

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Challenges in Regulating Emotion among Malaysian Adolescents: A Qualitative Secondary Data Analysis

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### ABSTRAK

Zaman remaja dianggap sebagai sebuah fasa kritikal untuk pengurusan emosi (ER) dalam perkembangan manusia. Dalam beberapa tahun kebelakangan ini, topik berkaitan ER remaja dan cabaran yang mereka hadapi semakin mendapat perhatian meluas. Tiada kajian yang meneliti secara khusus cabaran dan pengalaman remaja dalam mengawal emosi di Malaysia. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk meneroka pengalaman dan cabaran yang berkaitan dengan pengawalan emosi dalam kalangan remaja di Malaysia. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan analisis data sekunder menggunakan perbincangan empat kumpulan fokus dan 14 perbincangan mendalam yang melibatkan 24 pelajar sekolah menengah rendah di seluruh Malaysia. Tema-tema yang muncul dikenal pasti daripada kod-kod berulang yang ditemui dalam data yang dikumpulkan dan seterusnya dikenal pasti sebagai elemen-elemen yang berkaitan dengan cabaran dan pengalaman dalam pengawalan emosi. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa remaja menghadapi cabaran tertentu dalam mengawal emosi, terutamanya disebabkan oleh faktor ibu bapa, masalah akademik, konflik dengan adik-beradik dan tekanan rakan sebaya. Penggunaan pengekangan ekspresi emosi (ES) jelas kelihatan dalam kalangan remaja ini, di mana ada yang terbukti memberi manfaat dan ada yang tidak bersifat adaptif. Penggunaan ES sebahagian besarnya didorong oleh nilai-nilai budaya yang

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*menekankan tentang kerisauan atas penolakan oleh masyarakat. Dapatan kajian ini menekankan kepentingan menangani cabaran-cabaran ini dan keperluan penglibatan guru-guru dan ibu bapa untuk mempromosikan kesejahteraan emosi yang lebih baik dalam kalangan remaja.*

**Kata kunci:** *Pengekangan ekspresi emosi; pengurusan emosi; remaja*

## ABSTRACT

Adolescence is recognised as a critical phase for emotion regulation in human development. In recent years, there has been growing interest in how adolescents regulate their emotions and its challenges. Up to this date, no previous study has explored the challenges and experiences among Malaysian adolescents in regulating emotion. The objective of this study was to explore the experiences and challenges associated with regulating emotion among Malaysian adolescents. This study employed a qualitative approach using secondary data analysis employing four focus group discussions and 14 in-depth interviews involving 24 junior high school students across Malaysia. Emergent themes were identified from recurring codes in the data collected and then identified as elements related to challenges and experiences in regulating emotions. Study revealed adolescents encountered certain challenges in regulating emotion, particularly due to parental factors, academic struggles, siblings' conflict and peer pressure. The use of expressive suppression (ES) was evident among these adolescents, some proved to be beneficial, and some to be maladaptive. ES use is mainly driven by cultural values emphasising fear of rejection by society. The findings underline the importance of addressing these challenges and the need for societal involvement, especially teachers and parents, to promote better emotional well-being among adolescents.

**Keywords:** Adolescents; emotional regulation; expressive suppression

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## INTRODUCTION

### Adolescence

Adolescence is recognised widely as a critical phase in human development, marked by significant biological, physiological and social changes. Typically ranging from ages 10 to 19 (World Health Organisation 2019), this period is a bridge between childhood and adulthood, where individuals undergo rapid physical growth, cognitive advancements and emotional maturation. Granville Stanley Hall, frequently referred to as the "father of adolescence", described this stage as a period of "storm and stress", marked by emotional turbulence and heightened sensitivity to peer

influence before establishing a more stable equilibrium in adulthood (Arnett 2006).

Biologically, adolescence is marked by the onset of puberty, driven by hormonal changes that result in secondary sexual characteristics and reproductive maturity. The brain also undergoes significant remodeling during this period, particularly in the prefrontal cortex, which plays a crucial role in executive functions such as decision-making, impulse control and emotion regulation (ER) (Blakemore & Choudhury 2006). These neural changes underpin the cognitive and emotional shifts seen during adolescence, contributing to the increased capacity for abstract thinking, self-reflection, and developing a more complex

self-identity.

Psychologically, adolescence is a time of identity formation, as Erik Erikson proposed in his theory of psychosocial development. According to Erikson, the primary task of adolescence is to resolve the crisis of identity versus role confusion. Identity is achieved if the adolescents are supported in their exploration and given the freedom to explore different roles leading to a coherent sense of self, which is influenced by a range of factors, including familial relationships, peer interactions and cultural context (Marcia 2016).

Socially, adolescence involves the renegotiation of relationships with parents, peers and society at large. Parental guidance and support remain crucial for positive development outcomes in adolescence. Peer relationships are also equally important, providing a context for social learning, emotional support and the development of social skills (Brown & Larson 2009).

### Emotion and Its Regulation

Campos and colleagues described emotion as the attempt by a person to establish, maintain, change or terminate the relation between the person and the environment on matters of significance to the person (Campos et al. 1994). Although emotion seems to regulate individuals in the face of challenges, it itself is regulated by extrinsic or intrinsic processes.

Emotional regulation, as defined by Gross (1998) refers to “the processes by which individuals influence the emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions”. According to him, there are two ways of regulating an emotion, which are antecedent-focused (e.g. attentional deployment) and response-focused (e.g. expressive suppression/ES) (Gross 1998). Antecedent-focused strategies include

situation selection and situation modification, attentional deployment, and cognitive change. Meanwhile, response-focused strategies occur after emotional responses are generated. This strategy comprises response modulation, where an individual tries to suppress the expression or the experience of emotion (Petrova & Gross 2024).

Emotional regulation plays a vital role in maintaining mental health and well-being, particularly during adolescence, when individuals are learning to adaptively manage emotional responses to external stimuli. As they mature, they become less dependent on parental guidance and increasingly use internal strategies to manage their emotions effectively (Gross 2001). The maturation of higher-order cortical functions enhances inhibitory control over subcortical emotional processes, despite the presence of both inhibitory and excitatory mechanisms in emotional arousal across different levels of the central nervous system (Ernst 2014). However, when emotional regulation becomes impaired, particularly when negative emotions are not effectively balanced, in the face of complex challenges, it can lead to maladaptive behaviours (Lanfredi et al. 2021) and subsequently mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, mood disorders and behavioural problems (Blakemore 2019).

Emotional dysregulation is defined as the relative absence of process that involves 4 dimensions which are awareness and understanding of one’s emotions, acceptance of one’s emotions, ability to control impulsive behaviours when leaving negative emotions, and capability to use appropriate ER strategies to achieve desired goals (Ciuluvica et al. 2019). Emotional dysregulation can happen when efforts to manage negative or distressing emotions are not sufficiently balanced by the experience of positive and pleasurable emotions (De Berardis et al. 2020). Reduced

capacities to downregulate heightened negative affects are present in both anxiety and depression, while reduced ability to regulate positive affect may be more specific to depressive disorder (Werner-Seidler et al. 2013).

Combination of parental factors, academic pressure and peer pressure have been associated with emotional dysregulation among adolescents. Parental behaviours, such as having high expectations and authoritarian parenting styles, can contribute to emotional instability when adolescents struggle to meet these expectations (Camisasca et al. 2022). Academic pressure can impair self-control and exacerbate emotional and behavioural issues. As students grapple with academic challenges, they faced peer dynamics such as social rejection and peer pressure, which can further disrupt their emotional regulation (King et al. 2018; Steare et al. 2023). Negative parent-child interactions and conflicts between them have been noted to influence the adverse effects of academic and peer stressors on emotional health, leading to psychiatric illness (Jiang et al. 2022).

Despite the significance of emotional regulation during adolescence, limited research has focused on the challenges faced by Malaysian adolescents particularly, especially concerning the use of ES as a regulatory strategy. A study demonstrated how ES accentuated shame proneness experienced by Asian adolescents and guilt proneness among the Western adolescents. Both shame and guilt proneness are related to suppression, which in turn directly related to mental health conditions such as depression (Liw et al. 2022).

This study aimed to fill this gap by exploring adolescents' experiences, challenges in regulating their daily emotions and insights on how Malaysian adolescents manage their emotions through in-depth interviews (IDIs)

and focus group discussions (FGDs). This study also explored the mechanism of ES which emerged from interviews and discussions. The study also hoped to instill insights and empathy among parents on the challenges and mechanisms their adolescent children employ in daily life. By highlighting the topics of challenges in emotional regulation and ES, this study hoped to contribute to the future development of an effective social-emotional learning framework which is being developed in the parent study.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our research focuses on Malaysian adolescents' perspective based on their knowledge and experience on challenges in regulating their own emotions. Qualitative approach is considered the best approach to answer this research question as it offers greater capacity to gain more depth and meaning on what sort of experiences and challenges faced.

This study employed qualitative secondary analysis using secondary qualitative data collected by another research studying ER strategies among Malaysian adolescents. This study was one of the four sub-projects under a parent study, with an overarching aim to establish a learning module on ERs among adolescents. Data from IDIs and FGDs of 24 junior high school students were analysed.

### Data Collection

For this study, the secondary data was sourced from interview transcripts of an ongoing study exploring the ER strategies among Malaysian adolescents. Part of the semi-structured interview from the ongoing study was discussing challenges among adolescents in regulating their own emotions. Semi-structured interviews are an effective method

that can offer participants the opportunity to elaborate, providing insight into participant's perspectives, and deep exploration of their own thoughts and experience about a particular topic (DeJonckheere & Vaughn 2019).

The secondary data involved 4 FGDs and 14 IDIs involving secondary school students under the Ministry of Education (MOE) or attending private schools. The primary researcher received ethics approval from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and MOE for data collections. Schools were chosen from six geographical zones across Malaysia: North, South, East Coast, West Coast, Sabah and Sarawak. After selecting schools within these zones, purposive sampling was used to identify participants. The relevant authorities such as school counsellor were engaged to recruit the participants. Poster containing study information, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and a link to a Google Form containing the Patient Information Sheets (PIS) and Consent Form was distributed through school authorities. Parents who wished their children to participate completed the consent form online.

Inclusion criteria of this study included adolescents who were (i) Malaysian; (ii) aged 13 to 14; and (iii) attending schools (public or private). The researcher did not set any conditions related to the choice of gender, race, and religion for the student's participation, which meant that male and female students as well as various races and religions had the same opportunity to be selected as respondents. Students with special needs, having cognitive difficulties, or currently receiving psychological treatment were excluded. A total of 24 students, aged 13 to 14 years, agreed to take part in the study.

Data was gathered through a series of one-on-one IDIs and FGDs, mostly conducted online via Zoom version 5.6.0-5.9.0 (Zoom

Communications, Inc., San Jose, United States) during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2021. The FGDs consisted of either 2 or 3 participants, with each participant coming from either the same or different schools. Participants were interviewed in either IDI or FGD form. The interviews were conducted according to the validated interview guide prepared by the primary researcher which consisted of a set of questions that the researcher planned to cover while allowing some flexibility for follow-up questions based on the responses.

Both IDIs and FGDs were carried out by a group of researchers which included a primary researcher who had undergone a qualitative study training course, along with experts consisted of two consultant psychiatrists, a family medicine specialist with expertise in qualitative study and a clinical psychologist with expertise in developmental psychology and had qualitative study experiences. The interviews were conducted in Malay language and were conducted for 1 hour 30 minutes. Using both IDIs and FGDs helped to produce rich and comprehensive qualitative data. FGDs enabled dynamic discussions among participants, capturing a wide array of experiences, while one-on-one IDIs allowed for detailed exploration of these experiences, minimising concerns about social desirability.

In the present study, all IDIs and FGDs were video recorded through Zoom application and transcribed verbatim to language spoken. The primary researcher, along with the experts, transcribed the recordings using Microsoft Words Word version 365 (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, United States) The transcriptions included descriptions of significant non-verbal communication e.g., laughs, long pause. Finally, the primary researcher and the experts repeatedly reviewed the transcript to ensure accuracy. Each transcript was reviewed against the audio

recording at least twice.

To ensure confidentiality, personal identifiers (e.g., names) were replaced with numbers (e.g., Participant 3), and home addresses were generalised to states where participants resided. The Zoom recording was password-protected and remained accessible due to the ongoing manuscript writing process by the primary researcher.

The participants' length of interviews was decided by data saturation, whereby data collection was continued until no more new data repeats collected from each participant, and no further new themes can be found in the data analysis (Saunders et al. 2023).

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Univeristi Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) with reference number UKM PPI/111/8/JEP-2021-182.

**Data Analysis**

The interviews were conducted in Malay language and had been transcribed into the same language as described earlier and then coded in English. The data was analysed using thematic analysis facilitated by Nvivo 14 (Lumivero, Denver, United States), a qualitative data analysis software. The data were analysed through six phases of analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) in a recursive process. After going through the iterative process of data analysis through constant comparisons, reflections, modifications and adjustments throughout the coding process with two supervisors which one of them was a consultant psychiatrist, the findings were finalised and presented. As stated earlier, data saturation was determined until no more new data was repeated from each participant and no further new themes could be found.

**RESULTS**

**Demographic Data**

The summary of the demographic data was listed in Table 1. The demographic profile of the research consisted of 24 participants and the categories were divided into gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and geographical zone.

In terms of gender, the subjects consisted of 10 males (44%) and 14 females (56%). With respect to age, the majority of participants (64%) were 14 years old (n = 16) while 13 years old accounted for 32% (n = 8). The ethnic composition of the participants showed a majority of Malay participants (n = 13), representing 52% of the sample, while other ethnic groups made up 36% (n = 9 participants), and minority ethnic groups were much smaller in representation. The socioeconomic status of participants showed

TABLE 1: Summary of demographic data

Characteristics	No. (%)
Gender	
Boy	10 (42%)
Girls	14 (58%)
Age (year)	
13	8 (33%)
14	16 (67%)
Ethnicity	
Malay	13 (54%)
Chinese	1 (4%)
Indian	1 (4%)
Others	9 (38%)
Zones	
Peninsular Malaysia	15 (63%)
Sabah & Sarawak	9 (37%)
Interview type	
In-depths Interviews (IVI)	14 (78%)
Focus Group Discussion (FGD)	4 (22%)
Socio-economic status	
Low Income	11 (46%)
Middle Income	8 (33%)
High Income	5 (21%)

that low-income households form the largest group (n = 11, 44%). Lastly, in terms of geographical zone, most participants (n = 15, 60%) were from Peninsular Malaysia, while the remaining 9 participants (36%) were from Sabah and Sarawak. This distribution reflected the effort from the primary researcher's attempt to capture regional differences and suggested a balanced effort to include voices from both Peninsular Malaysia and the less urbanised Sabah and Sarawak region. Regarding interview types, the study conducted 14 IDIs and 4 FGDs.

### Experiences in Regulating Emotions

Based on transcripts on both IDIs and FGDs comprising 24 participants in total, majority of them (n=19) experienced emotional regulation difficulties at some time in their life. Some participants described how they experienced difficulties in handling their own emotions:

*"I had to hold back my tears when I wanted to cry..."*

(Participant 3, FGD 1)

### Challenges in Regulating Emotion

In exploring obstacles that led to ER difficulties among participants, several themes emerged from the verbatim. A summary of each main themes and subthemes of the challenges in regulating emotion was listed in a thematic tree in Figure 1. Detailed description of each subtheme from the 4 main themes was described below:

#### (i) Challenges in regulating emotion related to parental factor

- Parents were busy with their responsibilities

Few participants seemed to be having difficulties in regulating their emotions when they felt that their parents were too busy with everyday life, which led to difficulties talking about their feelings and thoughts to them.

*"At times I feel sad and hurtful. But it's okay as my **parents seem to be busy** due to lots of responsibilities, such as taking care of my younger siblings."*

(Participant 10, FGD 4)

- Parents set a high expectation

Parents who had high expectations seemed to be affecting their children in regulating emotion, as participant 3 described how her parents having high expectations of her in terms of academic performance, that led her to feel being dismissed or invalidated.

*"I don't talk to my parents about any stressful issues, because I guess my parents didn't understand about it and **would prioritise my grades above my mental health.**"*

(Participant 3, FGD 1)

- Parents practiced authoritarian style of parenting

Some parents practiced an authoritarian style of parenting, which led to difficulties in adolescents as parents set rigid rules with no explanation and expect children to obey them without arguing. Participant 8 described what she understood on strict parenting style,

*"Some parents are strict that made their children have to toe to their lines. **They have arranged everything for them**, but somehow certain children were unhappy about it. These parents refused to listen to their children's explanation."*

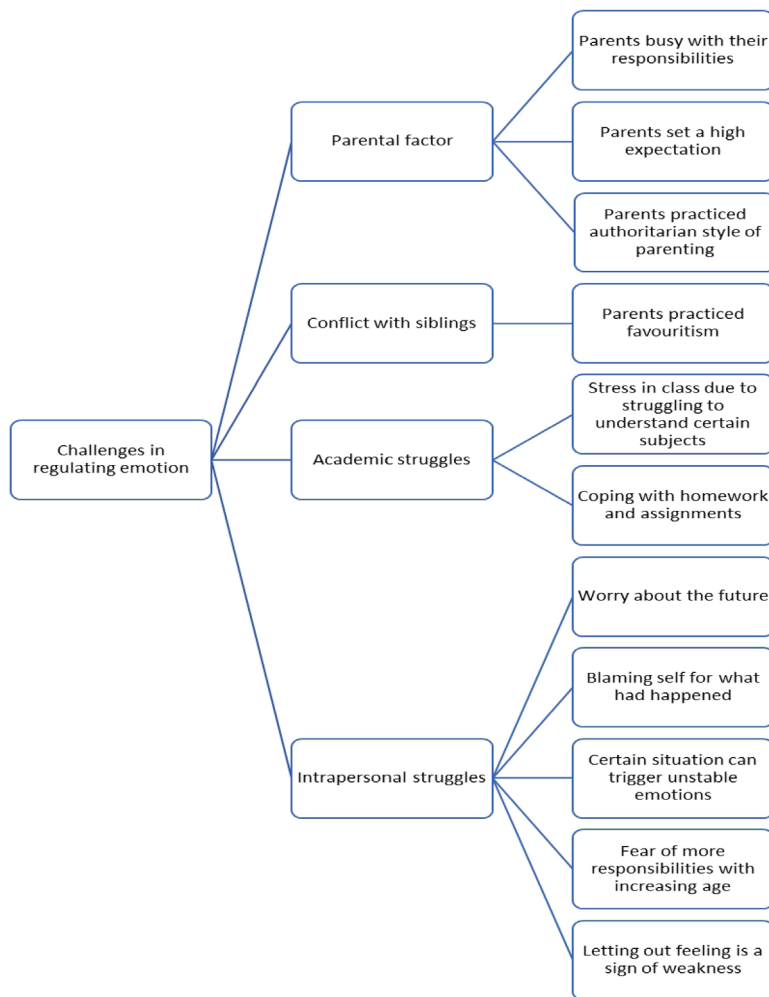


FIGURE 1: Themes and subthemes of the challenges in regulating emotion

**(ii) Challenges in regulating emotion related to conflict with sibling(s)**

Another common theme that came up was conflict with siblings.

- Parents practiced favouritism  
Some participants described how favouritism was practiced by their parents, resulting in them to have problems regulating emotions at home.

*“When my younger sibling did wrong, myself as the eldest bore the fault as well.”*

(Participant 11, FGD 4)

**(iii) Challenges in regulating emotion related to academic struggles**

- Stress in class due to struggling to understand certain subjects  
Apart from challenges described by participants at home, they were also struggling



with academic matters. Participant 3 described how she felt the same in class,

*“Sometimes in class, I suddenly feel out of place and worthless because I can’t understand what the teacher is teaching. Then, I feel guilty because I’m not as smart as my older sister.”*

- Coping with homework and assignments  
Issues with homework and assignments also seemed to be one of the challenges associated with academic struggles. One of the participants mentioned,

*“I’m having unstable emotion especially when my teacher suddenly told us to pass up the assignments as soon as possible. I felt stressed. When I’m stressed, I tend to become angry.”*

(Participant 7, FGD 3)

#### (iv) Challenges in regulating emotion related to intrapersonal struggles

Internal conflicts had been a recurring theme among the participants as well.

- Worry about the future  
Participant 13 described how academic challenges shaped his thought that he feared that he would fail all major examinations.

*“When I’m alone, I am worried about what will happen in the future. Sometime later I will sit for major examinations, and I have this negative thought what happen to my life if I fail these exams...”*

(Participant 13, IVI 3)

- Blaming self for what had happened  
Participant 1 seemed to be having difficulties regulating her emotions that led her to blame herself for situations that had happened

especially related to conflict with family members at home.

*“Once I got really angry with my sister after an argument that I ended up blaming myself for what had happened, then I did harm myself...”*

(Participant 1, IVI 1)

- Certain situations can trigger unstable emotions

Participant 9 described how he had difficulties in controlling his anger in certain situation that happened abruptly.

*“When someone made sudden mistake, I became really angry especially when my friend doesn’t know how to play football as a team and when my siblings didn’t listen to what I instructed them not to do...”*

(Participant 19, IVI 9)

- Fear of more responsibilities with increasing age

Participant 10 described her fear of growing up that would lead her to shoulder more burden and responsibilities.

*“Our people’s mentality is that when we grow up, we have to be mature. It makes me angry hearing that. I have concerns and fears growing up, because a lot needs to be shouldered...”*

(Participant 10, FGD 4)

- Letting out feelings was a sign of weakness  
Participant 3 mentioned her struggle with regulating emotions as she felt it was a sign of weakness.

*“Because when at times I want to let out my emotions, I feel weak, and I don’t want to appear weak.”*

(Participant 3, FGD 1)

## Use of Expressive Suppression

Apart from our analysis in adolescents' challenges and experience in regulating emotions, researchers noticed a recurring theme of ES as one of the ER strategies in many situations. This strategy seemed to benefit them, mostly in maintaining social harmony. Examples of the use of such a strategy as described in their own words and reasons behind its use: two participants used ES as a strategy to avoid humiliation or being judged. By hiding their true emotions, they aimed to protect themselves from potential negative reactions and social repercussions.

*"...if I get angry in front of people, it will hurt my pride. People will assume I'm a hot-tempered person."*

(Participant 5, FGD 2)

Participant 16 shared his experience of concealing his feelings, aiming to prevent conflicts with his friends and maintain social harmony within their social circles. This approach may help them with sidestep disagreements and the discomfort of potential disputes, ensuring their relationships remained stable.

*"Even if my friends at fault, I just keep it silent. I don't want to think about it. It's useful to avoid confrontation."*

(Participant 16, IVI 6)

## Factors Leading to Use of Expressive Suppression

Upon further analysis of both FGDs and IDIs, it became evident that participants tended to suppress their emotions due to a variety of factors, hence the author felt the need to analyse these emerging themes. The analysis

revealed several key elements that contributed to the use of ES among adolescents. A summary of each main themes and subthemes of the factors leading to the use of ES was listed in a thematic tree in Figure 2.

### (i) Factors leading to use of ES due to parental factor

- Worried of affecting parent's mood  
Participant 5 reported that one of the reasons he felt difficult in sharing emotions to his parents was afraid of disturbing his parent's mood.

*"There is somehow a hindrance for me to share my emotion with my parents, as I don't want to ruin their day."*

Participant 11 shared similar opinions on not sharing with parents due to fear of ruining their mood. But for her, she didn't want to add more burden to a very tiring day for her parents.

*"Parents are tired with their work duties and having to teach their children at home as well. This will make them more stressful."*

(Participant 11, FGD 4)

- Uncomfortable and embarrassing to express feelings to parents  
Some participants described shyness and uncomfortable feeling in talking about emotional issues with their parents.

*"I'm feeling uncomfortable and shy to talk about my emotion to parents..."*

(Participant 13, IVI 3)

- Afraid of unwanted consequences from parents if express feeling  
Participant 8 shared her terrible experience

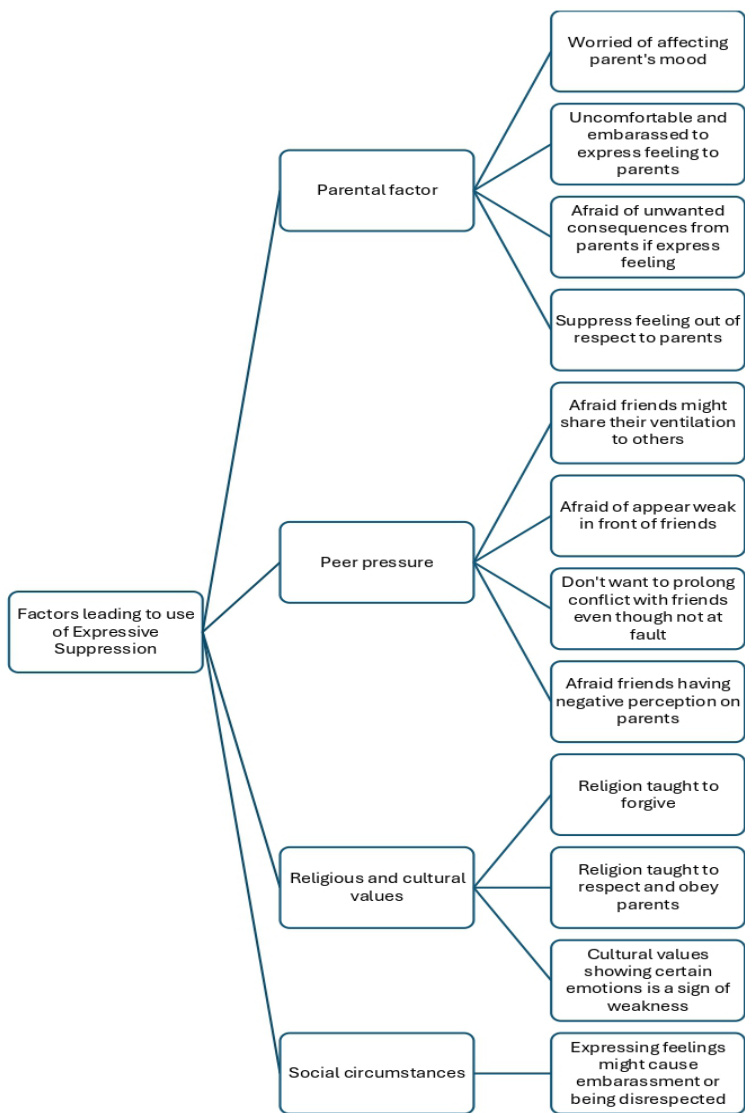


FIGURE 2: Themes and subthemes of the factors leading to the use of Expressive Suppression

upon sharing her feelings to other people which was noticed by her mother. Since then, she reluctantly expressed her feelings to others.

*“When I was a kid, my mom used to pinch me when I shared my feelings to others.”*  
 (Participant 8, FGD 3)

Few participants felt disclosing what they felt or arguing with parents were signs of disrespect to their parents.

*“We shouldn’t speak out to parents because the need to respect them.”*  
 (Participant 17, IVI 7)

- Suppress feeling out of respect to parents

*“I’m afraid that my parents will think that they*

are a bad parent. **I respect them.** Hence, I didn't share my feelings to them."

(Participant 11, FGD 4)

### (ii) Factors leading to use of expressive suppression due to peer pressure

Hiding feelings and emotions in front of friends was quite common among participants in this study. Most of them would try to keep their feelings to avoid any repercussions. Few factors that led them to use ES were:

- Afraid friends might share their ventilation with others

Participant 23 showed her disappointment when she talked about her private matters to her trusted friend, in which later her friend told others about it.

*"I did share with a friend last time. But **later she told others about it.** Since then, I don't trust anyone and I thought it's better to keep to myself than sharing..."*

(Participant 23, IVI 13)

- Afraid of appear weak in front of friends

Participant 1 seemed to have problems regulating her emotions in front of friends, citing it will make her to appear weak. This had been explained earlier as one of the intrapersonal challenges as well.

*"Because if I cry in front of people, **I will appear weak.** At the same time, I'm having difficulties in retaliating back..."*

(Participant 1, IVI 1)

- Don't want to prolong conflict with friends even though not at fault

Participant 7 described how she felt angry following a thought of having to apologise to her friend despite not even her fault. In the

end, she didn't express her dissatisfaction and left the feeling kept inside as she didn't want to prolong the fight further with sole reason for maintaining social harmony.

*"Yes, I was a bit of angry and my thought was – why should I apologised when I'm not at fault? **Then I just moved on by apologising and made amends with my friend..."***

(Participant 7, FGD 3)

- Afraid friends having negative perception on parents

Participant 11 described how she was afraid to share her problems at home to her friends, especially about herself being scolded by her parents due to embarrassment and didn't want friends to have negative perception on her parents.

*"I felt embarrassed to tell my friends about being scolded by my parents. **I don't want them to look down on my parents..."***

(Participant 11, FGD 4)

### (iii) Factors leading to use of expressive suppression due to religious and cultural values

- Religion taught to forgive

Participant 1 shared how she managed not to share her thoughts and feelings related to intense fights with her sister. She wouldn't dare share about it to her parents but chose to ignore it by thinking about the good things that her sister had done and practiced the value of forgiving others according to what her religion taught her.

*"I don't have to share any conversation with my parents especially about any fight with my sister. It helps by just ignoring the uncomfortable feeling by thinking of what*

*my sister had done good to me and **Prophet Muhammad taught us to forgive people.***"

(Participant 1, IVI 1)

- Religion taught to respect and obey parents  
Participant 8 talked about her mother's advice on religious obligation to obey parents,

*"When I was small, my mom told me about a story that if a child disobeys their parents, **they will be thrown into hell.** I keep remember her words until now..."*

(Participant 8. FGD 3)

- Cultural values showed certain emotions was a sign of weakness

A participant described how she lived around the mentality that crying was a sign of weakness, that shaped their own belief as well as described in intrapersonal challenges earlier.

*"People will say it's a **shameful when grown up person still crying in front of people.** People have this mentality that once you've grown up, you need to be more mature. You shouldn't cry in front of people, that's their expectation. I'm so angry at this, because even I'm getting older, I'm still a human..."*

(Participant 10, FGD 4)

#### **(iv) Factors leading to the use of expressive suppression due to social circumstances**

- Expressing feelings might cause embarrassment or being disrespected

Participant 1 described her struggle in expressing her feelings in public as it might have embarrassed her.

*"It's difficult to contain my tears especially when you are nearer to your siblings, and they are looking at you. **It's embarrassing.** At times*

*when I'm in public or around people and I feel like crying, I just pretend by looking at my phone or just go inside my room and cry."*

(Participant 1, IVI 1)

Participant 2 described how he felt uncomfortable by the negative perception that others might show if he shared his problem with them.

*"If I tell others about my problem, I think maybe they felt pity towards me, and I don't like **people to look down on me.**"*

(Participant 2, IVI 2)

## **DISCUSSION**

According to our analysis, 46% of the participants were from the lowest B40 household income group. It is a known fact that living at a low socioeconomic level can have adverse effects on children, especially adolescents. Chronic stress due to financial instability, unsafe living conditions can impair their emotional regulation abilities resulting in maladaptive coping strategies among older children and youth. Whilst active engagement by problem solving or seeking support protects children from adverse effects of stressors, disengagement by avoiding or withdrawal are associated with elevated internalising and externalising symptoms in children (Compas et al. 2001).

Parents play a vital role in shaping their children's ability to manage emotions. Earlier research indicated parent's role in "scaffolding", which aids in development of ER that can lead to positive outcomes (Silvers 2022). Examples of scaffolding provided by parents are positive emotional maintenance with limited hostility display, appropriate autonomy granting in emotional situations and helping children label and talk about their

feelings, especially the negative ones, based on findings from previous research (Southam-Gerow & Kendall 2002). The most prominent theme from our analysis is challenges related to parental factors. The subthemes are parents who are busy with their responsibilities, set exceedingly high expectations to their children and employ authoritarian parenting methods, which can significantly impede their children's ability to regulate emotion.

Past study indicated that stress or chaotic home environments can attenuate the ER skills of children. Being stressed can put a parent's ER skills to be under pressure, making it difficult to react supportively. Such limited interactions can prevent children from receiving the necessary emotional support and guidance to learn how to handle their feelings effectively (De Raeymaecker & Dhar 2022). Setting high expectations for children can create a pressure-filled environment where children may feel their worth is tied to their achievements. This pressure can lead to anxiety and stress, hindering children's ability to express and manage their emotions freely.

Authoritarian parenting, characterised by high demands and low responsiveness, can suppress children's emotional expression and hinder the development of healthy emotional regulation. When a child lives in an emotional climate that is predominantly unresponsive and coercive, then the child is more likely to be exposed to strong and negative emotional responsiveness, which is attributed to frequent manifestations of undesirable emotions or emotional treatment (Chen et al. 2022).

The second theme analysed was on sibling conflict related to parental favoritism, where one child is consistently favoured over another either intentionally or unintentionally. This shift in parenting due to the parents addressing varying needs between siblings can lead to noticeable differential treatment, which

further results in sibling rivalry and conflict. Adolescents with low-self-esteem are more likely to perceive significant differences in treatment compared to their siblings and tend to show higher levels of negative emotions and delinquent behaviour (Rolan & Marceau 2018). In certain cases where parental favouritism culminates into sibling rivalry and bullying results into a sense of lower self-esteem, self-confidence and competence which would further impacted the children's well-being in their early adulthood (Plamondon et al. 2021).

The third most profound theme was related to academic struggles. Participants reported two sub themes, which are stress in class due to struggling to understand certain subjects and coping with homework and assignments. These two sub themes could be a sign of school burnout, which was defined as an exhaustion due to study demands and feelings of inadequacy as a student (Salmela-Aro et al. 2009). Parental factors with high expectations (as described earlier) could probably reinforce the fear of failure that can result in decreased self-esteem and confidence in adolescents, as described by one of the participants. The effect of school burnout on depression is stronger for adolescents with low self-esteem (Jiang et al. 2021). Coping with heavy homework can also overwhelm adolescents, leading to poor time management and feeling out of control, both of which contribute to emotional dysregulation. Academic stress also can lead to sleep deprivation, which can impair emotional regulation, making it harder for adolescents to handle stress and negative emotions (Galloway et al. 2013).

Our analysis reported the use of ES as one of the most used strategies that is observable in majority of participants. ES, as described earlier, is a conscious effort to inhibit outward display of emotions. ES is often used to maintain social harmony and avoid conflict,

particularly in collectivistic cultures such as those of Latino, Asian and African American communities. In these cultures, ES has been found to have fewer negative effects compared to those who do not lean towards collectivism. Collectivism emphasises strong connections between group members, with an expectation of lifelong loyalty. This cultural orientation seeks to reduce individuality by establishing predefined goals, attitudes, and behaviours from birth onward. ER is valued in collectivistic cultures because it supports pro-social goals (Ramzan & Amjad 2017), and ES helps to uphold these values by preventing conflicts and preserving group cohesion and hierarchy (Matsumoto et al. 2008), as observed in our study participants.

Additionally, as a multi-religious country, many religions practiced in Malaysia advocate for self-control, patience and forgiveness, which align with the practice of ES. This strategy also helps individuals to avoid embarrassing situations and prevent hurting others' feelings, thus fostering stronger social bonds (Ramzan & Amjad 2017), which is a key focus of collectivistic cultures. Individuals may struggle with feelings of inauthenticity and emotional dissonance due to the tension between societal expectations and personal emotional needs, particularly if their personal inclinations lean towards more open emotional expression. Gross & John (1998) reported this as "masking", where individuals experienced perceived discrepancy between inner feelings and outward expressions. This internal conflict can exacerbate feeling of isolation and reduce overall life satisfaction, as individuals feel pressured to conform to cultural norms at the expense of their emotional authenticity.

The emphasis on ES can also have negative psychological and physiological consequences. Individuals who often suppress their emotions

can have difficulties in processing and expressing their emotions in a healthy manner, potentially leading to emotional numbness or the buildup of unresolved emotional issues. Research shows that while ES may be socially adaptive in the short term, it can undermine long-term psychological well-being by preventing emotional release and contributing to internal psychological conflicts (Kitayama & Markus 1994; Tamir 2016).

Peer pressure is another factor that leads to the use of ES among participants in our study. Past research indicated that adolescents experiencing high levels of peer pressure are more likely to suppress their emotions to avoid negative judgements and fit in with their peers (Bukowski & Adams 2005), apart from conforming to the cultural values mentioned earlier. Cultural values emphasising emotional restraint as a sign of strength and maturity, can lead adolescents to adopt similar beliefs to fit in and conform to these norms (Hampton & Varnum 2018).

Thus, while ES may offer certain social benefits, its negative impact on individual health and authenticity highlights the need for a balanced approach to ER that considers both cultural values and personal well-being.

One of the limitations encountered in this study is the use of secondary data. The primary concern related to its use is the lack of control over data collection, which can lead to issues with the relevance, accuracy, and completeness of the information for specific research questions. In addition to that, the majority of Malay participants in the study with limited representation of Chinese and Indian participants may constrain the study's ability to generalise findings across all ethnic groups. The study also cannot conclude whether the use of ES would be different in other races due to the prominent number of Malay participants in this study.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this research is exploring the challenges associated with regulating emotion among Malaysian adolescents as well as experiences in managing their own emotions. Interpretation of the findings revealed parental factors, sibling conflict, peer pressure and academic struggles as challenges faced by these participants in regulating their own emotions. In addition to that, the researcher was able to analyse the significant use of ES among participants where parents, peer pressure, religious values and social circumstances were the factors behind its use. The findings of this research are relevant to the wider study on psychological well-being and emotional regulation among adolescents, especially in Malaysian settings, where such study has been limited. The importance of involving members of society, especially parents and teachers, to understand these challenges and its effect is detrimental so that more efforts can be done to preserve the well-being of these adolescents apart from creating a safe environment at home and at school for them to express their feelings in a healthier way.

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