*, and *lebih muatan* all highlight overweight-related stigmatization, while *orang lidi* and *keding* target individuals perceived as underweight. Similarly, nicknames like *boy kecil* and *pendek* are used to mock short stature. Facial features like *jongang* (protruding teeth) or *sepet* (slanted eyes) also become points of ridicule. A particularly dehumanising category is animal and creature references, where individual's physical features or traits are likened to animals such as *tapir*, *itik* (duck), *kera* (monkey), *kuda* (horse), *burung kakak tua* (cockatoos) and even mythical beings like *goblin*. Such comparisons reduce a person to something less than human, serving as a form of mockery and ridicule. In Thai culture, using an animal as a nickname for a person may indicate closeness in a relationship, however at the same time, it may also be a form of insult as these names address vividly the person's physical attributes which are reflected in the animals referred to (Tawichai, 2023). In the intelligence and personality category, nicknames focus on perceived mental capacity and demeanor is at 8.33%. Terms like *bodoh* and *dumb bum* directly insult intelligence, while *lembap* (slow) and *membosankan* (boring) criticise a person's mannerisms or lack of enthusiasm. These nicknames based on physical and personality traits were not only used as mocking tools to undermine a person, but at the same time may impose a standard to beauty, similar to those found in the study of Javanese nicknames by Dianitami et al. (2023).

Another category at 9.72% includes cursed word, sexual and genital terms and where individuals are labeled as annoying (*sial*, *beler*), cowardly (*pondan*), *pompuan murah* (cheap/promiscuous woman) or even illegitimate (*anak haram*). Additionally, sexual and genital terms such as *kontol* and *totey* add an element of vulgarity, often used to shame or insult. These nicknames reflect social prejudices and can lead to marginalization. This finding aligns with Setyaningtias et al. (2023), who conducted a descriptive qualitative study on the use of swearing words among multicultural youth living in dormitories in Indonesia. The researchers identified five dominant types of swearing words used by students which include obscenity, abusive, blasphemy, expletive, and humorous. Terms in the obscenity and abusive categories such as references to genitalia (*teling*, *butuh*, *konak*) and degrading insults (*sunal*, *kampang*, *bujang inam*) were frequently used to express anger and annoyance, often with the intent to insult or humiliate. Meanwhile, ethnicity-related nicknames (6.94%) such as *hitam* or *Keling*, *Cina bukit* or *anak Cina* reflect racial biases directed toward individuals of Indian and Chinese descent respectively. These labels perpetuate stereotypes and social exclusion. For instance, *Keling* has long been considered a derogatory term used to marginalize Indians in Malaysia, and while its usage is less overt today, variations like *Beling* still carry the same pejorative connotations. Similarly, nicknames like *Bing Bong* mock the tonal qualities of Chinese speech, reinforcing racial caricatures. These examples illustrate how ethnic labels function as

slurs that diminish identity and reinforce discrimination in Malaysian society (Fong, 2024).

The primary motivations and social factors influencing negative nicknaming

The most significant reason for giving a nickname is to tease or mock the person (48.2%), showing that nearly half of respondents recognize name-calling as a means of ridicule (*Figure 1*). Closely following this, 24.4% of respondents stated that nicknames are used to make a person lose confidence, emphasising the damaging psychological impact that negative labels can have on self-esteem and personal identity. Another 12.9% of respondents admitted that nicknaming is used to assert power or dominance over the person. This suggests that negative nicknames can function as a form of social control, where certain individuals use derogatory labels to establish superiority over others. Additionally, 11.9% reported that nicknames are given to express disapproval or dislike, further proving that name-calling is frequently used as a means of exclusion or rejection. On the less significant end, only 2.1% of respondents indicated that nicknames are given to joke around, suggesting that truly harmless nicknaming is relatively uncommon. The least significant factor, at just 0.5%, is the use of nicknames to differentiate a person from others, showing that practical and neutral purposes for nicknaming are rare compared to its more negative applications. Unlike Dianitami et al. (2023) whose study found that nicknames were given to express intimate relationships, this study witnessed more unfavorable motives.

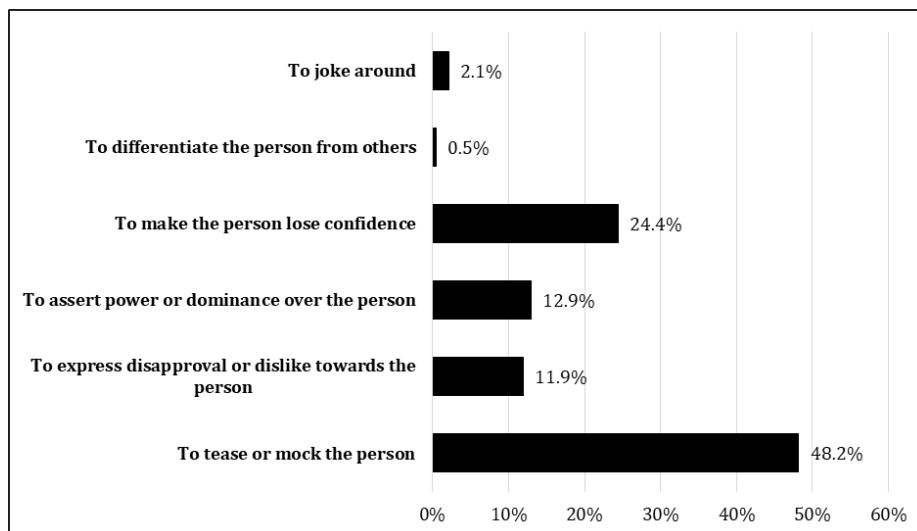


Figure 1. *The intention(s) behind giving a person a negative nickname.*

The decision to give someone a negative nickname is influenced by various factors. The most significant factor, at 28.9%, is physical traits (*Figure 2*). This suggests that individuals are most frequently given negative nicknames based on attributes such as body size, height, facial features, or skin color. Closely following this, 23.2% of negative nicknames are based on a person's appearance. While similar to physical traits, this factor may also include fashion choices, grooming, or overall presentation. The third most significant factor is personality traits, accounting for 18.1% of cases. This suggests that people are often labeled negatively based on their behaviours, mannerisms, or perceived intelligence. Dianitami et al. (2023) in their study found that

nicknames received playing on appearance and physical traits subtly hold the societal ideals of beauty and expected conduct. A less frequent but still notable influence is inside jokes or shared experiences, which account for 16.5% of negative nicknames. This indicates that some nicknames originate from personal interactions, humorous incidents, or memorable moments within a specific social group. The least significant factor, at 13.3%, is difficulty in pronouncing a person's name. This suggests that individuals with unique or non-local names may be subjected to negative nicknaming simply because their names are unfamiliar or challenging for others to say correctly.

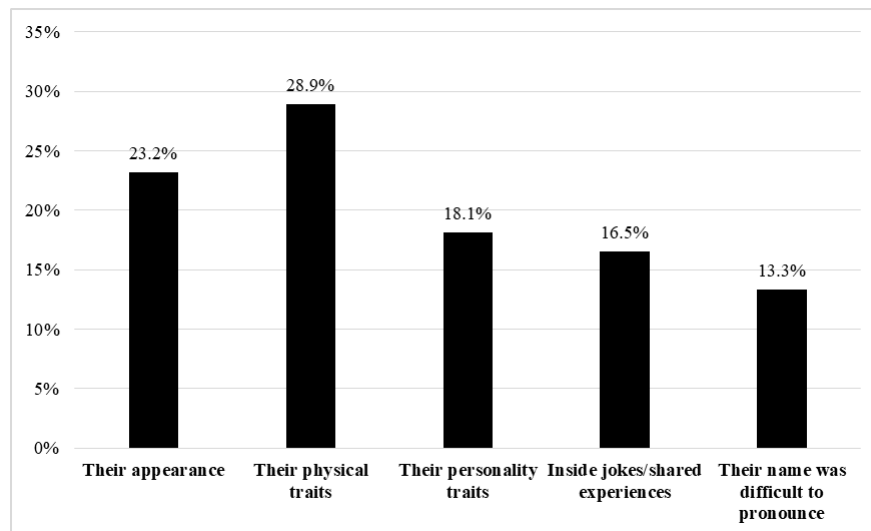


Figure 2. Factors influencing someone's decisions when giving others a negative nickname.

The psychological and social effects of negative nicknaming on self-identity, emotional well-being and peer relationships

A person may be emotionally affected by the negative nicknames given to them. The most reported feeling when nicknamed negatively is hurt or offended (31.8%). Closely following this are feeling less confident with oneself (28.4%) and embarrassed (27.7%). 11.4% of the respondents felt that when given a negative nickname, a person may also feel alienated or excluded. Only 0.7% thought that this made them feel angry. Rather than anger, the victims of negative nicknaming are more prone to feel hurt or offended. According to Kauth (2021) feeling hurt or offended may damage a person's mental well-being and lead to serious depression. This shows how negative nicknaming has seriously affected a person's emotional health (*Figure 3*).

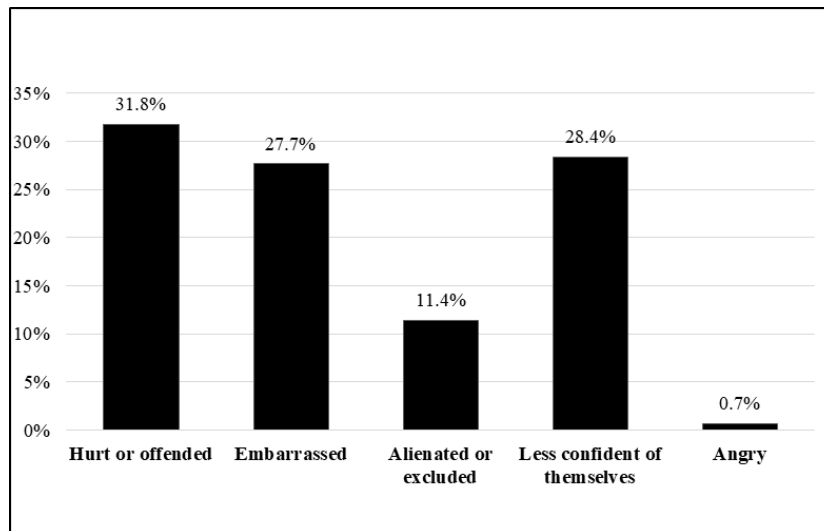


Figure 3. Effects of negative nicknaming.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the prevalence and multifaceted nature of negative nicknaming among Malay youths, revealing its deep psychological and social implications. With 66% of respondents reporting that they had been subjected to negative nicknames, the findings demonstrate that such verbal labeling is far from an isolated phenomenon. Most nicknames are given by peers, with 61% citing friends as the primary source. The dominant category of nicknames, at 69.45%, targets physical appearance, reflecting societal standards and stigmas related to body size, height, facial features, and skin tone. These labels function as tools of body shaming and colorism, echoing the findings of Wansink and Wansink (2023), who noted that being overweight was the most frequently targeted feature in body-shaming behaviours. Additionally, dehumanising references to animals and mythical creatures, as noted by Tawichai (2023), reduce individuals to caricatures, reinforcing ridicule and social exclusion. Furthermore, ethnicity-based nicknames comprising 6.94% of cases reflect entrenched racial biases, aligning with Fong (2024), who documented how such terms continue to perpetuate ethnic stereotypes and marginalisation in Malaysian society. Motivations for such nicknaming further reveal the intentionality behind these acts. Nearly half (48.2%) of respondents admitted that teasing or mocking was the primary reason for giving nicknames, followed by attempts to lower confidence (24.4%), assert dominance (12.9%), and express disapproval (11.9%). These findings support the broader literature that frames verbal teasing and negative labeling as instruments of social control and exclusion (Carranza-Pinedo, 2024; Li, 2020).

The psychological toll of these nicknames is significant. The most common emotional response reported was feeling hurt or offended (31.8%), followed closely by lowered self-confidence (28.4%) and embarrassment (27.7%). These effects mirror Amelia and Lestari (2024) findings, which show that verbal bullying, including nicknaming, undermines youths' self-worth and contributes to social withdrawal. In light of these findings, negative nicknaming should not be dismissed as harmless teasing or cultural norm. Instead, it must be recognised as a form of verbal bullying that contributes to social inequality, emotional distress, and fractured peer relationships. As suggested by Wang et al. (2024), promoting positive identity development through

inclusive language and respectful communication is essential in fostering healthier youth environments. Future research should explore the long-term psychological effects of negative nicknaming on Malay youths and its impact on their academic and professional development. Comparative studies across different cultural and linguistic groups can provide deeper insights into how negative nicknaming operates in diverse social contexts. Additionally, further research can investigate the effectiveness of intervention strategies and develop best practices for reducing the prevalence of negative nicknaming in society. By addressing these issues, society can work towards fostering a more respectful and inclusive environment, ensuring that negative nicknaming does not hinder personal growth and social cohesion among Malay youths.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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