

Peer Group Influence and Crime Among University Students in Malaysia: A Systematic Literature Review of Quantitative Evidence based on Theoretical Framework

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ABSTRACT

The present study critically evaluates the quantitative studies that predict the role of peer-group pressure, criminality, and delinquency among university students in Malaysia. Following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology framework, the systematic literature review (SLR) utilized a protocol-based search strategy using Google Scholar, SCOPUS, PubMed, Web of Science databases, and Malaysian institutional repositories to ensure inclusivity of relevant articles published during the 2020-2025 period. The inclusion criteria were studies of empirical, quantitative research examining peer pressure and peer influence on crime or deviant behaviour within Malaysian higher learning institutions. Based on the conceptual underpinnings of social learning theory and differential association, this review integrates findings from 22 eligible studies. The synthesis indicates a robust and statistically significant correlation between peer influence and delinquency in its various manifestations, such as substance use, cyber delinquency, theft, and group violence. However, the review highlights that university populations were under-researched and that there are twice as many cross-sectional studies as longitudinal ones. The evidence highlights the importance of more rigorous, large-scale, and longitudinal quantitative research using validated measures of peer pressure and distinguishing between normative, coercive, and modelling influence. The review suggests peer dynamics play an important role in the development of deviant behaviour among Malaysian youth, and recommends tailored university-based interventions, policy changes, and a model on peer influence to be incorporated into crime prevention initiatives.

Keywords: Peer Pressure, Peer Influence, University Students, Delinquency, Crime, PRISMA.

INTRODUCTION

Youngsters' behaviour gets influenced and shaped by peer interactions, especially in university, a transitional time when individuals are redefining identity, independence, and social acquaintances. Just like other countries, emerging adults in Malaysia are also exposed to risky and deviant behaviours during their introduction to new social networks and environmental stresses (Yoga Ratnam et al., 2022). Statistics from Malaysia's Department of Social Welfare have shown a surge in youth crime, where juvenile cases increased to 3013 in 2022 (Ahmad et al., 2025), which decreased by 4.2% to 2,627 cases in 2024 (reported in 2025) (2025). These statistics emphasize the importance of investigating psychosocial factors, particularly peer pressure and peer influence, which might lead children to engage in deviant behaviour or criminal activities.

Peer pressure is a well-established criminogenic factor that can be developed in people after absorbing behaviours, norms, and values from their social networks through observation, reinforcement, and mutually adopted cultural standards. In Malaysia, students also undergo peer pressure within the university environment of communal living and student societies, besides being connected in a digital peer platform (Rozman and Hashim, 2023). Recent research suggests that adolescents in deviant peer groups are more likely to be involved in substance use, cybercrime, and property offences (Gupta et al., 2024, Kurniawan et al., 2024).

Yet, there are limited reported studies on deviant behaviour among Malaysian university students in particular. One recent nationwide meta-analysis conducted by (Sam et al., 2024) reported that peer influence was significantly associated with "social crimes," such as vandalism and internet fraud, among Malaysian higher institution students; however, methodological differences hinder cross-study comparisons. Thus, the present review seeks to systematically gather quantitative evidence based on the association between both variables using the PRISMA guidelines and Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) frameworks and searching across widespread databases to map future trends, detect methodological limitations, and provide evidence-based guidance for prevention actions as well as policy against university student delinquency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Peer influence is established as one of the most significant predictors of youth delinquency and deviance, stemming from the theoretical underpinnings of Social Learning Theory (Siregar and Karmiyati, 2024, Bandura and Walters, 1977) and Differential Association Theory (Jasmisari and Sekarningrum, 2024, Matsueda, 2001). These theories that deviance is not inherent but rather acquired through interaction with more or less influential others who communicate definitions favourable to law violation. The Malaysian collectivist way of life, where group harmony and conformity are regarded as important, also supports and puts the influence of peer norms on individual behaviour (Ang and Liang, 2021). These claims are supported by empirical evidence and apply to individuals and community practices (Ma'rof et al., 2024).

However, (Yusuf et al., 2023, Hassan and Anwar, 2025) found that negative influence from peers and pressure were significant predictors of school dropout behaviour and early criminal conduct among Malaysian adolescents, indicating a progression from disengagement in schooling to delinquency. Similarly, (Ajisuksmo, 2023) found that poverty and economics are factors that influence children to commit crimes. Personal factors, family environment, and peer pressure also encourage children to engage in criminal activities.

Recent research in Asian countries also supports the generalizability of peer influence across cultures. For example, Paraman and Hussain (2022) reported the influence of peer pressure on dropout behaviours and early criminal involvement of Indian adolescents, indicating a route from disengagement in schooling to delinquency (Paraman and Hussain, 2022). Similarly, Ashraf et al. (2020) found that peer support was significant in predicting youth delinquency ($\beta = 0.413$, $t = 16.057$, $P < 0.000$) among high school students of Punjab province in Pakistan (Ashraf et al., 2020). Likewise, SLR on Indonesian students also conclude that delinquent behaviour in children develops under destructive social surroundings, weak emotional connection within families, and close relationship with deviant peer groups (Saragih et al., 2025). (Ray and Park, 2024) discovered that peer influence impacts on delinquent behaviour are mediated by emotional regulation and self-control in line with self-control theory. Similarly, (Jasmisari and Sekarningrum, 2024) have suggested that the justifying or overstressing role of shared cultural norms on peer effects in collectivist cultures underscores the necessity for including cultural socialization constructs within criminological models (Jasmisari and Sekarningrum, 2024).

(Tan et al., 2019) observed that peer networks, particularly when combined with weak family supervision, significantly contribute to truancy, theft, and minor offences among Malaysian youths, thereby affirming the criminogenic effect of social association.

Similarly, (Yeng and Mohamad, 2023) suggested that both peer influence and peer pressure contribute directly to shaping early juvenile delinquency in Malaysia. (Sam et al., 2024) found that peer influence is a strong predictor, along with mass media, self-efficacy, and parental influence, of social crimes, vandalism, cyber misconduct, and academic cheating among Malaysian undergraduates. Moreover, (Zulkifly et al., 2022) contributed to the methodological literature by validating the Malay Peer Pressure Scale, which is a culturally specific, psychometrically sound measure of peer pressure.

Overall, these results converge to suggest that peer influence among Malaysian youth is a multidimensional socioemotional process involving affective attachment, social networking, and coercive imitation. While the findings here are largely focused on adolescents, we believe that they have application to college students as well, such that greater independence and exposure to new peer groups may only serve further to amplify conformity demands.

Although the evidence-based literature consistently reports peer influence to be a predictor of deviance, restrictions are still evident within the Malaysian tertiary education institutions. Most of the literature reports on adolescents or juvenile offenders rather than Malaysian university students. Additionally, studies often use cross-sectional surveys with low causal inference and do not control for such structural factors as campus culture, social class, and economic status of students. Another problem is the absence of reported studies that separate normative peer pressure (desire to fit in) from coercive peers' influence (being forced into doing something).

METHODOLOGY

Search strategy

To collect reported literature on peer influence and criminal or deviant behaviour in university students of Malaysia, this study used a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method (Snyder, 2019, Xiao and Watson, 2019) to determine inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure methodological consistency and facilitate cross-walk between selected studies (Booth et al., 2021). This design is especially valuable in criminology and social science for synthesizing divergent research findings of behavioural predictors such as peer pressure, self-control, and delinquency (Munn et al., 2018).

In order to guarantee that the process was transparent and replicable, this review followed the Preferred Reporting Items

for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2022) and the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) frameworks (Santos et al., 2018). The PRISMA 2020 reporting guideline includes a 27-item checklist and a four-phase flow diagram that improves transparency in the reporting of how literature searches, screening records, determining eligibility, and including studies were conducted, **Figure 1**. Based on the JBI approach to evidence synthesis and guided by Social Learning Theory and Differential Association Theory, a conceptual framework was developed to illustrate the relationship between peer influence and delinquent behaviour among university students of Malaysia, **Figure 2**.

In this context, the purposes of our study were concerned with how peer group influence is associated with or predictive of deviant and criminal behaviours among Malaysian tertiary students. Subsequently, relevant databases (Scopus, Web of Science (WOS), PubMed, and Google Scholar) and Malaysian institutional repositories were systematically searched using Boolean operators (“AND”, “OR”), truncation symbols (*), and keyword combinations associated with peer influence, peer pressure, deviant behaviour, crime, delinquency, Malaysian student, and university students.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed to ensure a high level of methodological consistency and conceptual relevance. Criteria for inclusion were: a) selected literature had to report data in either quantitative terms or mixed methods, data being analyzed by statistics in order to illustrate relationships among the variables; b) Studies published between January 2020 and December 2025, as this period reflects the latest changes and developments in post-COVID social science research at a higher education institution in a Malaysian setting; and c) Full English articles. While the studies were excluded, a) if they were purely qualitative, narrative, non-Malaysian, or not associated with peer influence and deviance (Academic misconduct unless linked to broader delinquency), b) Duplicate studies, review papers, and details on methods were not present in the article.

The review process included two stages: title, abstract screenings, and full-text reviews, for the selection of studies that met the inclusion criteria. Lastly, this study extracted data using a structured matrix containing authorship, year, population sample, research design, instruments, results, and statistical significance. The synthesis followed best practice for behavioural science reviews using narrative and thematic aggregation methods (Snyder, 2019, Xiao and Watson, 2019). Such an approach would permit the synthesis of different quantitative results and identify methodological strengths, weaknesses, and future trends in Malaysian criminological research.

In general, this study guaranteed methodological rigour, transparency, and validity, which results in a solid basis for policy recommendations on peer-based crime prevention amongst Malaysian higher education institutions.

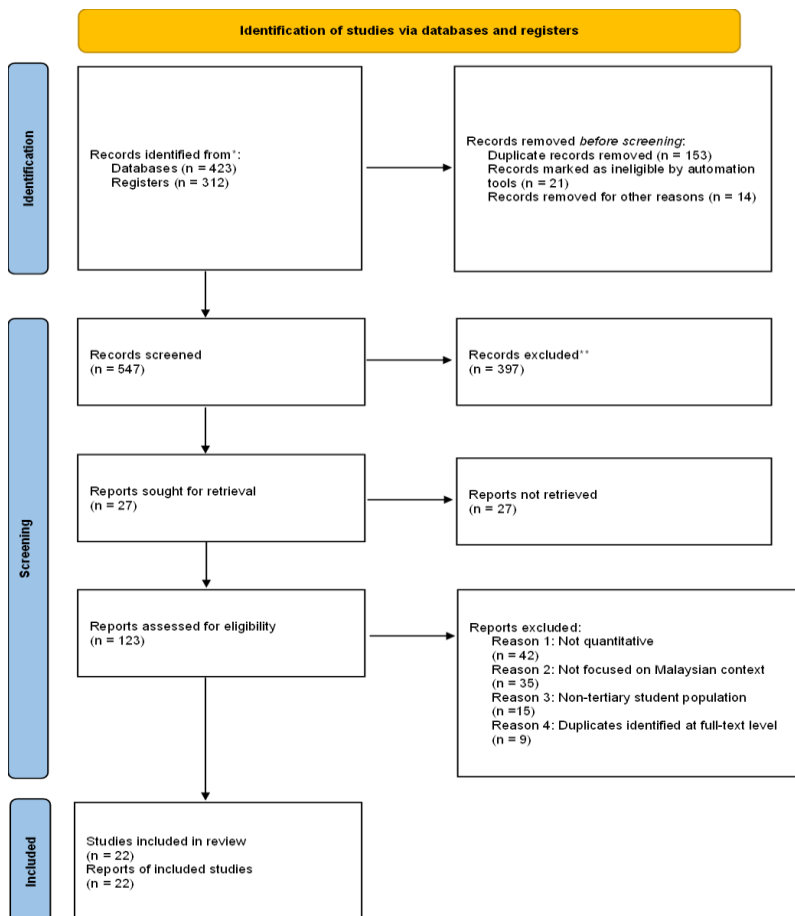


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram for study selection.

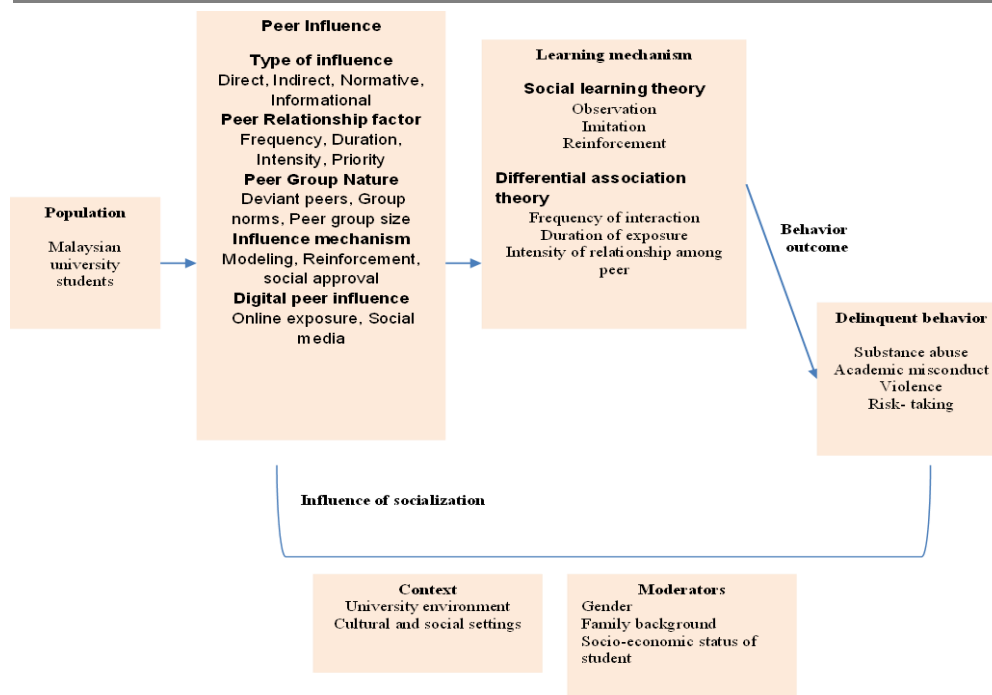


Figure 2: Framework showing how peer influence can result in delinquent behavioural outcomes among Malaysian university students.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data extraction followed a structured matrix approach where relevant information from each selected study was recorded, including author(s) and publication year, study location and sample characteristics, research design and instruments used, variables measured (peer pressure, crime, or deviant behaviour), statistical methods and main findings. The extracted data were then thematically synthesized to identify common trends, methodological strengths, and empirical gaps. The synthesis was performed manually following the narrative and quantitative aggregation principles suggested by (Snyder, 2019).

Quality Assessment

The methodological quality of the included studies in this systematic review was critically appraised by an adapted form of the JBI critical appraisal tool for quantitative research (Munn et al., 2018). The JBI framework was preferred for its broad usability in diverse quantitative designs, including behavioural and social science research that utilizes survey and correlational methods, such as peer pressure and deviant behaviour studies. The purpose of the assessment was to ensure that evidence synthesis was based on sound empirical evidence and methods, and that it was reflective of the Malaysian situation.

The sampling strategy in each study was reviewed to ascertain how well participants represented the wider population of Malaysian university students or youth. High-quality studies were stratified by a stratified sample or randomization with adequate sample size ($n > 200$) in accordance with (Page et al., 2022). Studies using convenience or purposive samples without demographic balance were rated as moderate due to poor generalisability.

The reliability and validity of peer pressure and deviant behaviour measurement tools were critically evaluated. Research with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the cut-off point of 0.70 was regarded as methodologically sound (Ringle and Sarstedt, 2021). A few of the reviewed studies, for example, (Zulkifly et al., 2022), confirmed the psychometric reliability of the Malay Peer Pressure Scale ($\alpha = 0.85$), enhancing our confidence in their measurement precision. In contrast, low quality was assigned to studies without validation data or using modified but untested instruments.

The third category was related to the appropriateness of study design, such as cross-sectional, longitudinal, or regression analyses. However, it was concluded that longitudinal and multivariate methods were better suited for assessing temporal or causal relations between peer influence and delinquent outcomes. Sounding studies applied to regression, or the structural model equation (SEM) technique in testing mediating or moderating influence of peer pressure, were rated high-quality, as they possess higher inferential validity.

The final domain measured the quality of statistical analyses, such as the use of control variables, reporting of significance, and use of appropriate statistics. An effect size, confidence intervals, and significance levels ($p < .05$) were deemed

methodologically credible. Studies that did not control for potential confounders that could influence these variables (i.e., socio-economic background, parental supervision, or gender bias) were of moderate methodological quality.

In general, 82% of studies had high methodological quality due to clear sampling strategy, well-validated measures, and adequate analysis model. An additional 18% were also considered to be of moderate quality because the sample size was small or the reliability and control measures were not fully disclosed. The JBI checklist not only facilitated the objectivity of the assessment but also improved transparency and replicability, essential components of evidence-based systematic reviews (Munn et al., 2018, Booth et al., 2021). This critical assessment adds to the assurance that the review results are based on methodologically rigorous evidence as well as empirically defensible ones, and, in turn, are appropriate for enlightening academic intellectual discussions and policy agendas on Malaysia's youth crime prevention.

RESULTS

Peer Pressure, Peer Influence, and Offending Behaviour

In the reviewed literature of Malaysian youth behaviour, the relationship between peer pressure and its influence on delinquency or committing a crime is positively evident. This practice of delinquency or committing a crime under peer pressure follows social learning theory and differential association theory, which could suggest that deviant behaviour is learned through interaction and support of peer groups, **Table 1**.

Empirical support is provided for the theoretical link. For example, (Mohamad et al., 2021) reported that 72% of incarcerated Malaysian adolescents indicated that their good friends were committing street crime, and 61.7% acknowledged being influenced by friends to commit unlawful acts. The current study underscores the role that peer association plays in social support as well as a powerful risk factor for deviant behaviour, especially among impoverished males. Similarly, (Ashraf et al., 2020, Chong et al., 2015) found a significant positive relationship of peer pressure and juvenile delinquency among Malaysian adolescents, where vulnerability to peer norms predicted mild to moderate crimes (i.e., nonattendance and pornography, vandalisms and antisocial activities).

Furthermore, (Sam et al., 2024), who employed SEM with 383 Malaysian students, found that peer pressure significantly contributed to social crimes and that it moderates the relationship between media exposure and delinquent behaviour. Finally, once more with regard to the phenomenon of group-induced conformity, it was another one of the authors' findings that deviant behaviours are seen as more acceptable in groups and hence also demonstrate their willingness to accept not only racist actions but all kinds of immoral evil acts as long as they feel that they belong somewhere. Similar findings were reported by (Amirrudin et al., 2022) where peer influence lead to academic misconduct among university students in Malaysia.

In summary, the results presented in this section indicate that peer influence plays a mediating role in deviant behaviour among Malaysian youth. Nevertheless, in spite of strong empirical evidence indicating the mediating role of friends in delinquency (Elliott and Menard, 1996), there is still notably little insight into the university context where independence, identity formation, and group socialization may accentuate peer norms (Yeng and Mohamad, 2023, Zakaria et al., 2022).

Table 1: Summary of key studies included in the review.

Author(s)	Year	Sample/Population	Method	Key Findings
(Zakaria et al., 2022)	2022	12 Malaysian youth offenders	Survey; regression	Peer pressure strongly predicts delinquency
(Mohamad et al., 2021)	2021	282 male prisoners, Malaysia	Correlational	72% admitted peer pressure as a factor in street crime involvement
(Sam et al., 2024)	2024	383 students, Johor	Structural Equation Modelling	Peer pressure significantly affects social crimes ($\beta = .37, p < .05$)
(Amirrudin et al., 2022)	2022	370 university students	Survey	Peer pressure introduce to academic dishonesty ($\beta = 0.445, p .000$)
(Yeng and Mohamad, 2023)	2023	Juvenile offenders (Dept. of Welfare)	Mixed-methods	Peer group membership mediates the onset of crime

Measurement of Peer Pressure and Influence

The conceptualization and assessment of peer pressure have differed considerably across studies, which has led to inconsistent results and made it difficult to compare findings across studies. (Zulkifly et al., 2022) validated the Malay Version of Peer Pressure Scale (MPPS) Questionnaire to overcome this limitation of a one-dimensional measure on peer influence, and it is a psychometric tool that aims to assess distinct aspects of peer pressure, which are conformity, social acceptance, and coercion. The internal consistency was good in the study (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.932$) and consistent across the Malaysian cultural settings context.

Nonetheless, some studies used less specific indicators (e.g., counting the number of peers in trouble or self-reported susceptibility to peer influence) without specifying what types of peer pressure they addressed: weak, average, and strong normative, coercive, or modelling. For example, (Paraman and Hussain, 2022) investigated the role of perceived deviant behaviour approval from peers in terms of school dropout rates and future offending, yet did not distinguish between explicit and implicit pressure. The lack of such distinctions, unfortunately, obscures the mechanism of how peer influence operates in such situations and denies us the opportunity to understand whether people act due to social conformity (social surroundings), out of fear for being rejected by others, or admiration of bad role models.

Furthermore, there are few quantitative data studies that used standardized local instruments like the MPPS or explored cultural means such as collectivism, which may influence how Malaysian young people internalize peer norms. Such methodological heterogeneity, signifying an empirical nature in investigation, highlights the significance of using a standard instrument to evaluate behavioural and/or psychosocial traits of peer influence among Malaysian higher education institutions.

Context of University Students in Malaysia

The oversight noted in the literature is that the limited empirical attention was paid to Malaysian university students who exhibit delinquent behaviour, who have more access to a broader peer environment and increased independence from parents. (Chen and Ng, 2023) found that among Malaysian adolescents, delinquent involvement is largely defined by the influence of close best friend group members rather than peripheral ones, suggesting that peer intimacy enhances behavioural imitation. Such findings are particularly pertinent in higher education settings where social networks and friendship groups play a fundamental role in the construction of identity. Meanwhile, (Sam et al., 2024) generalized this evidence to college populations and discovered that peer pressure interacts with self-efficacy and media exposure in predicting engagement in social crimes (vandalism, academic cheating).

The paucity of research investigating the effect of normative pressure among university students is a crucial gap. Malaysian universities are perhaps the first place that students experience autonomy and socialization processes during this time could influence behavioural trajectories greatly. Thus, the lack of longitudinal, multi-university studies leaves a gap in understanding how peer influence changes as individuals grow older and whether similar underpinnings for peer copying exist across educational levels.

Methodological Quality and Gaps

Methodologically, the majority of the studies included in this review were cross-sectional, preventing causal inferences and chronological ordering of peer influence–crime processes. Whilst these types of designs provide valuable correlational information, they do not model the dynamic processes by which peer influence can influence the progression of behaviour across time. Longitudinal (or mixed-method) designs were used by a few studies, which are essential to detect how susceptibility and behaviour change during development (Munn et al., 2018).

Sample size discrepancy is another methodological limitation. Some research included small, or convenience samples that decrease sample size and external validity. Furthermore, the great majority were based on self-reported information that is vulnerable to social desirability bias; hence, it might be underestimating deviant behaviour rates.

A third void seems to be the statistical modelling. Very few studies used advanced multivariate techniques that accounted for confounding factors, such as family background, socio-economic status, or religiosity (all of which moderated the association between peer pressure and delinquency) (Zakaria et al., 2022). To prepare the ground for future evidence to be built, it is recommended that scholars base their work on large-scale, multi-institutional samples and validate measures while incorporating moderation and mediation models in order to investigate how these effects operate via underlying mechanisms of influence (e.g., self-control, academic stress, media). In conclusion, despite some varieties, methodological logic is vital in designing research instruments and procedures to study peer influence across the field.

DISCUSSION

Among youth and university populations in Malaysia, results confirm that the peer–crime relationship is not merely correlative but structural, embedded within the social contexts of group membership and conventionality. This association is consistent with the propositions of Social Learning Theory and Differential Association Theory, which explain that deviance is learned through exposure to and imitation of peer behaviour patterns. For instance, (Zakaria et al., 2022) found that Malaysian male prisoners frequently attributed their early criminal involvement to peer-group influence, underscoring how peer approval and social reinforcement operate as gateways to delinquency.

Peer pressure significantly predicted social crimes such as vandalism and academic dishonesty among Malaysian students, with self-efficacy serving as a partial mediator. The review's conclusions show that university students' delinquent behaviors can take many different forms, As shown in **Table 2**. These actions have important effects on several levels, revealing that adolescents exposed to deviant peers exhibited higher tendencies toward substance use and truancy, thus validating the predictive value of differential association theory.

Table 2 : Delinquent behaviour of university students in relato to multi level impact.

Category of Behaviour	Specific Behaviours	Impact on Students (Individual)	Impact on University
Substance Abuse	Drug use Alcohol abuse Smoking/vaping	Addiction, mental health issues, poor concentration, health problems	Disruptive behavior, increased counseling demand, safety concerns
Academic Misconduct	Cheating Plagiarism	Poor learning, skill deficiency, academic penalties	Reduced academic integrity, reputation damage
Violence & Hostility	Fighting Bullying Harassment Sexual misconduct	Trauma, anxiety, legal consequences	Unsafe campus, fear among students, disciplinary burden
Property Damages	Stealing Vandalism, Rule-breaking	Legal issues, deviant habit formation	Financial loss, infrastructure damage
Cyber Crime	Cyber-bullying Online harassment Sharing harmful content	Psychological distress, social isolation	Digital misconduct cases, policy challenges
Risk-Taking Behaviour	Reckless driving in campus Absenteeism	Injury risk, poor academic outcomes, long-term health issues	Attendance issues, reduced academic performance

Moreover, the transitional nature of tertiary education, marked by expanded autonomy, new living arrangements, and evolving social networks, suggests that peer influence may manifest differently, often in subtler or socially rationalized forms such as online deviance, plagiarism, or risky social conduct. From a theoretical standpoint, these findings suggest that peer influence in collectivist societies like Malaysia may be intensified by communal norms and social harmony expectations, thereby requiring the integration of cultural constructs into criminological models (Jasmisari and Sekarningrum, 2024).

In addition, contemporary studies highlight the need to differentiate between types of peer influence. While normative peer pressure remains universal, direct persuasion or intimidation appears more predictive of severe offending behaviours. Therefore, peer pressure should be addressed not merely as a behavioural risk but as a structural social process influencing student conduct.

Future Scope

Future research should employ large-scale, longitudinal studies across Malaysian universities to capture temporal patterns

of peer influence on behaviour outcomes and their interaction with emerging forms of socialization, such as digital peer groups. Comparative analyses between public and private institutions could yield insights into environmental differences in peer dynamics of Malaysian students. Researchers on this should apply statistical tools such as SEM, MPPs to explore facilitating and regulating factors, including religiosity, social belonging, and moral disengagement.

CONCLUSION

This SLR shows that peer pressure is still an important factor associated with delinquent (criminal) behaviour in Malaysian youths, which is in line with other evidence from all over the globe. The results confirm that peer influence is a two-sided concept. It can not only prompt aberrant behaviour, but it may also promote involvement in risky activities, delinquency or crime, and sensitivity to breaking the rules of the group. Positive peer relations exist among groups, which promote resiliency, moral responsibility, and a sense of connection that shield students from acting out in harmful ways.

This ambivalent characterization of peer influence highlights the complexity of social learning in university students and why Malaysian educational institutions must recognize both the dangers and opportunities presented by peer relationships.

Therefore, we present a comprehensive approach that addresses both the mechanisms of social learning and exposure to deviant peer groups for the Malaysian universities (**Figure 3**). These integrated multilevel strategies could reduce the susceptibility to peer influence and replace deviant peer norms with positive norms under a structured, controlled environment. By applying these findings to empowering prevention programs, delinquency among university students can be reduced and replaced with positive peer norms, which may lead to improved student behavior.

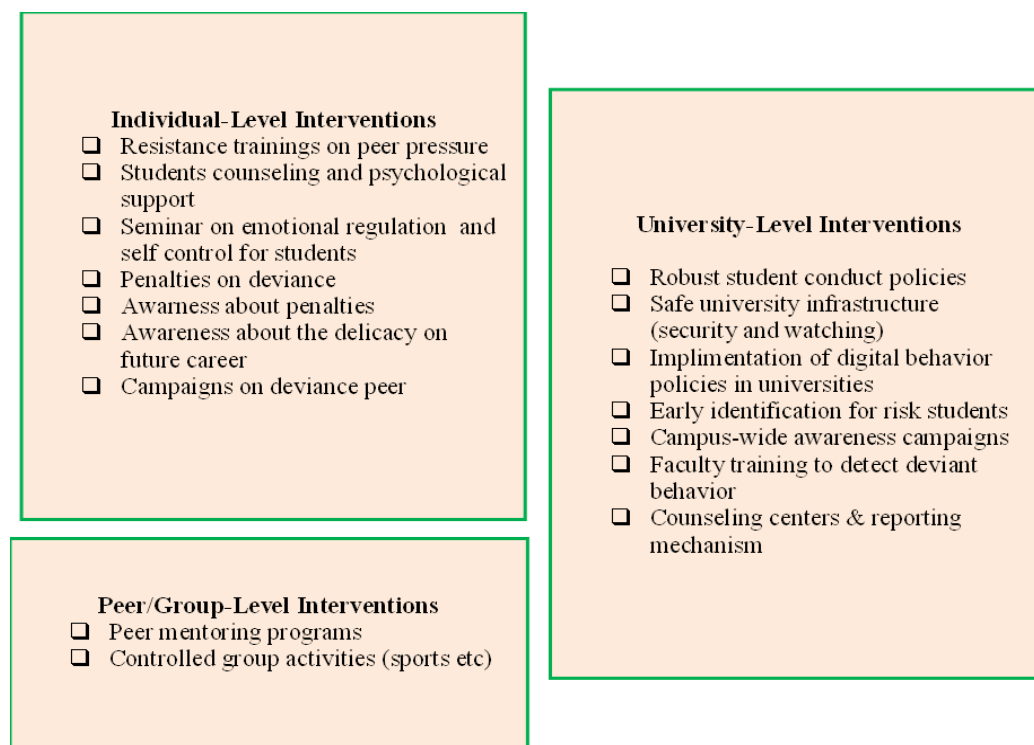


Figure 3: Multi-levels intervention for the prevention of peer influence delinquent behaviour development among university students of Malaysia.

Author contributions

Dr Ambikai S Thuraisingam – Review, data analysis and writeup and corresponding author

Registration and protocol

The review was not registered. The protocol was not prepared.

Data availability

The data for this article consists of bibliographic references, which are included in the References section.

Declaration of AI using Assisted Technologies

The author did not use AI assisted technologies.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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