

Can Street Children Rely on “Friendship” to Survive on the Streets? A Comparative Study between Street Children in Kuala Lumpur City and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

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Abstract

This paper explores whether street children in the city of Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah can rely on “friendship” as a strategy to survive on the streets. Street children are categorized as vulnerable and marginalized children since they receive lack of supervision, direction and protection from parents/guardians/adults. These situations immensely influence these children to succumb to a life on the streets. To continue surviving, street children develop distinctive relationships with each other. It is vital to stay in a group of friends to maximize their protection and minimize risks, such as discrimination, gangsterism, abuse and violence. This study adopts the qualitative method by using in-depth interviews and observations of street children’s nature, behaviours and characteristics. The data collection was conducted in 2016, in two areas (Kuala Lumpur city and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah) which involved 24 respondents—12 respondents from the Kuala Lumpur city and 12 respondents from Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Out of 24 respondents, 18 were male street children and 6 were female street children. The findings of this study prove that “friendship” is one of the key survival strategies of street children in both areas. Further, the findings of this study reveal that there are three degrees/levels of friendships engaged by street children—too close, close and distant. Friendship as a survival strategy of street children is a positive strategy in its nature. However, when street children engage in friendship while they are on the streets, it has led to many consequences toward street children—positive and negative consequences. Among the positive consequences are friends as sources of help and a mean to maximize protection and security. Notably, negative consequences of engaging in friendship among street children in the city of Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah outnumber the positive consequences. When street children are too close and close to friends, they may be trapped in complicated situations such as being involved in loitering, stealing, smoking, consuming drugs, drinking alcohol, glue sniffing and punk groups. This study concludes that street children acknowledge and are cognizant that friendship is one of the vital survival strategies as well as it can be used as a mean to survive on the streets to maximize their protection and security. Notably, friendship alone cannot guarantee street children will survive in their lives. This can be seen through many negative consequences that may harm their childhood and development.

Keywords: Street children, friendship, survival strategy, consequences

Introduction

The life of street children on the streets requires these vulnerable children to develop various strategies to survive on the streets. According to Orme and Seipel (2010), innumerable survival strategies among street children have been recognized around the world. The authors further stated that some of the street children rely on family networking, friendship, working to obtain money, seeking community resources, belief in God and their focus on the future (looking for opportunities in education). These strategies may be necessary for one instance, but may not be for another situation as it depends on a number of factors including intention, motivation and judgment of street children (Williamson & Folaron, 2001). In the worst case scenario, some strategies may involve high levels of risk such as escaping. “Escape” sounds like a simple word, however, it is believed that escape patterns among street children often involve injuries and hazardous situations. For instance, in order to survive, these vulnerable children have to throw themselves through the window, jump from high buildings and be chased by attackers. Once the escape strategy fails, numerous dangerous situations such as threats, harm, assault as well as murder may become a reality for these street children.

As indicated earlier, there are a number of survival strategies of street children. However, among the strategies, “friendship” is considered as one of the most popular survival strategies used/applied by street children around the world (Orme & Seipel, 2010; Ofosu-Kusi & Mizen, 2010; Berhanu, 1998). Friendship is considered as a need for survival among street children mainly to maximize protection and minimize risks. This is because while on the street, street children receive a lack of supervision, protection and direction from their parents and family members. Due to this situation, they are exposed to high risks such as bullying, abuse, violence and in the worst case scenario, they are exposed to exploitation including child labour and prostitution. In sustaining their lives on the streets, reciprocity and cooperative ways of living have become critical elements in friendship (Ofosu-Kusi & Mizen, 2010). Although friendship is recognized as one of the main survival strategies of street children, however, this situation ponders a pertinent question: “to what extent can street children rely on friendship to survive on the streets?” This requires thorough research as undertaken in this study—with the main objective to explore friendship as a survival strategy of street children in the Malaysian context. Notably, the scope of this paper covers two different areas—Kuala Lumpur city and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. This is because the Child Rights Coalition (2012) reported that a majority of street children are currently residing in the area of Kuala Lumpur and Sabah.

Overview of the street children phenomenon

Street children issues have been recognized as one of the global issues in the world (Abro, 2012). Reviewing literature surrounding the street children issue reveal that the total population of street children around the world has reached millions of children annually (Sharma & Joshi, 2013; Pietkiewicz-Pareek, 2012; Hong & Ohno, 2005). Although many studies have been undertaken to identify the population of street children; however, there is no specific number that can represent the actual population of street children in any country. There are only estimated numbers of the street children population which have been recorded around the world, that is, approximately 11 million in India, 450 000 in Bangladesh, 300 000 in China, 50 000 in Vietnam and 10 000 in Burma (Ahmad, Latif & Sulaiman, 2011). Notably, the rising number of children on the streets around the world portrays how grave this issue is and it requires immediate intervention of many parties to take actions in addressing this issue effectively and holistically. In addition, street children will remain as a group of vulnerable and marginalized children if adequate measures fail to be executed.

Although the street children issue has been discussed since decades ago (Mayhew, 1861; Patel, 1990; West, 2003; Murray at al., 2012; Ahmad, 2016); however, street children still remain invisible and are suffering from hunger and pain (Abd Hamid, Ahmad & Tahir, 2017). Notably, the life of a street child is filled with challenges, difficulties and hazardous situations while they are on the streets. They are synonymous to being vulnerable, marginalized and forgotten in many countries around the world, especially in poor and developing countries such as Africa (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Ofofu-Kusi & Mizen, 2010), India (Murray et al., 2012; Pietkiewicz-Pareek, 2012; Patel, 1990), Vietnam (Hong & Ohno, 2005), Indonesia (Amrullah, 2014; Plan Indonesia, 2012), Malaysia (Taib, 2012; Aliaas, Bajunid & Abdullah, 2011; Ahmad, Latif & Sulaiman, 2011) and many others. Ironically, the challenges and difficulties they face require them to be rough, wild and brutal. Following this situation, street children around the world have been associated with many negative connotations by the close community and society, such as “servant of all works” (Mayhew, 1861); “dust of life” (Hong & Ohno, 2005); “odd-job boy” (Nte, Nke & Igbani, 2009); “rootless children” (Pietkiewicz-Pareek, 2012) and many others. According to Wiencke (2008), the term “street child” itself sounds problematic and instils negative images in the mind pertaining to children’s lives on the streets. Regardless of all the negative connotations associated with street children, all countries and societies have to remember that: street children are our children and they still require care and protection from responsible adults, parents, family members, community, society, relevant agencies and the government. In other words, the rights of street children should not be undermined, neglected and ignored. Otherwise, these children are forced to be on the streets, live independently on the streets, to work and earn money for survival as well as giving up their childhood.

Further, many studies have been undertaken to explore the street children issues in different countries. It is discovered that there are a number of factors that influence street children to end up their lives on the streets, such as poverty (Ahmad, 2016; Kayiranga & Mukashema, 2014; Murray et al., 2012); family breakdown (Ahmad, 2016; Sharma & Joshi, 2013; Murray et al., 2012); victims of warfare (Ball, 1994); documentation issue (Ahmad, 2016; Vanar, 2014; Aliaas, Bajunid & Abdullah, 2012); violence and abuse (Ahmad, 2016); runaway (Lukman, 2009) and many others. This study believes that the factors attributing to the street children issue differ according to different situations, contexts, nature, environment and cultural practices in every country. This study further argues that there is no single factor leading to street children issues; rather the factors are all interrelated with one another. In addressing the street children issue, it requires momentous effort and attention from many parties including families, societies, communities, relevant agencies and the government.

The above discussion depicts the lives of children who have no other option but to end up their lives on the streets. This is because the “streets” have been associated to a source of livelihood where they can work, earn some money and share their lives with other street children (UNICEF, 2009). In sustaining their lives on the street, street children have developed numerous strategies to survive including family networking, friendships, community resources, belief in god and future focus (Orme & Seipel, 2010). Although there are innumerable survival strategies of street children which have been identified; however, this paper concentrates only on “friendship” as the main survival strategy of the children while they are on the streets. Friendship as a survival strategy of street children around the world is still under-researched and remains a curiously neglected topic (Ofosu-Kusi & Mizen, 2010). This is the gap that this paper hopes to fill, specifically in exploring friendship as a survival strategy of street children in the Malaysian context, in particularly in Kuala Lumpur city and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

Friendship as a survival strategy of street children

“Friendship” as a survival strategy of street children is unique in its nature. According to Ofosu-Kusi and Mizen (2010), friendship among street children is associated with sources of help that can be affiliated with “cooperation”, “mutuality” and “reciprocity”; in which these terms are considered as unfamiliar in writings. Although street children still require care and protection from many parties especially parents and family members; however, most of these children receive lack of supervision, protection and direction until they need to live and stay independently on the street. Once these vulnerable children decide to end up their lives on the streets, they are exposed to high risks such as gangsterism, violence, abuse and others. To minimize risks and maximize protection while on the streets, street children need to stay with a group of friends, especially those who are female. Berhanu (1998) claimed that female

street children are the ones who are dire need of friends on the streets. This is because they are vulnerable to high risks of getting raped, sexually harassed and sodomized while sleeping. In addition, the author also argued that experienced street children will become resourceful and vital assets to “newbies” or “newcomers” on the streets.

Street children never realize that engaging in friendship can lead to many consequences (positive and negative consequences). A study conducted by Murray et al. (2012) claimed that friendship of street children bring about negative consequences towards them such as succumbing to theft to assist these “friends”, involving in drugs, becoming ignorant to their parents due to peer influence and getting involved in wrong groups of friends. Street children may be forced to live in complicated situations on the streets. Regardless of the consequences of engaging in friendship; the relationships formed between street friends are unique. Street friends become a source of encouragement, bravery, motivation and determination for street children, in particularly, for those who have been abandoned and neglected by their families. The unique formation of friendship among street children is not only based on trust, but also on mutual exchanges and support. Some of these children, especially the newcomers, would be clueless and would need to befriend other street children to obtain survival skills and protection. In sustaining their lives on the streets, reciprocity and cooperative way of living have become critical elements in friendship among street children.

This paper concentrates only on friendship among street children in the Kuala Lumpur city and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Although Kuala Lumpur city and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah share the similar geographical location in Malaysia; however, both of these areas differ in nature, environment, context and culture. This study believes that these are among the reasons that shape the behaviour and characteristics of street children in the two areas. Through an observation during the data collection for the research funded by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE)¹ with street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah; most of them were close to or know other street children as they called ‘friends’. Almost every day they spend their time with friends; help their friends work so that they can earn money as much as they can, play football when they are tired to work and chat with each other by using their own languages such as Bajau and Sabahan languages.

In Kuala Lumpur, the level of dependency among street children is low since they receive some attention from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Religion of Love, The Soup Kitchen, Pertiwi and Chow Kit Foundation (to name a few

¹ This information is gathered during data collection for the research grant titled: ‘Social construction and identity formation of “street children” in a Malaysian context’—Interview session took place at Kota Kinabalu, Sabah for second phase of data collection for the above project involving ten (10) street children aged from seven (7) to below eighteen (18) years old.

of the non-organizational organizations (NGOs) that provide help and support to the street children in Kuala Lumpur city). These NGOs supply food, clothes and other basic needs to people in need (homeless, urban poor and immigrants), including street children in Kuala Lumpur. Although the goods and support received are still not enough for the children's healthy growth; however, it is better as compared to street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah who depend much on their friends and if fortunate, from the community. For instance, Religion of Love initiated a program called "Chow Kit Kids" that provides several activities including tuition classes, poem classes, monthly birthday celebration and "buku jualan" for children at high risk and street children around the Chow Kit area. Thus, this paper aims at exploring friendship as a survival strategy of street children in the Kuala Lumpur city and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews since it is the most appropriate to be used and is well suited for a sociological study (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). It is supported by observations to study and understand people within their natural environment (Baker, 2006)—in the context of this study, it refers to the street children's natural environment. An interview protocol consists of semi-structured questions (prompted with relevant pictures) was used during the face-to-face in-depth interviews with street children. The purposive and snowball sampling techniques were applied in this study (Etikan, Alkassim & Abubakar, 2016) which suit the purpose of this study to obtain more respondents through the street children network (snowballing—introducing and convincing their friends to participate in the interviews). The data collection was conducted in 2016, involving 24 respondents (individual street children)—12 respondents in Kuala Lumpur city and 12 respondents from Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Among the sampling criteria of the selection of the respondents were: (1) children aged between 7 years and below 18 years old; (2) represents both gender; and (3) represents two age groups – toddler (aged 7 to 12 years old) and teenagers (aged 13 to below 18 years old).

Findings

The presentation of the findings of this study begins with: (1) demographic profile of street children in the Kuala Lumpur city and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah; (2) friendship as a survival strategy of street children in the Kuala Lumpur city and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah; and (3) the degree/level of friendship and their consequences faced by street children in the city of Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah (too close to friend/s, close to friend/s and distance from friend/s).

Demographic profile of street children in the Kuala Lumpur city and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

Through the findings, this study discovers that the number of male street children (18 respondents) who were involved in this study was higher than female street children (6 respondents). Among the respondents, the number of street children who were categorized as toddlers (aged between 7 years old to 12 years old, 13 respondents) was higher than street children who were categorized as teenagers (aged between 13 years old to below 18 years old, 9 respondents). Notably, the majority of street children in the Kuala Lumpur city were among the local people (Malaysian citizens). However, the majority of street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah were undocumented (9 respondents)—they were illegally migrated from the Philippines and Indonesia. Some of them followed their father/mother/guardian to come to Malaysia while the rest was born here. This situation makes them unsure about their country of origin (1 respondent). Out of 24 respondents, a majority of street children live with parents/father/ mother/guardian (18 respondents) (Refer Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic profile of street children in the Kuala Lumpur city and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

| Characteristics | | Kuala Lumpur City | Kota Kinabalu, Sabah | Total |
|---|---|----------------------|-------------------------|-------|
| Gender | Male | 9 | 9 | 18 |
| | Female | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| Age | Toddler (aged between 7 years old to 12 years old) | 5 | 8 | 13 |
| | Teenagers (aged between 13 years old to below 18 years old) | 7 | 2 | 9 |
| | Unknown | 7 | 2 ² | 9 |
| Malaysian Citizen | Yes | 12 | 2 | 14 |
| | No | - | 9 | 9 |
| | Unknown | - | 1 | 1 |
| Ethnicity | Malay | 12 | 2 | 14 |
| | Philippines | - | 7 | 7 |
| | Indonesia | - | 2 | 2 |
| | Unknown | - | 1 | 1 |
| Live with parents/mother/ father/guardian | Yes | 7 | 11 | 18 |
| | Seldom | 1 | - | 1 |
| | No | 4 | 1 | 5 |

² The findings of this study reveal that the majority of street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah are illegally migrated from other neighbouring countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia. These children followed their parents/mother/father/guardian by entering Malaysia to seek for a better life, job opportunities and new "home". Hence, this situation makes them undocumented and unsure about their age since they do not have legal birth certificates or passports.

Friendship as a survival strategy of street children in the Kuala Lumpur city and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

The findings of this study reveal that all the respondents (12 respondents from the Kuala Lumpur city and 12 respondents from Kota Kinabalu, Sabah) recognized friendship as survival strategy while they are on the street. However, street children use/adopt friendship as a survival strategy in their daily lives differently according to different situations, context, environment and cultural practices.

Based on the findings of this study, the overall pattern of friendship as a survival strategy among street children in the Kuala Lumpur city was mainly for accompanying them while on the street and only some of them need friends for education. The findings of friendship as a survival strategy of street children in the city of Kuala Lumpur are exemplified below:

I have many friends (Saiful, male, 10 years old, Kuala Lumpur).

I have many friends (Alin, female, 12 years old, Kuala Lumpur).

I have many friends (Zafran, male, 15 years old, Kuala Lumpur).

I have many friends (Zulhairi, male, 17 years old, Kuala Lumpur).

I have many friends (Syahrizal, male, 17 years old, Kuala Lumpur).

I have a dozen of friends here (Taufiq, male, 15 years old, Kuala Lumpur).

I have many friends [...] Till I cannot count (Putera, male, 13 years old, Kuala Lumpur).

I have a lot of friends here [...] We are like a family (Amirul, male, 16 years old, Kuala Lumpur).

I have friends [...] I have many friends [...] My closest friend is Aidil, he is 15 years old (Aki, male, 11 years old, Kuala Lumpur).

I have many friends behind this building (the building is referring to shop lot at Chow Kit area) (Kamaruddin, male, 9 years old, Kuala Lumpur).

I always come here to meet my friends, every night. [...] But, sometimes I will come in the evening (Baayah, female, 12 years old, Kuala Lumpur).

I have best friends, Baayah and Nabila [...] I have male best friends too, Am, Sam, Faisal, Aki, Botak [...] (Azwani, female, 13 years old, Kuala Lumpur).

In contrary, this study finds that the overall pattern of friendship as a survival strategy among street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah is mainly for working, loitering around and playing on the streets. These findings are exemplified as below:

All my friends are okay (Firdaus, 10 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah).

I have many friends (Misbar, male, 8 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah).

These are all my friends (pointing the fingers to his friends) (Johny, male, age is unknown, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah).

I only have few friends here (Noor, female, 7 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah).

This is my friend (refers to another street child) (Juari, male, 7 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah).

I came here for playing and sightseeing (with friends) (Jerry, male, 9 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah).

I have a lot of friends [...] Sometimes I forgot their names (Lin, female, 10 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah).

I have many friends [...] This is my friend; in fact, I have more friends (Farah, female, 11 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah).

I do not even have a best friend [...] We are only friends during working (Harkamil, male, 13 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah).

I go to Central Point (shopping mall in front of the Philippine Market) with my friends at night (Faisal, male, 11 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah).

I have many friends [...] This is my friend (refers to another street child), all of them are my friends too (Arik, male, 13 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah).

I have two friends here, only two of them [...] We know Mamal (another street child) [...] We are Mamal's friends (Salleh, male, age is unknown, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah).

The degree/level of friendship and their consequences engaged by street children in the city of Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

Based on the findings, this study finds that the degrees/levels of friendship among street children in the city of Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah can be divided into three: (1) too close to friends; (2) close to friends; and (3) distance from friends. The majority of street children in the Kuala Lumpur city were found too close to their friends. On the other hand, street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah only closely engaged with friends, as illustrated in Figure 1. Further, each degree/level of friendship is discussed together with their consequences (negative and positive consequences) to develop in-depth comprehension in the following sections.

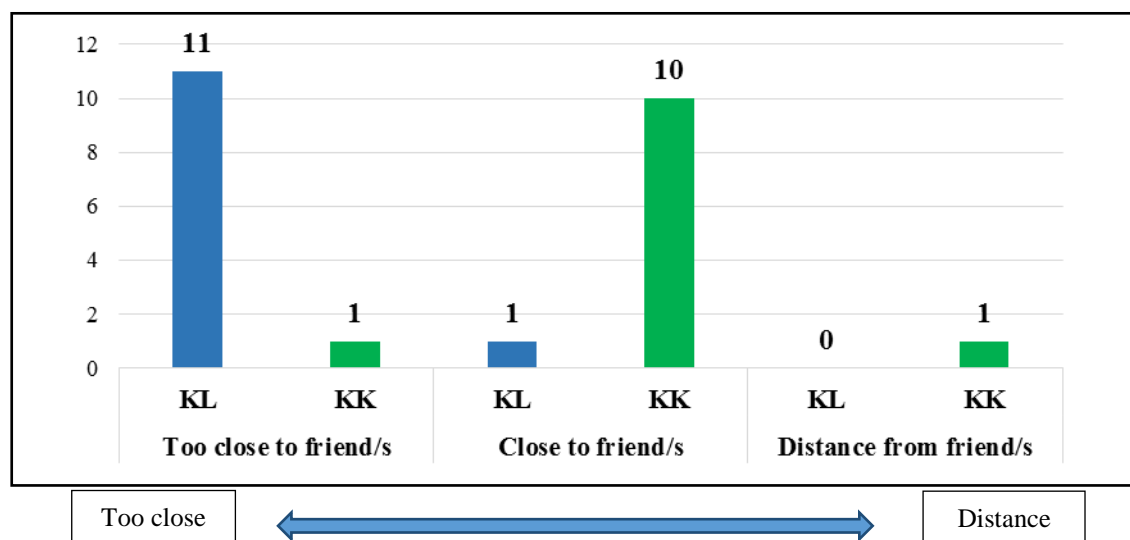


Figure 1

The Degree/Levels of Friendship Engaged by Street Children

Too close to friends

Out of 24 respondents involved in this study, the majority of street children in the Kuala Lumpur city engage too close friends (11 respondents) as compared to street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah (1 respondent). This study discovers a number of reasons that influence these children to be too close to friends and the main reason is to maximize their protection from being bullied and kidnapped by strangers. Notably, 5 respondents (3 female street children and 2 male street children) associated friendship as a source of protection, as exemplified below:

I always come here to chat with my friends [...] I must have friends to accompany me while going anywhere, doing homework together [...] I have never been bullied because my friends always protect me [...] (Alin, female, 12 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I need friends because if I get into trouble, they can help me, such as they protect me from being bullied by others [...] (Azwani, female, 13 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I need to have friends with me because they can protect me from being kidnapped [...] (Saiful, male, 10 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I have never been bullied because I have my friends who can protect me (Baayah, female, 12 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

[...] They also can protect me (Zafran, male, 15 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

Based on the findings, street children who engaged too close to friends associated their friendship as sleeping together on the streets. These children were among the homeless children who were loitering and residing on the streets. However, there were times when they also slept at their friends' rental room or went home occasionally to meet their parents/father/mother/family members. The findings are presented below:

I used to sleep with my friend. My mother left me here at that time because she had to go somewhere [...] During that time, I sleep here (on the street) while waiting for my friend's mother to go back home [...] (Baayah, female, 12 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I live with my friends [...] I am not going home frequently [...] I sleep with them, my friends [...] (Aki, male, 11 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I used to sleep here (on the street) with my friend (Saiful, male, 10 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

Street children develop distinctive friendships until they are comfortable to share the burden with friends while they are on the streets. The findings of this is exemplified below:

I have dozens of friends, but I only have three best friends, Saiful, Putera and Haikal [...] *If people asked me to choose either friends or money, I would want my best friends [...]* We need to stay together (Taufiq, male, 15 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

We went to KLCC together to play at the pool [...] *We shared food together, and if I do not have money, my friends will treat me* (Azwani, female, 13 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I always playing with my friends, loitering, dancing [...] *Sometimes if my friends need money, I will try my best to help them by giving my money that I have* (Putera, male, 13 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

Yesterday, we went to waterfalls [...] *We share the money to go there [...]* I am happy to be with my friends (Amirul, male, 16 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

They were always helping me when I have no money (Alin, female, 12 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

Subsequently, out of 24 respondents, 6 of them associated friends like family to share their problem and sadness. In some situations, they will get bored and lonely if they do not have friends while on the streets, as exemplified below:

I have a lot of friends [...] *My best friends are my adopted brother and Black [...]* I need friends to share my problem and sadness [...] *I felt lonely when I have no friend*

[...] I felt afraid too when alone because I felt like there is someone who wants to hurt me or beat me (Zafran, male, 15 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

My friends and me just like a family [...] I must have friends, otherwise I will feel bored [...] (Amirul, male, 16 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I felt lonely if my friends are not here [...] I cannot play and hang out with them (Alin, female, 12 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I felt lonely when my friends are not here [...] I just kept dreamy (Azwani, female, 13 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I will feel lonely if my friends are not with me (Aki, male, 11 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I felt lonely when my friends went to school (Taufiq, male, 15 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

Only 1 respondent claimed that he had to remain in a group of friends to minimize risks while he was on the streets. He was one of the street children who was involved in the Punk groups in Kuala Lumpur city. While the other respondent admitted that he used to drink alcohol and get drunk with friends. The findings are presented below:

We are always in a group of friends to minimize the risk while on the street (Syahrizal, male, 17 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I have best friends. *We always get drunk to release stress*; there is nothing for us to do (Zulhairi, male, 17 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

The above discussion was centred around friendship among street children in the city of Kuala Lumpur. Unlike street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, only 1 respondent out of the 12 respondents claimed that he engaged too close to friends while on the streets. He also associated friendship as a source of protection from being beaten.

All of them are my friends [...] I am afraid to come here without my friends [...] Sulu people always beat me, it hurts (Johny, male, age is unknown, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

As indicated earlier, a majority of street children in the Kuala Lumpur city are engaged with too close to friends as compared to street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Friendship among street children leads to positive and negative consequences. Among the positive consequences of engaging too close to friends are to get support, protection and sources of help, as exemplified below:

Yes, I need to have friends, they can protect me [...] We have our own gang [...] They can protect me from being bullied (Putera, male, 13 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I have never been bullied since I was here [...] If there is someone who wants to bully me, my friends will protect me (Alin, female, 12 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I will help my friends if they do not have the money [...] There are times that they gave me money to buy food. I will pay them back when I have extra money (Alin, female, 12 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

To accompany me while on the street [...] It is not safe to be here alone (Aki, male, 11 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I used to share my food with friends (Aki, male, 11 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

However, this study also discovers that the negative consequences of engaging with too close friends outnumber the positive consequences. This has thrown and succumb them into complicated and problematic situations or activities. These activities include loitering, smoking, being cheated by friends, getting involved in theft with friends and other harmful activities.

I did smoking with friends [...] I started to smoking since I was 12 years old (Zafran, male, 15 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

Usually, I smoking with friends [...] I enjoyed with friends (Syahrizal, male 17 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I smoking with friends [...] I am smoking since I was 9 years old (Aki, male, 11 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

Among the activities I always do with friends is smoking (Amirul, male, 16 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

Sometimes, I used to smoking with my friends (Taufiq, male, 15 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

My friend did ask me to steal (Zafran, male, 15 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

My friend used to ask me to steal, but I do not want to do that [...] She asked me to steal because she did not have that stuff like the slippers, cell phone [...] She is poor (Alin, female, 12 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

Sometimes, I have been cheated by my friend [...] He took my money while I was sleeping (Aki, male, 11 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I have one friend who stole my belongings [...] She is weird; she likes to staring on others [...] Many of my friends do not like to be friend with her (Azwani, female, 13 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

[...] *I came here to hang out with my friends.* That's all (Azwani, female, 13 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I always come here to loiter with my friends (Baayah, male, 12 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

We messed up with the dog [...] The dog has just chased us [...] *It was so fun* (Taufiq, male, 15 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

In the worst case scenario, these children will start to get involved with Punk groups, consumption of drugs, alcoholism and glue sniffing. The findings are presented below:

I am Punk [...] *Punk is freedom* [...] We will helping each other [...] *We are independent, tolerate with each other* [...] We get trouble together [...] If we were hungry, it's got to be chaos [...] Chaos is we eat together, go to KFC together. Although, we knew that people see us differently [...] *We are a family* [...] *Punk has four types, Nazi, Anarchy, Pirate and Shark. I am Nazi* [...] Anarchy is freedom. No God, No Leader [...] I do not believe that ideology [...] If you want to know further, you can go to Sogo or Pavillion [...] *I will get drunk with my friends if I stressed* [...] I asked the money from people around to buy the alcohol, RM1.00 per person (Zulhairi, male, 17 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I used to take drugs [...] *Ice (methamphetamine)* [...] *I am not addicted to it. I took the ice for several times* [...] Sometimes, I miss it [...] *My friend gave me the drugs* (Zafran, male, 15 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

What I always do with my friends is glue sniffing (Amirul, male, 16 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

I have friends who sniff glue (Johny, male, age is unknown, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

Close to friends

While the majority of street children in the Kuala Lumpur city are engaged too close to friends; most street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah are engaged closely with friends. The "closeness" to friends among street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah is mainly for meeting and playing with friends. The findings are exemplified below:

I know Bambil, he is the fat boy, isn't? *I want to meet him there* (Faisal, male, 11 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

I always play with my friends (Farah, female, 11 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

I play with my friends (Noor, female, 7 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

I always playing with my friends, go to Central Point to play games (Arik, male, 13 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

I always playing with my friends [...] We chasing each other, playing car and a lot more (Firdaus, male, 10 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

I came here (Philippine Market) with my friend [...] My friend and I always play together, we play "taram" [throwing cents] (Juari, male, 7 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

I always playing with my friends, we chase each other [...] None of my friends are bad, all of them are good people (Misbar, male, 8 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

I am not always with my friends [...] Sometimes, I need friends because I am afraid to stay here alone (Lin, female, 10 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

Only one respondent from the Kuala Lumpur city claimed that he used to play with friends while on the streets. The finding is presented below:

I always play with my friends [...] We like to chase each other, play hide and seek (Kamaruddin, male, 9 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

Similar to the previous degree/level of friendship, engaging closely with friends also lead to positive and negative consequences towards street children. Among the positive consequences are friendships can be sources of help and maximize protection while they are on the streets, as exemplified below:

I afraid to come here without my friends [...] I am afraid to be kidnapped (Farah, female, 11 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

[...] I also scared to come here without friends (Lin, female, 10 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

I always help my friends (Noor, female, 7 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

Further, this study also discovers that street children who are engaged closely with friends also need to bear the negative consequences, which include loitering, wasting time and money for playing video games, fighting and glue sniffing.

I came here to play [...] I just walk and loiter around (Jerry, male, 9 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

We always come here to play and have a chat (loiter) (Juari, male, 7 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

I just came here to play with my friends [...] I just want to walk around (loiter) (Firdaus, male, 10 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

We just play on the street [...] We go to Centre Point to play the games (loiter) [shopping mall in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah] (Arik, male, 13 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

He is my friend [...] He sniffs glue (Faisal, male, 11 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

Yes, I have many friends who involved in glue sniffing (Lin, female, 10 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

I have around four or five friends who sniff glue (Misbar, male, 8 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

A lot of children sniff glue with their friends here [...] Similar to these children's age (Harkamil, male, 13 years old, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

Last time I have a fight with my friend [...] He messed up with me (Kamaruddin, male, 9 years old, Kuala Lumpur, italicized emphasized added).

Distance from friends

Notably, only 1 respondent from Kota Kinabalu, Sabah was found distance from friends. He claimed that he only had friends while working on the street; and most of his times were spent on working rather than playing with friends. The findings are exemplified below:

I have do not have many friends [...] I am busy working [...] (Salleh, male, age is unknown, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

Due to this situation, he always felt afraid and it exposed him to high risks. He received no support from friends, as presented below:

I have do not have many friends [...] I am busy working [...] Sometimes, I felt afraid if I am alone [...] I have been beaten by Sulu people [...] (Salleh, male, age is unknown, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, italicized emphasized added).

Discussion and conclusion

The emergence of street children is recognized as a long-standing issue in Malaysia (Singh, 2007). This issue creates serious implications and consequences toward street children's survival (Omiyanka & Festus, 2010; Murray et al., 2012). Complicated situations have dragged and succumb these vulnerable children into inhumane conditions on the streets. This includes violence, abuse, gangsterism, discrimination, exploitation and others. Moreover, this study argues that friendship as a survival strategy that is used/adopted by street children in the Kuala Lumpur city and

Kota Kinabalu, Sabah is influenced by different situations, contexts, environment and cultural practices. Notably, the majority of street children in the Kuala Lumpur city are among the local people who are suffering from urban poverty. While the majority of street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah are from neighbouring countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia; hence, they are undocumented and exempted from receiving any basic services provided by the government or are imposed high charges for the services.

Following to this situation, street children have developed distinctive relationships among themselves on the streets which are known as friendship. Friendship among street children is unique (Abd Hamid, Ahmad & Hussin, 2015). This is because friendship of street children involves mutuality and a cooperative way of living (Ofosu-Kusi & Mizen, 2010). As indicated earlier, friendship among street children is divided into three degrees/levels: (1) “too close to friends”, (2) “close to friends” and (3) “distance from friends”. Based on the findings of this study, the majority of street children in Kuala Lumpur city were found engaging too close to friends; while street children in Kota Kinabalu were engaging closely with friends on the street. Notably, only 1 street child can be categorized under the third degree/level of friendship, pertaining to his involvement with distant friends.

Every degree/level of friendship among street children leads to many positive and negative consequences. However, this study finds that the negative consequences of engaging with friendship among street children in the Kuala Lumpur city and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah outnumber the positive consequences. This is consistent with a study conducted by Murray et al. (2012) that claimed friendships of street children result in negative adverse effects such as child assist thefts, consumption of drugs, disregard of parents because of friends’ influences and involvement with wrong groups of friends. Engaging too close to friends among street children has been associated to a source of help for protection while on the streets. However, it also propels these children to be involved in complex and problematic situations such as loitering, smoking, involvement in drugs, alcoholism and many others. Street children who are engaged closely to friends also associated friends as sources of help and protection. They are also exposed to negative consequences such as loitering, glue sniffing and fighting. Distance from friends makes them at high risks and no support while on the streets.

The above discussion on friendship among street children proves that in some situations, street children have to rely on friendship to survive on the street. However, friendship among street children involves various degrees/levels which may lead to many consequences. Street children are still young and fragile. They may not realise that engaging in friendship may also lead them to innumerable negative consequences as compared to positive consequences. However, they still need to be in a group of friends to maximize protection and minimize risks while on the streets (Berhanu, 1998). Hence, this study concludes that street children acknowledge that friendship is a

pertinent survival strategy and are aware that they can rely on friendship to survive on the streets and maximize their protection and security. However, friendship alone cannot guarantee their survival. This can be seen through many negative consequences that may harm their childhood and development. Thus, the street children issue in Malaysia requires serious attention from relevant parties including families, societies, communities, agencies and the government. This is because street children are our children and are the future generation of our beloved nation.

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