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Type of Primary School Attended Influences Bribe-Giving Intentions

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ABSTRACT

This study provides specific insights into bribe-giving intentions in developing societies with diverse populations, using Malaysia as a case study. We investigated whether there are significant variations in young adults' intentions to offer bribes, depending on the type of primary and secondary schools they attended. We surveyed 345 young adults and tested for significant differences using Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests. We find that those who attended Chinese vernacular primary schools, as opposed to national primary schools, have a higher intention of giving bribes. We found no significant differences for the type of secondary school attended and bribe-giving intention. The results suggest the need for early anti-corruption education in primary schools in curbing corruption. These insights can aid policymakers and anti-corruption agencies in devising targeted interventions and strategies to diminish bribery. Additionally, they can inform future research concentrating on the socialization environment and the act of giving bribes.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

Unlike many countries with a single mainstream education system, multicultural societies like Malaysia offer citizens the opportunity to attend various types of schools. For instance, there are national primary schools and Chinese vernacular schools (CVS). Both are government schools where it is mandatory for students to learn English and Malay, but in CVS, Mandarin is the main medium of instruction.

Given the diversity in the types of primary and secondary schools attended by Malaysians, we investigated whether attending different types of schools would predict individuals' intentions and attitudes toward giving bribes as young adults. We surveyed 345 young adults in their twenties to measure their intentions regarding bribery by presenting them with various scenarios, such as offering a large sum of money to traffic police to overlook unlawful behavior. They were then asked to rate, on a 7-point Likert scale, their likelihood of engaging in similar behavior if they were in the described situation.



Our results suggest that primary school is key for anti-bribery education. Targeted programs should be developed, aligning with cultural and educational backgrounds to foster aversion to corruption from a young age.

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Curbing bribe-giving can be challenging, especially when children become familiar with bribe-giving from a very young age. In Malaysia, children have a diverse set of schools they can choose from, though most opt for schools associated with their families' religion and ethnicity (Rahman, 2021). This perpetuates the pluralistic Malaysian society characterized by a strongly embedded fusion of religion and ethnicity, contributing to a social fabric that influences social interactions, politics, cultural practices (Meer & Modood, 2012) and, we argue, bribe-giving intentions. Instead of solely condemning the act of corruption as an inherently immoral tenet of certain demographic groups, we unearth what is causing it to persist. In this article, we find that the type of primary, but not secondary, school attended plays the most significant role in determining bribe-giving intentions at a later age.

Due to the criminal nature of corruption, individuals are reluctant to have their own social group be associated with bribe-giving. For example, a senior Malaysian politician has alleged that non-Muslims are responsible for corruption in the country (Hilmy, 2022). He made these allegations based on bribery conviction data in Malaysia, which showed that 57.46% of bribe givers are Malaysian Chinese, 30.51% are Malaysian Indians, and 12.03% are Malaysian Malays (Chong & Narayanan, 2017). Such remarks have evoked strong emotions from the accused groups (Ibrahim, 2022), which has led to unnecessary racial tension rather than addressing the challenges of curbing corruption itself. While we recognize that religion and ethnicity may impact an individual's preferences, it's essential to highlight that when investigating the causes, it is more useful to address the social context which predicts bribe-giving intentions (van Oosten, 2022). The Stanford prison experiment illustrates the importance of social context in shaping intentions and subsequent illicit activity (Banyard et al., 1996; Ng, 2022; Zimbardo, 2007), and we also understand social context as key to understanding the causes of social behavior such as bribe-giving intentions.

Previous research tells us that the logic of appropriateness drives corruption more than the logic of consequences (Zaloznaya, 2014). That is why we should not only enact legislation to penalize instances of corruption, but inspire a collective understanding that corruption is inherently detrimental to the self and society. The people and places around us can shape how we think about bribery, such as schools attended. For instance, research has shown that parental socialization significantly impacts the political attitudes of young adults (Jennings et al., 2009). The challenges faced by children in comprehending ethical distinctions are further exacerbated by neighborhood effects (Bacchini & Esposito, 2020). Moreover, the type of schooling a person receives also influences their political ideas (Kunst et al., 2020). Schools, as important socialization settings, play a crucial role in shaping individuals' attitudes toward giving bribes. In Malaysia, children spend approximately 11 years (6 years in primary school and 5 years in secondary school) within school environments. This underscores the importance of school environments in shaping individuals' perspectives toward bribe-giving.

By prioritizing efforts to foster a society that discourages bribery and promotes ethical behavior, we can positively influence individuals through their school environment without inciting societal unrest or resistance detrimental to putting an end to corruption. In the discussion, we recommend that policymakers allocate resources toward curbing corruption by targeting primary school children attending Chinese vernacular schools.

Scope of the study

A common response to corruption is to blame authority figures, such as politicians or law enforcement officers (see e.g., Case, 2008; Kapeli & Mohamed, 2015, 2019). Authority figures or bribe receivers are often viewed as the "bad apples" and it is assumed that if they are removed, corruption will disappear as well. However, this simplistic view overlooks an important side of the act of corruption: bribe *givers*. Ariely (2013) has argued that the economic loss caused by

thousands of people who cheat just a little bit is more damaging than a few big cheaters (Ariely, 2013; Zimbardo, 2007). Therefore, this study focuses on examining the intention to *give* rather than *receive* bribes. We study young adults who lack access to power and are more likely to *give* bribes. One advantage to studying this group is that they do not face the same accountability concerns as authority figures, like politicians, and are therefore less likely to let their responses be colored by social desirability bias.

This study examines individuals' intentions regarding bribe-giving to gain insights into their likelihood of engaging in bribery. Research consistently shows that intention serves as a reliable predictor of behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011). By examining individuals' intentions to engage in bribery, we can better understand their potential inclination toward this illicit activity. Higher bribe-giving intention anticipates potential future behavior, aiding prevention efforts. The correlation between behavioral intention and subsequent actions is substantiated by studies that assess behavior following the measurement of intention (Hagger et al., 2020; Joensuu-Salo et al., 2020). For example, higher levels of entrepreneurial intention were associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in entrepreneurial behavior after one to three years and six to eight years (Joensuu-Salo et al., 2020). Additionally, intention, action planning, and habit predict social distancing behavior to minimize COVID-19 infections (Hagger et al., 2020). Moreover, online consumption is positively related to online purchase intention (Peña-García et al., 2020). Bribe-giving intentions serve as a valuable proxy for actually giving bribes and the wider societal acceptance of bribery in general.

The covert tactics employed by criminals to conceal their activities present significant challenges for researchers aiming to study and understand the intricacies of criminal behavior. The deliberate efforts to obscure their actions make it difficult to access reliable data and gather comprehensive insights, thus making the exploration of bribe-giving intent a more viable approach. Furthermore, guided by the principle that prevention is better than cure, this study seeks to understand young adults' bribe-giving intentions rather than focusing solely on those who have committed the crime (Ajzen, 2020). The primary objective of this study is to offer new insights aimed at shaping the mindset of primary school children, preempting the formation of any inclination toward bribery and, importantly, prior to their involvement in actual bribe-giving behaviors.

The national context of Malaysia

Malaysia, celebrated for its rich cultural diversity and pluralism, is home to a multitude of ethnic and religious groups, each accompanied by schooling systems affiliated with them. The Malays, Chinese, and Indians, representing the primary ethnic communities, practice distinct religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The linguistic tapestry includes Malay, English, Chinese, and Tamil languages. Despite a relatively harmonious blending of cultures over time, each group remains dedicated to preserving its unique traditions. In Malaysia's educational landscape, children have access to a diverse range of school options, yet a significant majority gravitates toward institutions aligned with their family's religious and ethnic background. Embedded within the educational system, ethnicity and religiosity play pivotal roles in shaping individuals' outcomes and experiences, contributing to diverse political attitudes and perspectives across the nation.

Type of primary and secondary school attended

School is an important institution where people receive their formal education and interact beyond the family circle. Most Malaysians attend 6 years of primary school from age 7 to 12 and 5 years of secondary school from age 13 to 17. When it comes to school education, research provides insight by describing how education *level* could affect one's dishonesty (see Ivlevs & Hinks, 2015; Mocan, 2008). Individuals with lower levels of formal education tend to exhibit more

favorable views toward corruption (Gutiérrez et al., 2016). Indeed, education level predicts individual corruption (Mangafić & Veselinović, 2020) because individuals with higher education might have more knowledge about government's activity and this helps them in making judgments about the degree of corruption (Torgler & Valev, 2006). Improving access to education in developing countries may reduce the presence of corruption norms (Truex, 2011) because increased levels of education in the country lower the bribery risk (Mocan, 2008). Though one study carried out in England showed no association between education and corrupt behavior (Ivlevs & Hinks, 2015), the general consensus in the literature is that corruption is associated with educational level or attainment.

Considering all of the evidence, it appears that most researchers have explored the correlation between education *level* or attainment and corrupt behavior. However, little is known about how individuals who have graduated from different *types* of education systems differ in their bribe-giving intentions. The characteristics of an educational system can influence an individual's perception of corruption (Wysmulek, 2022). Discipline of tertiary education could impact bribery as individuals who studied economics are more likely to accept bribes (Cameron et al., 2009) than those with backgrounds in other fields. This suggests that even if two people have the same level of education attainment, such as a Bachelor's degree, the courses they took in their tertiary education may still impact their bribe-giving intentions. To our knowledge, there has been no previous study on primary or secondary schooling and impact on corruption. Therefore, this study aims to understand how attending different types of schools may have influenced an individual's bribe-giving intentions.

Due to its diverse population, Malaysians have the opportunity to attend different types of primary and secondary schools (Mengzhen et al., 2021). For example, parents have the option of sending their children to either national schools or Chinese vernacular schools for primary education. For secondary education, options range from national secondary schools to private international schools. Despite the variety of schools available for parents to choose from, the fundamental principle of schools in Malaysia is that all schools must provide Malaysian students with the opportunity to learn Malay as it is an official language, and English is also a compulsory

Table 1. Example of different types of schools available in Malaysia.

Level	Type	Characteristic
Primary	National primary school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students from ethnic Malays attended the majority ● Fully funded public school ● Malay language as the medium of instruction ● Owned by Ministry of Education
	Chinese vernacular primary school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students from ethnic Chinese attended the majority ● Partially funded public school ● Mandarin language as the medium of instruction ● Owned by Ministry of Education
Secondary	National secondary school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students from ethnic Malays attended the majority ● Fully funded public school ● Malay language as the medium of instruction ● Owned by Ministry of Education
	Chinese vernacular secondary school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students from ethnic Chinese attended the majority ● Partially funded public school ● Malay language as the medium of instruction ● Owned by Ministry of Education
	Chinese independent secondary school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students from ethnic Chinese attended the majority ● Privately funded school ● Mandarin language as the medium of instruction ● Owned by The United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia.
	International school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Varies depending of the International school when it comes to ethnicity of students ● Privately funded school ● English or other language as the medium of instruction ● Privately owned

subject in all schools. Ethnicity and cultural background are usually the main factors considered by parents when choosing which school to send their children to Ismail (2018; Siah et al., 2015). However, despite these two factors, parents are allowed to send their children to any of their preferred schools (see Table 1).

Table 1 illustrates the various types of schools available to students in Malaysia.

There are a number of characteristics that separate Malaysian schools, such as school funding (Mengzhen et al., 2021). School funding plays a crucial role in shaping the school's environment and operations. Chinese vernacular schools are not fully funded, leading to two main differences between Chinese vernacular schools and the other schooling options. On the one hand, at Chinese vernacular schools students or their parents need to fundraise to cover the costs of basic educational materials (Khuo, 2022). On the other hand, in other schools, students and their parents may be able to spend money on luxury school events without needing to entice community members to donate money (Johorcircle, 2023). In essence, the variations in school funding create distinctive differences between Chinese vernacular schools and other educational options, impacting the financial aspects and community involvement in supporting educational activities.

This disparity can lead to two mechanisms: (i) familiarity with financial gifts leading to favors in return and (ii) feelings of unfairness. First, when schools are dependent on private funding for educational needs, children become familiar with financial donations and favors in return, arguably a form of somewhat honest corruption. Despite the honesty of giving gifts, research finds an explicit relationship between donations and corruption (Abas Azmi & Zainudin, 2020). Second, feelings of unfairness can, in turn, lead to dishonesty. A study by Leib et al. (2019) found that people who felt that they were being treated unfairly were more likely to behave dishonestly. In the study, participants were asked to complete a task in which they could earn money by cheating. The participants who felt that they were being treated unfairly were more likely to cheat than those who did not feel that they were being treated unfairly. Unequal school funding can create an environment in which students feel that they are being treated unfairly, which can lead to dishonesty.

Based on this evidence, we argue the following two hypotheses based on types of school:

- H1: There will be a significant difference between types of *primary* school attended and bribe-giving intention.
- H2: There will be a significant difference between types of *secondary* school attended and bribe-giving intention.

In summary, this research aimed to test 2 hypotheses to answer the research question: Are there any significant differences between types of primary and secondary school attended and bribe-giving intention?

Methods

We use an online survey method to investigate the relationship between (i) primary and (ii) secondary school attendance and bribe-giving intention. We presented five (5) scenarios to respondents, and we asked them to rate their likelihood of paying bribes in those scenarios. To ensure the scenarios were relevant to local respondents, we conducted tests of face validity with a local enforcement authority.

1. [Large Money] In Malaysia, a person offers a traffic police officer a large amount of money to overlook their unlawful behavior.
2. [Small Money] In Malaysia, a person offers a traffic police officer a small amount of money to overlook their unlawful behavior.

3. [Small Gift] In Malaysia, a person offers a traffic police officer a small gift to overlook their unlawfulness.
4. [Illicit giver] In Malaysia, a person gives a government employee a small gift in order to obtain a passport without proper documentation.
5. [Deserved Giver] In Malaysia, because of a delay, a person gives an immigration officer a small gift in order to make sure that his passport gets processed.

We asked respondents to rate their intention to engage in the behavior described in each scenario on a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 7 indicating “strongly agree.” The specific question we asked was “If I was the person described in the scenario, I intend to do the same.” The scores for each scenario were then added up to create a composite score for bribe-giving intention. A higher score indicated a higher intention to give bribes. The Cronbach alpha for the scale was 0.87, indicating good reliability.

After obtaining approval from the university’s ethics chair, we advertised this study on social media (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube) and on the university’s public notice board. The advertisement was in English because it is the working language of the target audience. Interested respondents scanned the QRCode on the advertisement to access the research site. After consenting to participate, respondents answered all questions.

Initially, 600 Malaysian respondents took part in an online survey. We used convenience sampling to select respondents who were 18 years of age and above while also being Malaysian nationals. We performed the following manipulation checks in sequence to ensure the reliability and validity of the data collected;

1. We performed two attention checks for each scenario, before and after the respondent answered each scenario. Two hundred and forty-nine respondents were disqualified from the study due to failing the attention check.
2. We conducted a social desirability check using the English version of Kurzsкала Soziale Erwünschtheit-Gamma (KSE-G) (Nießen et al., 2019). Two respondents were excluded as their mean score deviated more than two standard deviations from the total.
3. We identified outliers using standardized residual values above or below 3.3, as suggested by Pallant (2020). Four additional respondents were excluded.
4. We tested for Common Method Bias using the Harmon Single-Factor Test (Podsakoff et al., 2003). An exploratory factor analysis showed that the first factor accounted for 46% of the variance, indicating no presence of Common Method Bias (Babin et al., 2016).

After excluding 249 respondents for failing attention check, 2 for failing social desirability test, and 4 outliers, the final analysis was based on data from 345 respondents—156 (45.20%) male and 189 (54.80%) female. The respondents were between 18 and 30 years old, with a mean age of 20.68 and a standard deviation of 2.01. Three hundred and nine (90.60%) of the respondents were university students. We asked respondents to self-report which type of primary and secondary school they attended in multiple choice format. Main respondent characteristics are listed in Table 2. We would like to inform the reader that the first part of the study results has been published separately (Mengzhen et al., 2022).

Results

We tested our hypotheses to determine the relationship between the type of primary and secondary school attended and bribe-giving intention and carried out analysis protocols following the guidelines from Field (2013). We hypothesized that there will be a significant difference between types of primary school attended and bribe-giving intention. As those who indicate “other” are

Table 2. Demographic variables.

Variable	Details	n	%
Primary school	National primary school	120	34.8
	Chinese vernacular primary school	199	57.7
	Others	26	7.5
Secondary school	National secondary school	205	59.42
	Chinese vernacular secondary school	42	12.17
	Chinese independent secondary school	32	9.28
	International secondary school	50	14.49
	Others	16	4.64
Dominant language	Malay or dialect	44	12.8
	Chinese or dialect	160	46.4
	English	126	36.5
	Others	15	4.3

Table 3. The Mann-Whitney U test for types of primary school.

Types of primary school	Mean	SD	Mean Rank	U	Z	<i>p</i>
National primary school	9.47	5.71	145.55	10,206.50	-2.23	0.03
Chinese vernacular primary school	11.13	6.66	168.71			

Table 4. The Kruskal-Wallis test for types of secondary school.

Types of secondary school	Median	Mean	SD	Mean Rank	χ^2	<i>p</i>
National secondary school	8.00	10.19	6.27	157.87	3.78	0.29
Chinese vernacular secondary school	9.00	10.72	6.12	170.46		
Chinese independent secondary school	10.50	11.41	6.14	186.73		
International school	10.00	11.60	7.14	175.73		

only $n = 26$ or 7.5% of the data (see Table 1), it is deemed as non-significant data and excluded from the calculation.

As data was found to not meet the assumption of parametric statistics, Mann-Whitney U was used to test whether there is a significant difference between types of primary school attended and bribe-giving intention. Significant differences were found ($U = 10,206.50$, $n_1 = 120$, $n_2 = 199$, $p < 0.05$, $r = -0.12$, power = 0.69). Thus, this hypothesis is accepted. This indicates that individuals who attended Chinese vernacular school have higher bribe-giving intention as compared to individuals who attended national primary school (see Table 3).

We also hypothesized that there are significant differences between types of secondary school attended and bribe-giving intention. We first excluded those who indicated “other” when self-reporting the type of secondary school they attended because $n = 16$ or 4.64% from the data set (see Table 1) was deemed as non-significant data. Hence we excluded it from the analysis.

Results of a Levene’s test for homogeneity of variance found that the data met the homogeneity of variance assumption, $F(3,325) = 0.95$, $p > 0.05$. According to Field (2013), the data have met the homogeneity of variance assumption. But, Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests were used to examine whether the data are normally distributed and found that the data for the National secondary school $D(205) = 0.20$, $p < .01$; Chinese vernacular secondary school $D(42) = 0.17$, $p < .01$; and International school $D(50) = 0.18$, $p < .01$ are all not normally distributed except for Chinese independent secondary school $D(32) = 0.15$, $p > .05$. Hence, further data analysis was carried out based on the nonparametric assumption using Kruskal-Wallis test.

The result showed that we found no significant differences between the four types of secondary schools $H(3) = 3.78$, $p > 0.05$ and we rejected our hypothesis. Hence, regardless of which types of secondary school a person attended, it does not influence their bribe-giving intention (see Table 4).

Discussion

Above and beyond laws and penalization, the logic of appropriateness is pivotal to curbing corruption (Zaloznaya, 2014), implying the importance of childhood socialization in understanding which children learn that corruption is appropriate leading to the perpetuation of corruption. Merely attributing corruption to demographic groups overlooks the structural causes leading to the embeddedness of the act of corruption. We highlight the importance of researching the context in which those who tend to commit acts of corruption grow up. We explored whether there are any significant differences between the type of primary and secondary school attended and young adult's bribe-giving intentions. We surveyed bribe-giving intentions of young adults from a country with a highly diverse population, Malaysia. Bribe-giving is an under-examined phenomenon within corruption research, compared to bribe-receiving. We leverage bribe-giving to diminish the influence of holding positions of power on corruption. Instead, we focus on studying this phenomenon within the wider population. The findings provide insight for policy makers aiming to curb corruption.

Young adults who attended Chinese vernacular primary school showed higher bribe-giving intention as compared to those who attended national primary school. However, bribe-giving intentions are not affected by the type of secondary school attended. The result of this study is consistent with research indicating how social environments change one's behavior (Banyard et al., 1996; Ng, 2022; Zimbardo, 2007). Previous studies have found that young adults in Malaysia lack a deep understanding of corruption, which is likely due to insufficient education about the subject (Mengzhen et al., 2021). This study suggests that education about bribe-giving should be emphasized in early primary school years rather than secondary school, particularly in Chinese vernacular schools.

When it comes to the school environments, we would like to emphasize the unequal school funding systems in place in Malaysia. Vernacular schools are not fully funded by the government and the schools have to raise funds for themselves (e.g., The Star, 2011) to finance basic school expenses. Scholars have suggested the explicit relationship between donation and corruption (Abas Azmi & Zainudin, 2020). Students in vernacular schools might have more opportunity to observe or be personally involved in the process of fundraising or donation (Deol, 2013) which might indirectly educate students about the usage of monetary gifts as a shortcut to solve problems. Besides that, the perception that Malaysian Chinese are facing discrimination (Tee, 2021) might also lead to higher bribe-giving intentions (Birkelund & Cherry, 2020) as children understand the concept of unfairness from a very young age onward (Reyes-Jaquez & Koenig, 2021).

In many cultures, it is customary to exchange gifts, and it is common for teachers to receive gifts from students (see Yahya, 2019) and Chinese culture places even greater emphasis on this practice than most cultures do (Qian et al., 2007). It is important to note that corruption in Chinese society has existed since 206 BC (Alatas, 1990), possibly influenced by the cultural phenomenon of "guanxi," which refers to the system of social relationships and influence that facilitates business and other dealings (Li, 2020). Future studies could explore how students perceive the practice of gift exchange and how to create a primary school environment that discourages bribery. Informal education in Chinese vernacular primary schools in Malaysia could place greater emphasis on educating students about the harmfulness of bribery. Additionally, policy makers should make the school funding system in place in Malaysia equal, making Chinese vernacular schools less dependent on external funding. Furthermore, linking additional funding for Chinese vernacular schools in Malaysia to the requirement of incorporating anti-corruption lessons could serve the dual purpose of enhancing educational resources while fostering a culture of integrity and accountability among students and educators alike.

Another explanation for the differences could lie in reward and punishment systems in place in primary schools. During the primary school years, according to Erikson's psychosocial development theory (Maree, 2021), if children receive consistent recognition and praise for their efforts,

it fosters a sense of competence. However, if they frequently experience feelings of failure or incompetence, it may contribute to a sense of inferiority. Future research should delve into the exploration of the reward and punishment system within elementary schools and its potential association with the practice of giving bribes. Consequently, the school environment in which individuals socialize may have a direct relationship with the act of giving bribes.

Above all, the lack of a comprehensive definition of corruption may explain the outcomes as well. The specific definition on what is considered as corruption is especially important in multicultural societies. For example, in recognition of the local cultural practice of expressing appreciation through gift-giving, the former prime minister implemented rules specifying that only food, flowers, and fruits are considered acceptable gifts for public officials (NST Online, 2018). Such clarity should be communicated as per our research result even in primary school. Schools should establish transparent guidelines that educate students about the concept of bribery and provide clear instructions on how they can express appreciation in appropriate ways. Transparent guidelines could strike a balance between preserving cultural backgrounds and preventing manipulation from anyone. These guidelines should ensure that cultural heritage is respected and upheld, while also promoting ethical behavior and discouraging any form of corruption or bribery.

Like any other research, this research has its own limitations. Firstly, this study solely focuses on the act of giving bribes without exploring the intent to receive them. Future studies should delve into understanding the phenomenon of bribe receiving to gain a more comprehensive insight into bribery. Secondly, the measure of bribe-giving is solely based on the given scenarios, such as bribing police, and should not be generalized to other bribery situations that we did not measure. Thirdly, while this study focused on specific types of schools in Malaysia, such as Chinese vernacular schools, it did not encompass others like Tamil vernacular primary schools. Future research should consider gathering data from these additional school types for a more comprehensive analysis. Fourthly, in this research, we did not consider gender differences, and we strongly suggest that future research investigate these differences (van Oosten, 2023, p. 18; van Oosten et al., 2024, p. 30). Fifthly, the intersection between gender and type of school may reveal that merely adding gender and type of school together amounts to more than the sum of its parts (Crenshaw, 1991; Hancock, 2007). Lastly, given that a majority of respondents were students, caution should be exercised in generalizing the study's results to the entire population.

In conclusion, this research provides specific insights into tackling corruption within societies with diverse populations, using Malaysia as a case study. We propose that anti-corruption education should begin as early as the primary school years in Malaysia. To effectively address this issue, targeted anti-corruption programs should be implemented for Chinese vernacular schools particularly. Primary vernacular Chinese schools require more attention to awareness of bribe-giving compared to national primary schools. Equalization of school funding systems might also contribute to curbing corruption amongst graduates of Chinese vernacular schools. By implementing targeted interventions and fostering a culture of integrity and equality, we can shape behavior and promote a society free from corruption.

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Authors' contributions

Lim Mengzhen: project administration, writing—original draft, methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, and investigation. Sanne van Oosten: review and editing. Wan Munira Wan Jaafar: supervision & review.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval

This research received approval from the University's Ethics Committee.

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