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Childhood Emotional Abuse and Adult Communication: Implications for Interpersonal and Organisational Interaction

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ABSTRACT

Childhood emotional abuse is a form of adverse interpersonal experience that may have lasting implications for communication and relationship dynamics in adulthood. While previous research has predominantly examined its psychological and mental health consequences, less attention has been given to how such experiences may shape communication behaviours that are relevant to interpersonal and organisational interaction. Guided by Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory of Personality Development, this study examines the perceived factors contributing to childhood emotional abuse and its perceived effects on adult communication, with particular consideration of interpersonal interaction and its potential implications for organisational contexts. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed using a structured questionnaire comprising 34 closed-ended items, including demographic questions and five-point Likert-scale measures. Data were collected through online distribution using convenience sampling, involving 250 respondents. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted using frequencies, percentages, and mean scores to examine respondents' perceptions of childhood emotional abuse, its contributing factors, and its potential effects on adult communication and interaction. The findings indicate a high level of awareness of childhood emotional abuse, with 99.6% of respondents reporting awareness of the phenomenon. Furthermore, 83.6% reported experiencing emotional abuse during childhood, while 93.2% reported witnessing someone they knew experiencing such abuse. Threatening children was the most strongly recognised form of emotional abuse (M = 4.800), followed by persistent swearing (M = 4.616) and public criticism (M = 4.364). Poor understanding of child development recorded the highest perceived contributing factor (M = 4.540), followed by parental histories of childhood abuse or neglect (M = 4.400) and problematic household environments (M = 4.388). Regarding adult communication, difficulties expressing opinions and feelings (M = 4.532), communicating with unfamiliar individuals (M = 4.524), and managing anger during interpersonal disagreements (M = 4.500) received the highest mean scores. The findings suggest that early adverse interpersonal experiences may have implications for communication and relationship dynamics that extend into organisational environments, particularly in relation to interpersonal interaction, communication effectiveness, and workplace relationships. The study therefore provides a basis for further research on the individual factors underlying communication behaviour in organisational settings.

Keywords: Childhood Emotional Abuse, Adult Communication, Interpersonal Communication, Self-Concept, Organisational Communication
JEL Classifications: I310, I120

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1. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is an important component of interpersonal interaction and organisational relationships. Individuals are required to express their opinions and feelings, engage with others, interpret verbal and non-verbal messages, manage disagreements, and regulate their emotional responses in various social and professional contexts. Communication difficulties may therefore influence the quality of interpersonal relationships and interactions, particularly when individuals are required to work with unfamiliar people, participate in discussions, or manage conflict. Although communication competence is frequently examined from organisational and behavioural perspectives, individual communication patterns may also be influenced by experiences established earlier in life.

One experience that may have long-term implications for individual development is childhood emotional abuse. Emotional abuse, also referred to as psychological abuse, involves repeated behaviours that damage a child's sense of self-worth and emotional development. Such behaviours may include withholding affection and support, humiliating, threatening, criticising, insulting, rejecting, or using derogatory language towards a child. Unlike some physical forms of abuse, emotional abuse may occur without visible physical evidence and can develop gradually over time, potentially affecting a child's sense of security, belonging, and self-worth (Morin, 2022). According to Kids Helpline (2025), emotional abuse may involve consistently making children feel unloved, unworthy, alone, or afraid, including through rejection, bullying, yelling, criticism, threats, and exposure to domestic conflict.

The consequences of childhood emotional abuse have been widely associated with difficulties in psychological and emotional development. Previous studies have reported associations between childhood emotional abuse and depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, stress, and other adverse psychological outcomes (Kumari, 2020; Kraut, 2022). Similarly, Dye (2020) found that individuals who experienced emotional abuse reported higher levels of neuroticism, depression, anxiety, and stress. Other studies have also demonstrated associations between childhood emotional abuse and identity-related difficulties and maladaptive behavioural outcomes (Gu et al., 2020). These findings indicate that the consequences of emotional abuse may extend beyond childhood and continue to influence individuals during adulthood.

Importantly, the developmental consequences of emotional abuse may also have implications for how individuals communicate and interact with others. Emotional abuse may affect an individual's confidence in expressing opinions and emotions, ability to establish interactions with unfamiliar individuals, emotional regulation during disagreements, and interpretation of interpersonal communication. Such capabilities are relevant not only to personal relationships but also to interactions in social and organisational environments. Employees, for example, routinely communicate ideas, exchange information, negotiate differences, manage interpersonal disagreements, and respond to verbal and non-verbal cues. Consequently, understanding factors that may be associated with communication difficulties in adulthood can provide useful insights into interpersonal behaviour within organisational settings.

Despite extensive research examining the psychological and emotional consequences of childhood emotional abuse, comparatively less attention has been given to its potential implications for communication in adulthood. Existing literature has predominantly focused on mental health, emotional well-being, behavioural difficulties, and developmental outcomes, while communication-related consequences have received comparatively less empirical attention. This represents an important area for further investigation because communication is an essential interpersonal capability across social and organisational contexts.

Therefore, this study examines respondents' perceptions regarding childhood emotional abuse, including the types and contributing factors associated with such abuse, and its perceived implications for communication in adulthood. Specifically, the study focuses on communication-related difficulties involving the expression of opinions and feelings, conversational attention, interaction with unfamiliar individuals, emotional responses during arguments, negative responses in communication, emotional expression, and the interpretation of non-verbal messages. By examining these dimensions, the study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of how adverse childhood experiences may have implications for communication behaviour in adulthood and its relevance to interpersonal and organisational interactions.

1.1. Problem Statement

Child emotional abuse remains an important social issue because its consequences may extend beyond childhood and influence individuals throughout adulthood. In Malaysia, the Social Welfare Department (JKM) documented 18,750 cases of child abuse between 2020 and 2022, involving various forms of maltreatment, including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect and abandonment. Although emotional abuse accounted for a smaller proportion of reported cases compared with physical and sexual abuse, its less visible nature may contribute to under-recognition and under-reporting.

The long-term consequences of childhood maltreatment have been widely documented. Individuals who experience emotional abuse during childhood may experience difficulties involving self-esteem, emotional regulation, psychological well-being, social relationships, and interpersonal functioning during adulthood (Kumari, 2020; Dye, 2020). Gu et al. (2020), for example, identified an association between childhood emotional abuse and nonsuicidal self-injury, with identity confusion playing a mediating role. Similarly, Dye (2020) reported higher levels of neuroticism, depression, anxiety, and stress among individuals who experienced emotional abuse. These findings demonstrate that childhood emotional abuse may produce developmental consequences that persist well beyond the childhood period.

However, the existing body of research has predominantly emphasised psychological and mental health outcomes, while comparatively less attention has been given to the potential

communication-related consequences of childhood emotional abuse. This represents an important gap because communication is fundamental to interpersonal interaction and is particularly relevant within organisational environments. Adults are expected to express ideas and emotions, interact with unfamiliar individuals, participate in conversations, manage disagreements, regulate emotional responses, and interpret non-verbal communication. Difficulties in these areas may influence the quality of interpersonal relationships and interactions in professional settings.

The limited attention given to communication-related outcomes creates a need to further examine how childhood emotional abuse may be perceived as influencing communication in adulthood. Understanding these potential effects may provide broader insights into individual communication behaviour and interpersonal interaction, including contexts relevant to organisations and human resource management. Rather than viewing communication difficulties solely as an immediate interpersonal issue, examining their possible association with adverse childhood experiences may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of individual differences in communication behaviour.

Therefore, this study examines respondents' perceptions of childhood emotional abuse and its potential implications for communication in adulthood. Specifically, the study investigates perceptions regarding the types of emotional abuse, contributing factors associated with emotional abuse, and communication difficulties that may be experienced in adulthood following childhood emotional abuse. The study is expected to provide insights into the potential long-term interpersonal implications of childhood emotional abuse and its relevance to communication within broader social and organisational contexts.

1.2. Research Objectives

1. To determine the perceived contributing factors associated with childhood emotional abuse
2. To examine the perceived effects of childhood emotional abuse on communication in adulthood.

1.3. Significant of Study

This study contributes to a broader understanding of the potential long-term implications of childhood emotional abuse for communication and interpersonal interaction in adulthood. While previous research has predominantly examined the psychological, emotional, and developmental consequences of childhood emotional abuse, this study places greater emphasis on communication-related outcomes. By examining respondents' perceptions of communication difficulties associated with childhood emotional abuse, the study provides additional insight into how adverse childhood experiences may be reflected in communication behaviour during adulthood.

From a communication perspective, the findings may contribute to a better understanding of difficulties involving the expression of opinions and feelings, interaction with unfamiliar individuals, emotional responses during disagreements, emotional expression, and the interpretation of non-verbal messages. These aspects represent important components of interpersonal communication and may influence how individuals establish and maintain relationships with others. The findings may therefore be useful to researchers seeking to understand the relationship between early-life experiences and adult communication behaviour.

The study also has potential relevance to organisational and management contexts. Communication and interpersonal interaction are essential in organisational environments, where individuals are required to exchange information, express ideas, collaborate with colleagues, manage disagreements, and respond appropriately to different interpersonal situations. Although this study does not directly measure workplace communication or employee performance, its findings may provide an initial basis for understanding how individual life experiences can potentially shape communication behaviour that becomes relevant in professional interactions. The findings may therefore offer useful considerations for organisations and human resource practitioners when developing communication, interpersonal skills, employee well-being, and supportive workplace initiatives.

In addition, the findings may benefit parents, caregivers, educators, and other individuals involved in children's development by increasing awareness of the potential long-term consequences of emotional mistreatment. Understanding behaviours such as excessive criticism, humiliation, threats, rejection, and emotional neglect may encourage adults to adopt more constructive approaches to communication with children. Greater awareness may also contribute to early recognition and prevention of emotional abuse.

Finally, the study may contribute to broader efforts to promote healthier interpersonal communication across different stages of life. By highlighting the potential relationship between childhood experiences and communication in adulthood, the study encourages greater recognition that communication difficulties may be influenced by experiences beyond the immediate interaction. Such awareness may support more empathetic interpersonal approaches and provide a foundation for future research examining childhood experiences, adult communication behaviour, and their implications within organisational and social environments.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Childhood Emotional Abuse

Childhood emotional abuse refers to behaviours by parents, caregivers, or other significant individuals that negatively affect a child's emotional well-being, self-worth, and psychological or social development. Unlike physical abuse, emotional abuse may not produce visible physical injuries and can therefore remain unrecognised for extended periods. It commonly involves repeated behaviours such as threats, rejection, humiliation, criticism, verbal aggression, and other forms of behaviour intended to make children feel unwanted, unworthy, or unsafe. Emotional abuse may occur as an isolated incident; however, it is more commonly characterised by a pattern of harmful behaviours that accumulate over time.

Emotional abuse is also recognised as an important component of child maltreatment because of its potential developmental

consequences. It may coexist with physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect and may independently contribute to adverse psychological and interpersonal outcomes. Emotional neglect differs from emotional abuse in that it primarily involves a failure to provide appropriate emotional support, attention, affection, and responsiveness to a child's developmental needs. Nevertheless, both experiences may influence children's emotional development and subsequent interactions with others.

Previous research has associated childhood emotional abuse with various psychological and behavioural difficulties that may continue into adulthood. These include difficulties involving self-esteem, emotional regulation, anxiety, depression, and interpersonal relationships (Kumari, 2020; Dye, 2020). Such findings suggest that the consequences of childhood emotional abuse may extend beyond immediate emotional well-being and potentially influence how individuals interact and communicate with others throughout their lives.

2.2. Communication and Interpersonal Interaction

Communication is an essential component of interpersonal interaction because it enables individuals to exchange information, express thoughts and emotions, develop relationships, and respond to the perspectives of others. Effective communication involves more than the ability to speak. It also includes listening, emotional expression, interpretation of verbal and non-verbal messages, and the ability to respond appropriately in different interpersonal situations.

Communication competence is particularly relevant when individuals interact with people from different backgrounds, participate in discussions, express disagreement, or manage emotionally challenging situations. Difficulties in expressing feelings, interpreting non-verbal cues, regulating emotions, or interacting with unfamiliar individuals may affect the quality of interpersonal relationships. These capabilities are also relevant in organisational environments, where individuals routinely communicate with colleagues, supervisors, clients, and other stakeholders.

Therefore, communication behaviour can be understood as an important interpersonal capability that may be influenced by individual experiences and developmental backgrounds. Examining factors that may shape communication patterns in adulthood may provide broader insights into interpersonal behaviour across both social and organisational contexts.

2.3. Types of Childhood Emotional Abuse

Gu et al. (2020) describe psychological abuse, which is also referred to as emotional abuse, as a form of maltreatment that causes emotional distress rather than direct physical harm. Common behaviours include insults, humiliation, blaming, threatening, and repeated criticism directed towards children. Such behaviours may undermine children's emotional security and influence their ability to regulate negative emotions.

The Nock Integrated Model suggests that experiences of emotional abuse may interfere with an individual's ability to regulate highly negative emotions, including anger, sadness, fear, and shame (Gu et al., 2020). Difficulty regulating these emotions may subsequently influence behavioural responses and interpersonal interactions.

Ness (2023) further highlights that emotional abuse may involve aggressive, threatening, manipulative, or degrading behaviours, while also reflecting inadequate emotional support. This perspective is important because emotional abuse should not only be understood through overtly aggressive behaviours but also through the absence of appropriate emotional support and empathy.

Hoeboer et al. (2021) identify several behaviours associated with parental emotional abuse, including name-calling, degrading remarks, harsh or insulting comments, bullying, verbal violence, verbal threats, and verbal attacks. Similarly, Kraut (2022) identifies threatening, rejecting, ignoring, isolating, corrupting, and exploiting as recognised forms of emotional abuse. These behaviours can communicate to children that they are unwanted, unworthy, or unsafe, potentially affecting their emotional development and subsequent interpersonal behaviour.

The range of behaviours associated with emotional abuse demonstrates that the phenomenon is multidimensional. Behaviours involving threats, criticism, humiliation, rejection, verbal aggression, and restrictions on emotional expression may influence how children understand themselves and interact with others. Consequently, identifying different forms of emotional abuse is important when examining its potential long-term implications for communication and interpersonal interaction.

2.4. Factors Contributing to Childhood Emotional Abuse

Childhood emotional abuse may arise from multiple interacting factors involving parents, families, and broader social circumstances. Loosley and Johnson (2023) identify parental characteristics and experiences as important factors associated with child maltreatment. Parents who experienced abuse or neglect during their own childhood may be more likely to reproduce harmful patterns of interaction. Such experiences may also be associated with low self-esteem, difficulties in relationships, emotional withdrawal, and difficulties in regulating emotions.

Parental expectations and understanding of children's developmental needs may also influence the likelihood of emotionally abusive behaviour. Parents who have excessively high expectations for their children's behaviour may respond more harshly when children fail to meet those expectations. A lack of empathy and insufficient understanding of children's developmental needs may further increase the risk of inappropriate emotional responses (Loosley and Johnson, 2023).

Avdibegović and Brkić (2020) similarly identify several parental and family-related risk factors, including social isolation, adverse childhood experiences among parents, inadequate parenting knowledge and skills, psychoactive substance use, criminal activity, financial difficulties, and unstable living environments. These factors may influence parents' capacity to recognise and respond appropriately to children's emotional and developmental needs.

Gonzalez et al. (2023) further identify individual, family, community, and social factors associated with child maltreatment. These include parental psychological difficulties, domestic violence, poverty, family circumstances, and other environmental risks. Conversely, parental resilience, social support, and education concerning child development and parenting may serve as protective factors (Wolford et al., 2019).

The literature therefore indicates that childhood emotional abuse is unlikely to result from a single factor. Instead, it may emerge from the interaction of parental experiences, emotional regulation, parenting knowledge, family relationships, and socioeconomic circumstances. Understanding these factors is important because the communication behaviours used by parents and caregivers represent an important component of children's emotional and interpersonal development.

2.5. Childhood Emotional Abuse and Communication in Adulthood

The potential long-term implications of childhood emotional abuse extend beyond psychological well-being and may also involve interpersonal communication. Individuals who experience emotional maltreatment may develop difficulties with emotional regulation, social interaction, and the expression of emotions. These difficulties may subsequently influence how individuals communicate and respond to others during adulthood.

The European Psychiatric Association (2023) reported that individuals with histories of emotional neglect, physical abuse, or psychological abuse demonstrated increased likelihood of anger-related difficulties, with the likelihood of adult anger increasing with the severity of childhood trauma. Such findings are relevant to communication because emotional regulation is an important component of effective interpersonal interaction, particularly during disagreements or emotionally challenging conversations.

Avdibegović and Brkić (2020) similarly reported that childhood neglect and maltreatment may be associated with difficulties involving emotional regulation, emotional expression, social interaction, and the ability to differentiate between emotional states. These findings suggest that adverse childhood experiences may influence not only how individuals feel but also how they express and communicate those feelings to others.

Liu et al. (2023) further found a positive relationship between child maltreatment and social anxiety, with emotional abuse demonstrating a stronger association with social anxiety than some other forms of maltreatment. Social anxiety may manifest through difficulties involving confidence, relationship formation, emotional regulation, and social interaction. Such outcomes provide a potential explanation for why individuals with adverse childhood experiences may experience challenges when communicating with unfamiliar individuals.

Taken together, these findings suggest that childhood emotional abuse may have potential implications for adult communication through several interconnected dimensions, including emotional expression, interpersonal interaction, emotional regulation, conflict responses, and interpretation of social cues. However, much of the existing literature has examined these outcomes through psychological or clinical perspectives rather than explicitly considering communication as an important adult interpersonal outcome.

2.6. Implications for Interpersonal and Organisational Communication

Communication and interpersonal interaction are fundamental to organisational environments. Individuals in organisations are required to exchange information, express ideas, collaborate with others, manage disagreements, respond to feedback, and establish relationships with colleagues and other stakeholders. Consequently, individual differences in communication behaviour may have implications for interpersonal interactions within professional environments.

Although the present study does not directly examine workplace communication or employee performance, understanding potential factors associated with adult communication difficulties may provide useful contextual insights for organisational and human resource perspectives. Early-life experiences may represent one of several background factors that influence how individuals express emotions, interact with others, respond to conflict, and interpret interpersonal messages.

From this perspective, examining the perceived communication consequences of childhood emotional abuse may extend existing discussions beyond psychological outcomes and towards interpersonal behaviour that may become relevant across different social and organisational contexts. Such a perspective may encourage future research to investigate whether communication difficulties associated with adverse childhood experiences are also reflected in workplace interaction, employee relationships, teamwork, or other organisational behaviours.

Overall, the literature indicates that childhood emotional abuse may influence several dimensions of adult interpersonal functioning. However, there remains a need to examine communication-related consequences more explicitly, particularly in relation to the expression of opinions and feelings, interaction with unfamiliar individuals, emotional responses during disagreements, emotional expression, and interpretation of non-verbal messages. These areas correspond to important dimensions of communication and interpersonal interaction and provide the basis for examining the perceived effects of childhood emotional abuse on communication in adulthood.

2.7. Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory of Personality Development

This study is guided by Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory of Personality Development, particularly his concepts of self-concept, early interpersonal experiences, and the importance of acceptance and empathy in human development. Rogers proposed that individuals develop their personalities through continuous interaction between their internal experiences and their surrounding environment. The individual's perception of experiences contributes to the development of the self and

influences how the person understands and responds to the world around them.

A central concept in Rogers' theory is the self-concept, which refers to an individual's perception and understanding of who they are. Self-concept develops through experiences and interactions with significant others, particularly during early stages of life. Rogers emphasised that the treatment individuals receive from important people in their environment can influence how they perceive themselves. Positive experiences involving acceptance, empathy, and unconditional positive regard may support a more positive and stable self-concept, whereas experiences involving rejection, criticism, humiliation, or conditional acceptance may contribute to negative self-perceptions.

Rogers also distinguished between the real self and the ideal self. Congruence occurs when an individual's perception of the real self is relatively consistent with the ideal self, whereas incongruence may occur when there is a substantial discrepancy between the two. Experiences that threaten an individual's sense of worth may contribute to incongruence and psychological discomfort. From this perspective, repeated emotional maltreatment during childhood may become part of an individual's phenomenal field and influence the development of self-perceptions and emotional responses.

The relevance of Rogers' theory to the present study lies particularly in the role of the early environment in shaping self-concept. Childhood emotional abuse may involve repeated criticism, humiliation, rejection, threats, blaming, and restrictions on emotional expression. These experiences may communicate negative messages to children about their value, abilities, and emotional expression. Over time, such experiences may contribute to negative self-perceptions and difficulties in responding to interpersonal situations.

The theory therefore provides a conceptual basis for understanding how childhood emotional experiences may have implications for communication in adulthood. Individuals who develop negative self-perceptions or difficulties with emotional regulation may potentially experience challenges when expressing their opinions and feelings, interacting with unfamiliar individuals, managing disagreements, or interpreting interpersonal messages. These communication-related behaviours correspond closely with the dimensions examined in the present study, including emotional expression, interaction with others, responses during arguments, and understanding non-verbal communication.

From an organisational perspective, the theoretical framework also provides a basis for considering the potential relevance of early interpersonal experiences to adult communication behaviour. Communication and interpersonal interaction are important in organisational environments, where individuals are expected to express ideas, collaborate, manage disagreements, and establish relationships with others. Although the present study does not directly examine workplace communication, employee performance, or organisational outcomes, Rogers' perspective allows childhood experiences to be considered as a potential background factor in understanding individual differences in adult interpersonal communication.

Based on Rogers' Humanistic Theory, the present study therefore conceptualises childhood emotional abuse as an adverse early environmental experience that may be associated with the development of self-concept and subsequent interpersonal communication patterns. The theory supports the proposition that experiences within the early environment may continue to be reflected in how individuals perceive themselves and interact with others in adulthood. Consequently, the theory provides a theoretical foundation for examining the perceived effects of childhood emotional abuse on adult communication and interpersonal interaction.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine respondents' perceptions of childhood emotional abuse, the factors perceived to contribute to such abuse, and its potential effects on communication and interpersonal interaction in adulthood. A quantitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to obtain measurable responses using structured questionnaire items and Likert-scale measurements.

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed electronically to eligible respondents. The questionnaire link was disseminated through social media platforms and electronic communication channels, including WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and other online networks. Online distribution enabled the researcher to reach respondents from different backgrounds and facilitated efficient collection of primary data.

3.1. Survey Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of 34 questions divided into several sections, including demographic information, knowledge and experience of childhood emotional abuse, perceptions of the types of childhood emotional abuse, perceived contributing factors, and perceived effects of childhood emotional abuse on communication in adulthood.

The main attitudinal items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. The use of a structured Likert-scale questionnaire enabled the responses to be quantified and compared across the different dimensions examined in the study.

The questionnaire items were developed based on the study objectives and relevant literature concerning childhood emotional abuse, contributing factors, and adult communication. Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed to ensure that the wording and structure of the items were understandable and aligned with the research objectives. Where applicable, evidence of instrument validity and reliability is reported in the subsequent sections.

3.2. Closed-Ended Questions

The study employed closed-ended questions to facilitate systematic collection and quantitative analysis of primary data. Closed-ended questions provide respondents with predetermined response options and allow responses to be coded numerically for statistical analysis.

For the perception-based items, a five-point Likert scale was used, consisting of 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. The scale was applied consistently across the relevant sections of the questionnaire.

3.3. Sampling Strategy

The study employed non-probability convenience sampling. Convenience sampling involves selecting respondents based on their accessibility and willingness to participate in the study. This approach was adopted because the study involved the collection of public perceptions through an online survey and required access to respondents who were available through online communication channels.

The questionnaire was disseminated through WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and other online networks. Respondents were also encouraged to share the survey with eligible individuals within their personal networks, thereby increasing the reach of the questionnaire.

The target population comprised Malaysian adults aged 18 years and above. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire.

3.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarise respondents' demographic characteristics and categorical responses, while mean scores were used to describe the level of agreement with the Likert-scale statements.

The interpretation of mean scores was used to identify the most strongly perceived types of childhood emotional abuse, contributing factors, and communication-related effects. The descriptive findings were subsequently interpreted in relation to the relevant literature and the study's theoretical framework.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Demographic

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 250 respondents. Female respondents represented the majority of the sample (64.8%), while male respondents accounted for 35.2%. More than half of the respondents were aged between 18 and 23 years (56.4%). In terms of nationality, 73.2% were Malaysian, while 73.8% identified as Muslim. More than half of the respondents held a bachelor's degree (52.4%).

The majority of respondents were single (95.6%), while 55.2% were employed. Among those employed, 33.2% worked in the private sector, 21.2% in the government sector, and 0.8% were self-employed. In terms of household income, 58.8% of respondents were categorised within the M40 income group. Geographically, 38.8% of respondents were from the Central Region, comprising Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Putrajaya.

Table 1: Demographic

Demographic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	88	35.2
Female	162	64.8
Age		
18-23	141	56.4
24-29	61	24.4
30-35	48	19.2
Race		
Malay	183	73.2
Chinese	64	25.6
Indian	3	1.2
Religion		
Islam	184	73.6
Buddha	59	23.6
Christian	6	2.4
Hindu	1	0.4
Level of education		
Diploma/Certificate	114	45.6
Bachelor	131	52.4
Master	4	1.6
Doctor of Philosophy	1	0.4
Marital status		
Single	239	95.6
Married	11	4.4
Household income		
M40 (RM4851-RM10,959)	147	58.8
B40 (<RM4,850)	97	38.8
T20 (>RM10,960)	6	2.4
Occupation		
Students	110	44
Private Sector	83	33.2
Government Sector	53	21.2
Self-employed	2	0.8
Unemployed	2	0.8
Current residing state		
Central Region (Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Putrajaya)	97	38.8
East Coast (Pahang, Kelantan, Terengganu)	72	28.8
Southern Region (Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Johor)	68	27.2
Northern Region (Perak, Penang, Perlis, Kedah)	9	3.6
East Malaysia (Sabah, Sarawak)	4	1.6

The demographic composition provides a relatively diverse sample in terms of gender, employment, education, income, and geographical background. Importantly, the presence of employed respondents from both the private and public sectors provides a relevant context for considering the potential interpersonal and communication implications of childhood experiences in adulthood.

Table 2 indicates a high level of awareness of childhood emotional abuse among the respondents. Almost all respondents (99.6%, n = 249) reported that they were aware of emotional abuse

Table 2: Respondents' knowledge and exposure to childhood emotional abuse

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Do you know about emotional abuse of children?		
Yes	249	99.6
No	1	0.4
Have you ever experienced emotional abuse in your childhood?		
Yes	209	83.6
No	41	16.4
Have you ever witnessed someone you know being emotionally abused as a child?		
Yes	233	93.2
No	17	6.8
If yes, how severe do you think the emotional abuse is?		
Very severe	61	25.6
Severe	130	55.9
Normal	36	15.1
Not severe	7	3.0
Not severe at all	1	0.4

involving children. In addition, 83.6% (n = 209) reported having experienced emotional abuse during childhood, while 93.2% (n = 233) reported having witnessed someone they knew experiencing emotional abuse as a child.

Among respondents who reported experiencing or witnessing emotional abuse, 55.9% perceived the abuse as severe, while a further 25.6% perceived it as very severe. These findings indicate that childhood emotional abuse was not an unfamiliar experience among a substantial proportion of the respondents.

The relatively high proportion of respondents reporting personal experience or observation of emotional abuse provides an important contextual basis for examining its perceived implications in adulthood. In particular, the findings suggest that emotional abuse may represent an experience that warrants attention beyond childhood because of its potential relationship with later interpersonal and communication behaviour.

Table 3 presents respondents' perceptions regarding behaviours that constitute childhood emotional abuse. Among the identified forms, threatening children recorded the highest mean score (M = 4.800), indicating a strong level of agreement that threatening behaviour constitutes emotional abuse.

This finding is consistent with previous literature identifying threats and behaviours that create fear or insecurity as important forms of emotional maltreatment (Ness, 2023; Amone-P'Olak and Letswai, 2020; Hoeboer et al., 2021; Gu et al., 2020). Threatening behaviour may undermine children's sense of safety and emotional security, particularly when it is repeated or occurs within relationships involving significant adults.

Constantly swearing at children recorded the second-highest mean score (M = 4.616). The finding suggests that respondents also strongly recognised repeated verbal aggression as a form of emotional abuse. Previous studies similarly identify verbal aggression, insults, and degrading language as forms of emotional maltreatment that may negatively influence children's emotional development (Amone-P'Olak and Letswai, 2020; Kumari, 2020).

Table 3: Perceived forms of childhood emotional abuse

S. No.	Statement	Mean
1.	Humiliating children in public is a form of child emotional abuse.	3.704
2.	Constantly criticizing children in public is a form of child emotional abuse.	4.364
3.	Constantly swearing at children is a form of child emotional abuse.	4.616
4.	Neglecting children by not showing them love is a form of child emotional abuse.	4.144
5.	Threatening children is a form of child emotional abuse	4.800
6.	Restricting children of their freedom to express themselves is a form of child emotional abuse.	4.008
7.	Constantly blaming children under any circumstances is a form of child emotional abuse.	4.148

The third-highest mean was recorded for constantly criticising children in public (M = 4.364). Public criticism may communicate negative evaluations of children's abilities or worth and may contribute to feelings of embarrassment, rejection, or inadequacy. This finding is consistent with previous research identifying repeated criticism and humiliation as forms of emotional abuse (Kumari, 2020; Gu et al., 2020).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that respondents primarily recognised overt verbal and interpersonal behaviours, particularly threats, swearing, and public criticism, as forms of childhood emotional abuse. These behaviours are particularly relevant to the present study because they involve communication between children and significant adults. Thus, communication itself may function not only as a means of interaction but also as a mechanism through which emotional maltreatment is experienced.

Table 4 presents respondents' perceptions of factors contributing to childhood emotional abuse. Poor understanding of child development recorded the highest mean score (M = 4.540). This suggests that respondents strongly perceived inadequate knowledge of children's developmental needs as a contributing factor to emotional abuse. Previous research similarly indicates that insufficient understanding of child development may increase the risk of inappropriate parental responses and child maltreatment (Gonzalez et al., 2023).

The second-highest mean was recorded for parents with a history of abuse or neglect during their own childhood (M = 4.400). This finding is consistent with research suggesting that adverse childhood experiences may be reproduced across generations, particularly when parents have experienced maltreatment themselves and have difficulties with emotional regulation or parenting relationships (Loosley and Johnson, 2023; Avdibegović and Brkić, 2020).

Problematic household environments recorded the third-highest mean (M = 4.388). This finding indicates that respondents perceived family circumstances, including domestic violence, as important contributors to emotional abuse. Previous research has similarly identified disrupted family environments, domestic violence, and other adverse family circumstances as factors

Table 4: Perceived factors contributing to childhood emotional abuse

S. No.	Statement	Mean
1.	Financial difficulties will lead parents to emotionally abuse their children.	3.956
2.	High demands from parents will cause emotional abuse to children. Example: (excellent academic achievement)	4.024
3.	Problematic households will cause children to experience emotional abuse. Example: (Domestic violence)	4.388
4.	Unemployed parents will cause emotional distress among themselves which may lead to child emotional abuse.	4.000
5.	The arguments between parents which their kids have witnessed will be the cause of child emotional abuse.	4.116
6.	Parents with history of being abused or neglected as a child might also cause emotional abuse to their children.	4.400
7.	Poor understanding of child development will lead to child emotional abuse.	4.540

Table 5: Perceived effects of childhood emotional abuse on adult communication and interpersonal interaction

S. No.	Statement	Mean
1.	Emotionally abused children will have problems expressing their opinions and feelings when they are adults.	4.532
2.	Emotionally abused children will have difficulties to stay focused on conversations when they are adults.	3.552
3.	Emotionally abused children will find it is hard to communicate with new people when they are adults.	4.524
4.	Emotionally abused children will easily be taken over by their anger while having arguments when they are adults.	4.500
5.	Children with emotionally abused childhood will have a tendency to react negatively in their conversations with others when they are adults.	4.296
6.	Emotionally abused children will have a tendency to bottle up their emotions in communications when they are adults.	4.328
7.	Children who have experienced emotional abuse may find it challenging to understand nonverbal messages when they are adults.	4.252

associated with increased risks of child maltreatment (Loosley and Johnson, 2023; Avdibegović and Brkić, 2020; Spadine et al., 2020).

The findings collectively indicate that respondents perceived childhood emotional abuse as a multidimensional issue influenced by parental knowledge, previous parental experiences, and family environments. Importantly, these factors may also influence the communication climate in which children develop. A family environment characterised by criticism, conflict, threats, or limited emotional support may shape children's expectations regarding interpersonal interaction and emotional expression.

Table 5 presents respondents' perceptions regarding the potential effects of childhood emotional abuse on communication and interpersonal interaction in adulthood. The highest mean score was recorded for the statement that emotionally abused children may experience difficulties expressing their opinions and feelings as adults (M = 4.532). This finding indicates that respondents strongly perceived emotional expression as an important area in which childhood emotional abuse may have long-term implications.

The finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that childhood maltreatment may be associated with difficulties in emotional expression and emotional regulation (Avdibegović and Brkić, 2020). From the perspective of Rogers' Humanistic Theory, repeated negative interpersonal experiences during childhood may influence an individual's self-concept and perception of whether expressing thoughts and feelings is safe or acceptable. Consequently, difficulties in emotional expression may represent one potential manifestation of adverse early interpersonal experiences.

The second-highest mean was recorded for the statement that emotionally abused children may experience difficulties communicating with new people in adulthood (M = 4.524). This finding highlights the potential interpersonal dimension of childhood emotional abuse. Previous research has associated childhood maltreatment, particularly emotional abuse, with social anxiety and difficulties involving interpersonal relationships (Liu et al., 2023). Such difficulties may become particularly relevant when individuals are required to establish relationships with unfamiliar people.

The third-highest mean concerned the tendency to be overwhelmed by anger during arguments in adulthood (M = 4.500). This finding suggests that respondents perceived emotional regulation during interpersonal conflict as another important consequence associated with childhood emotional abuse. Previous research has reported associations between childhood psychological maltreatment and later anger-related difficulties, with the severity of childhood trauma potentially increasing the likelihood of anger-related problems (European Psychiatric Association, 2023).

Taken together, the three highest-rated items indicate that respondents perceived childhood emotional abuse as potentially affecting several interconnected dimensions of adult communication: emotional expression, interaction with unfamiliar individuals, and emotional responses during conflict. These findings extend the discussion of childhood emotional abuse beyond psychological outcomes by highlighting communication and interpersonal interaction as areas that may warrant further investigation.

From Rogers' perspective, the findings can be interpreted through the role of early interpersonal experiences in shaping self-concept and subsequent interpersonal behaviour. Experiences involving criticism, rejection, threats, or inadequate emotional support may influence how individuals perceive themselves and their relationships with others. Although the present study does not establish a causal relationship between childhood emotional abuse and adult communication difficulties, the findings provide evidence of strong perceived associations that merit further empirical investigation.

The communication-related findings may also have broader relevance to organisational environments. Communication, emotional expression, interpersonal interaction, and conflict management are important components of professional relationships. Therefore, although workplace communication and employee performance were not directly measured in this study, the findings provide a basis for future research examining whether communication patterns associated with adverse childhood experiences may also be reflected in workplace interaction, teamwork, conflict management, or employee relationships.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the perceived factors contributing to childhood emotional abuse and the perceived effects of childhood emotional abuse on communication and interpersonal interaction in adulthood. The findings indicate a high level of awareness of childhood emotional abuse among the respondents, while a substantial proportion also reported personal experiences of emotional abuse during childhood or having witnessed emotional abuse involving someone they knew. The findings further demonstrate that threatening behaviour, repeated swearing, and public criticism were strongly perceived as forms of childhood emotional abuse.

With regard to contributing factors, poor understanding of child development, parental histories of abuse or neglect, and problematic household environments were among the factors most strongly perceived to contribute to childhood emotional abuse. These findings reinforce the view that emotional abuse may emerge from a combination of parental, developmental, and family-related circumstances rather than from a single factor.

The findings also indicate strong perceptions regarding the potential relationship between childhood emotional abuse and communication in adulthood. Difficulties expressing opinions and feelings, communicating with unfamiliar individuals, and managing anger during arguments received among the highest levels of agreement. These findings suggest that communication and interpersonal interaction represent important areas for further consideration when examining the potential consequences of adverse childhood experiences.

The findings can be interpreted through Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory of Personality Development, particularly the role of early interpersonal experiences in shaping self-concept. Repeated criticism, rejection, threats, and inadequate emotional support may contribute to negative self-perceptions and difficulties in interpersonal interaction. However, given the cross-sectional and descriptive nature of the present study, the findings should be interpreted as perceived effects rather than evidence of a direct causal relationship between childhood emotional abuse and adult communication difficulties.

The findings also have potential relevance to organisational and management contexts. Communication, emotional expression, interpersonal interaction, and conflict management are essential components of professional relationships. Although the present study did not directly examine workplace communication or employee performance, the findings provide a basis for future research to investigate whether communication patterns associated with adverse childhood experiences may have implications for workplace relationships, teamwork, conflict management, and organisational interaction.

From a practical perspective, greater awareness of childhood emotional abuse may assist parents, caregivers, educators, and relevant professionals in recognising behaviours that may negatively influence children's emotional and interpersonal development. Communication and media-based initiatives may also contribute to public awareness and education (Jamri et al., 2017) regarding childhood emotional abuse and its potential long-term implications. Future studies should extend the present findings by employing larger and more representative samples, validated measures of childhood emotional abuse and adult communication, and inferential or longitudinal research designs to examine the relationships identified in this study more rigorously.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of considering communication and interpersonal interaction as potential areas through which the consequences of childhood emotional experiences may be reflected in adulthood. By bringing together childhood experiences, self-concept, and adult communication through the lens of Rogers' Humanistic Theory, the study provides a foundation for further research connecting developmental experiences with interpersonal and organisational communication.

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