

**PERCEPTION OF MANDATORY SCHOOL UNIFORM AND PERCEIVED SOCIAL  
COHESION DEVELOPED AMONG STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA**

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**Abstract**

The current study aimed to investigate Malaysian students' perception of their school uniforms and the relationship it has towards perceived social cohesion. A total of N = 192 college and university students from Johor, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Penang who had undergone and completed primary and secondary education in Malaysia were randomly selected to participate in the study. Participants completed a questionnaire which included a five-point Likert-type response scale to measure students' level of agreement with the statement of their perception of school uniform and perceived social cohesion. The results found that the aspect of tidiness in appearance attributed to students' positive perception of their school uniform followed by affordability, preferred attire to be worn in school, comfort, and attractiveness. Independent sample t-test revealed that female students have more positive perception about their school uniform compared to male students. No significant differences were found between male and female students in their overall perceived social cohesion. Pearson's product-moment correlation found a significant positive relationship between students' perception towards their school uniform and perceived social cohesion. Results obtained from the induction content analysis suggested the symbolic discourse of the school uniform that represents and reflects the experiences and interaction students have with their peers, stakeholders and school environment. Recommendations were provided for future research to obtain a richer understanding of school uniform and perceived social cohesion for different Malaysian student demographic categories. The current study hoped to act as a stepping stone for Malaysian educators and school policymakers to understand the perceived social cohesion amongst Malaysian students and how these experiences may contribute to the benefit of better school climate.

*Keywords:* school uniform, school uniform perception, perceived social cohesion

**Introduction**

School uniforms have been a traditional part of education in Malaysia since they were introduced by British missionaries around the end of the 19th century (The Star, 2010). The tradition is preserved in current mandates for all primary and secondary school students in Malaysia to wear school uniforms during school hours. Malaysian students are often observed in their school uniforms after school hours as they engage in after-school tuition classes and extra co-curricular activities as well. School uniforms have clearly become an integral part of the lives of most Malaysian students. Despite that, little is known or understood about modern Malaysian students' perceptions and attitudes regarding this tradition. Also, although it is commonly thought that wearing uniforms improves cohesion among students, little research has been done to investigate perceived social cohesion among Malaysian students in relation to school uniforms.

### Research Questions

The current study hopes to gain insight into the following research questions:

- 1) What is the perception of school uniform amongst students who have undergone and completed their secondary education in Malaysia?
- 2) Is there a difference between male and female students in terms of their perception of school uniform?
- 3) Is there a difference between male and female students who have undergone and completed their secondary education in Malaysia in terms of their sense of belonging and feelings of morale?
- 4) Is there a difference between male and female students in terms of their overall perceived social cohesion?
- 5) Is there a relationship between the perception of school uniform and perceived social cohesion amongst students who have undergone and completed their secondary education in Malaysia?
- 6) What are the general themes found in the students' experiences and perception of wearing their school uniform and their sense of belonging and their feelings of morale, respectively?

### Methodology

#### Participants

50 student participants (Males = 21 and Female=29 females. were recruited for the pilot study. The mean age for the total sample was 20.62 ( $SD = 1.56$ ). 192 student participants (Male = 75 males and Females = 117). The mean age for the total sample is 20.64 years ( $SD = 1.58$ ) were recruited for the current study. The inclusion criteria in selecting the participants were college or university students age ranging from 18-23 years old, Malaysian citizen, and had undergone and completed their primary and secondary education in a public or private secondary school in Malaysia. Participants of the study were selected through random and convenience sampling from public and private colleges and universities from Johor, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Malacca and Penang. Participants were not required to identify themselves in the questionnaire prior to data entry to ensure confidentiality. Participants were given RM5 each as a token of appreciation for participating in the study.

#### Assessment Tools

A researcher-created survey instrument was used as the data collection instrument. A pilot study was conducted to identify the feasibility of recruitment, randomization, assessment procedures, participants' receptivity and comprehensibility to understand the items of the survey instrument (Leon, Davis, & Kraemer, 2012). *The Other(s)* option for ethnicity and state were added and grouping of items into respective parts was done after the feedback for a neater appearance of the survey instrument. The survey instrument used after the regrouping of items consisted of three parts. Part A consists of 8 demographic questions. Part B consists of 6 closed-ended questions which use a five-point Likert-type response scale (*1.Strongly Disagree–5 Strongly Agree*) to measure student's level of agreement with the statement of their perception of school uniform. Higher scores indicate more positive perception of school uniform. Part C consists of 13 closed-ended questions which use a five-point Likert-type response scale (*1.Strongly Disagree–5 Strongly Agree*) to measure student's level of agreement with the

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statement of their perceived social cohesion. High scores indicate higher perceived social cohesion experienced by students. Part C also consists of 2 open-ended questions that allow participants to express their personal opinion about their overall perception of their school uniform and perceived belongingness and morale towards their school.

### Procedure

The approval of the ethics application for the current study was obtained from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee under the project number, 12135. A pilot study was conducted with 50 participants. In the pilot study, the recruited 50 participants were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. The survey questionnaire was completed with the presence of the investigator. Participants were asked to read the Explanatory Statement in full before deciding whether or not to participate in the study. Participants were informed about the possible inconvenience and discomfort involved in the study. Participants were also informed that they had the right to withdraw from the participation of the study at any stage of the prior to submitting their response with any further implication if they had chosen not to participate. Participants were advised to read each item carefully and respond to them genuinely. Participants were debriefed, dismissed and were given an incentive of RM5 upon submitting the questionnaire. The same procedure was carried out with the 192 participants in the current study using the reorganised survey instrument.

### Data analysis plan

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 24.0 will be used to run factor analysis, data screening and data cleaning, independent samples t-tests and the Pearson's product moment correlation matrix test.

**Factor analysis.** A principal axis factor analysis was conducted on the 13 items of the perceived social cohesion construct, with orthogonal rotation (varimax). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, KMO = .918, and all KMO values for individual items were greater than .77, which is well above the acceptable limit of .5 (Field, 2013). An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each factor in the data. Two factors had eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and in combination explained 56.68% of the variance. The scree plot showed inflexions that justify retaining 2 factors. Sense of belonging and feelings of morale subscale of the perceived social cohesion had high reliabilities, with sense of belonging with Cronbach's  $\alpha = .886$  and feelings of morale with Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ .

**Data screening and data cleaning.** Data were screened for accuracy, missing value, and outliers. Cases with missing values were examined for non-random patterns. Results of the analysis showed that no missing values were found in the dataset. Descriptive statistics and frequency distributions were conducted to determine that responses are within the possible range of values and the data were not distorted by outliers and to check for normality. Standardized residual values were created for each subscale score and cases were examined for values that fell in the z-score limit of  $\pm 3.29$  (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012). 1 outlier was identified from the sum of cohesion data, hence it was adjusted using deletion.

The assumption of normality was assessed by examining the Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistics, histogram and normal Q-Q plots. Analysis of Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistics was assumed to be  $p > .05$  for normality to be accepted. Histograms and normal Q-Q plots were plotted for a visual inspection which depicted skewness of data to confirm the status of

normality. Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistics revealed data from all variable groups to be  $p < .001$ , indicating normality have been violated. The results of the analysis indicated positive skewness confirming that normality has been violated. Central limit theorem suggests that since the sample size is larger than 30, the parameter estimates of the population will have a normal distribution (Field, 2013).

**Qualitative inductive content analysis.** The process of open-coding, creating categories and abstraction was done in this stage to identify comments and codes that emerged as fundamental to the students' individual experience of wearing their school uniforms and its relations to their perception of sense of belonging and feelings of morale. The open-coding process began by reading the responses several times, highlighting key phrases and writing down as many headings throughout the responses. Lists of categories were grouped by collapsing those that are similar or dissimilar into broader higher order categories (Dey, 1993). The purpose of grouping data was to derive a category that is able to describe and increase understanding and knowledge about the shared perception and experiences of the students. Formulation of a general description of the students' experience of wearing their uniform and (a) sense of belonging, and (b) and feelings of morale, respectively will be done through abstraction. Subcategories comprised of words which recur 2 or more times will form the impression of a theme of experiences and perception. Generic categories comprised of the subcategories of similar experiences and perception, and general categories are grouped as the main category (Dey, 1993).

### Literature Review

#### Defining Social Cohesion: Experimental vs. Multidimensional Approach

Early experimental studies (Festinger, Schachter & Back, 1950; Back, 1951) of cohesion generally involved the measurement of the cause and effect of cohesion and the understanding of specific elements at work that constitutes keeping groups together. Festinger and colleagues (1950) formalised the term cohesiveness through their investigation on how face-to-face small, informal, social group exerted pressure upon member adhere to group norms. They interpreted cohesiveness as "the total field of forces" (Festinger et. al, 1950, p. 164) which influenced individuals' decision to remain or to leave the group; and the maintenance of uniformity within the group. Back (1951) added to the findings of the theory through his experiment by creating conditions to observe the relationship of the attractiveness of the group to influence cohesion. He proposed that the (a) liking of other members in the group, (b) prestige nature of being in the group or (c) mediation of goals by the group, led members to conform towards the membership in a group, and eventually the development of sense of cohesion (Back, 1951). In their study with 45 adult participants, Piper, Marrache, Lacroix, Richradsen and Jones (1983) found that a cohesive group is one where a majority of the participants possess a commitment to the group, to one another and to the leader through one or more of the behavioural variables such as promptness, attendance, remaining and physical distance.

While these experimental studies provided their respective empirical bases for the concept of cohesion, these studies have been challenged for artificially manipulating treatments which does not reflect the actual, instinctive occurrence nature of group cohesiveness (Mudrack, 1989). Moreover, experimenters often neglected the individual group members' perception of cohesion to their group. The lack of exploration on the perception group members' sense of

cohesiveness to group often disregarded the role of the individuals in the life of the group (Bruhn, 2009). Similarly, experimental studies also often neglected the exploration of how the group may be a contributory factor in the lives of the individuals that attribute the individuals' tendency to "stick to" the group (Bruhn, 2009). In his literature review, Dion (2000) proposed that conceptualising social cohesion as a multidimensional construct by including the perception and appraisal of the individual of their own experiences could minimise the limitations of experimental studies. The inclusion of the individual's perception and appraisal of social cohesion may also extend its applicability towards understanding social cohesion in larger groups, such as communities.

One of the theories that use a bi-dimensional conceptualisation of social cohesion was proposed by Bollen and Hoyle (1990). They coined the term 'perceived cohesion' which is defined as "an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feelings of morale associated with membership in the group" (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990, p. 482). Bollen and Hoyle (1990) contended that sense of belonging and feelings of morale are the two main primary dimensions of perceived cohesion that are highly correlated with one. Bollen and Hoyle's (1990) defined sense of belonging by the personal sense of how closely individuals identify with a group of which he or she is a member. Consequently, this identification towards the group led to the natural display of positive attitudes and likeable attributes towards in-group member and showcase discriminatory behaviours towards out-group members of the individuals (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). Feelings of morale were explained as the global positive or negative emotional response an individual from belonging to a group (Dion, 2000). The feelings of morale served as a personal motivation to the individual in the evaluation his or her relationship to the group, to engage in social and task-related group activities and to value one's membership in the group (Boyle & Hoyle, 1990).

The main virtue of operationalizing cohesion as perceived cohesion with the inclusion of sense of belonging and feelings of morale as the two primary dimensions is its ability to examine the subjective perception of the individuals in their appraisal of their own relational experiences to the group. Individual members' beliefs about cohesion is derived without the requirement of him or her to have face-to-face interaction or knowledge of everyone in the group nor does it require individual members to objectively identify his or her closeness towards other group members (Dion, 2000). Therefore, focussing on the dimensions of sense of belonging and feelings of morale liberates the study of cohesion of small group performances within a controlled, laboratory setting and to obtain group level view of cohesion through the accumulation of individual beliefs of any group size including those of large communities (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990).

### **School Uniform: Its function on students' sense of belonging and its debate**

Uniform, by definition within the context of clothing and apparel, suggests the distinctive clothing worn by members of the same organisation, body or by children and young adults attending certain schools. It is generally agreed that the function and purpose of uniforms in establishing clear, standardised boundaries of a perceived complex organisation, assuring members' conformity of goals through suppression of individuality and eliminating any possible differential conflicts existing in members (Joseph & Alex, 1972). The uses for its function and purpose as a reform in the educational setting have been the highlight of an ongoing yet inconclusive debate among education stakeholders and researchers alike (Thompson, 1999).

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Following the rationale adopted in the English public school system, school uniforms were introduced in the Malaysian school system to foster school affiliation, loyalty and pride (Synott & Symes, 1995). In a literature review by Synott and Symes (1995) on the genealogy of school central features, they noted that school uniforms and its associated school badges and mottoes are an essential representation of the self in part of the community of the school. On a similar note, a literature review by Craik (2003) indicated the function of the school uniform in creating *esprit de corps* among students; which is the feeling of student belonging within the school through the identification of the unique components of the school uniform that separates students from non-students. The basis of this idea was often referred to the discussion of role theory. A literature review by Davis (1984) on the effects of clothing on behaviours of others referenced role theory to suggest the function of school uniform in allowing observers to easily distinguish and categorise between students and non-students due to its distinctive features and physical appearance of the uniform. Hence, school uniform, in its tradition, served as a symbol of the group that indicated identification and sense of belongingness to the school and its stakeholders (Davis, 1984).

Additionally, while the Malaysian school culture is one which foster conformity and minimising individualism, the maintenance of school uniform traditions and even similarities in their designs across the country suggests the reason to its perseverance within the current Malaysian school system (Gomez, 2005). The idea stems from the belief that the implementation of uniforms is capable of governing and regulating the outward and inward dispositions of students in the process of converging individual differences into an acceptable standard within the school system (Joseph & Alex, 1972; Synott & Symes, 1995). In a meta-analysis study by Joseph and Alex (1972), their findings justified that the uses of standardised external apparel often aimed to facilitate the sense of unity from wearing similar apparels with peers from both the students' and the observers' point of view. It also aimed to establish the instinct to conform and the sense of commitment within the students themselves and their desire to achieve a common goal and value within the school system. The result of these often leads to the feelings of belongingness which subsequently followed by the overall positive feelings and attitude towards the school and the stakeholders (Wade & Stafford, 2003).

However, a few existing literature reviews disagreed with these findings and indicated school uniform has less of those said effects on students' sense of belonging (Brunsma, 2006; Park, 2013). Brunsma's (2006) examination of the distribution of uniform policies by region and demographics across the United States found that school uniform does not actually foster students' intrinsic sense of belonging and connectedness. His argument implied that while school uniform does the job of giving a superficial form of unity, it does not suggest the implicit sense of belonging which educators and policymakers proposed it served. Similar findings were found in Park's (2013) focus group interview on the perception of school uniform and its effects on unity amongst Korean middle and high school students. Additionally, Park (2013) found that school uniform may also attributed as a catalyst that motivated students to strive more for individuality and competition amongst peers to look good in order to meet the standard of beauty within the restraints set upon them in their dressing and its unattractive appearance. Park (2013) explained her findings by referring to the importance of appearances and clothing and their ability to restrict or liberate individuals because individuals often choose their clothes based on their values and how they aspire to behave.

**Current research on students' perception of school uniform and perceived social cohesion**

To date, there has not been an empirical research which studies the students' perception of their school uniform in Malaysia and the gender differences of this perception. Moreover, relatively little research is also done on the direct relationship between school uniform and perceived social cohesion, except for the dimension of sense of belonging. Even so, the debate on whether or not school uniform actually does foster a sense of belonging has been inconclusive as explained and justified in the literature review. While it is useful to refer existing studies as references to our present study, the results found are not freely generalised to the student population in Malaysia unless a survey is done with the students themselves who had personally experienced and undergone the school system in Malaysia. Examining why students hold a positive or negative perception of the appearance and usage of school uniforms could help form conclusion on the effectiveness of implementing standardised apparels in the school system and its usefulness in fostering positive outward and inward dispositions like a sense of belonging and feelings of morale through examining students' personal perception.

The current study operationally defines students' perception of school uniform in terms of how students feel about the level of comfort, attractiveness, affordability, tidiness, willingness to be seen in public with school uniform and preference of wearing school uniform or casual wear to school. The current study will adopt Bollen and Hoyle's (1990) conceptualisation of perceived cohesion, using the two major dimensions of sense of belonging and feelings of morale to investigate student's perceived social cohesion. Sense of belonging will be operationally defined in this study as Malaysian student's personal sense of how closely he or she identifies himself or herself as a student who is part of their school and peers of which they belong. Feelings of morale will be operationally defined in this study as the overall positive or negative emotional response the students perceive from sense of belonging to their school and peers.

**Findings**

Data screening and data cleaning were undertaken prior to the analysis of statistical tests. 1 case was identified to be greater than the z-score limit of 3.29 (Fields, 2013), suggesting an outlier was found in the data set. Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic test was used to evaluate the assumption of normality for all variable groups showed a violation of normality. Histogram and normal Q-Q plots indicated positive skewness confirming that normality has been violated. However, the central limit theorem suggests that since the sample size is large enough, the parameter estimates of the population will have a normal distribution (Field, 2013).

To answer research question 1, one sample *t*-test was used to compare between the individual items of students' perception towards their school uniform of the 192 students. Table 1 below showed that students showed preference for school uniform for its *tidiness*. *T*-test was statistically significant,  $t(191) = 62.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .95$ , 95% CI of the difference [3.67, 3.91]. The preference were followed by *affordability*, with  $t(191) = 55.842$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 4.03$ , 95% CI of the difference [3.22, 3.45], *preferred attire be worn in school*, with  $t(191) = 37.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.711$ , 95% CI of the difference [3.00, 3.34], *comfort*, with  $t(191) = 41.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 3.01$ , 95% CI of the difference [2.92, 3.21], *being seen with school uniform*, with  $t(191) = 33.261$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.40$ , 95% CI of the difference [2.45, 2.76] and lastly, *attractiveness*, with  $t(191) = 36.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.60$ , 95% CI of the difference [2.45, 2.73]. All *t*-tests were statistically significantly.

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For research question 2, an independent samples *t*-test was used compare the difference between male ( $n = 75$ ) and female ( $n = 117$ ) students' perception of their school uniform. Levene's test was non-significant, thus equal variances can be assumed. The *t*-test was statistically significant, with female students showing more positive perception, than male students,  $t(190) = -2.65, p < .001$ , two-tailed,  $d = 0.39$ , 95% CI of the difference  $[-3.28, -.48]$ .

*Table 1*

Means and Standard Deviations of Each Item of Students' Perception of School Uniform and between Genders

	Students' Perception of School Uniform	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Comfortableness	3.06	1.02
Attractiveness	2.59	.99
Affordability	3.33	.83
Tidiness	3.79	.84
Being seen	2.61	1.09
Preference (school uniform>casual wear)	3.17	1.17
Male	20.48	4.94
Female	22.36	4.71

For research question 3, an independent samples *t*-test was used to compare the difference in sense of belonging between males and females. Levene's test was non-significant, thus equal variances can be assumed. Table 2 showed that females had higher sense of belonging compared to males however, the *t*-test was statistically non-significant,  $t(190) = -.99, p = .323, d = 0.15$ , 95% CI of the difference  $[-3.02, 1.00]$ .

For research question 4, an independent samples *t*-test was used to compare the difference in feelings of morale between males and females. Levene's test was non-significant, thus equal variances can be assumed. Table 2 showed that males experience more positive feelings of morale compared to females however, the *t*-test was statistically non-significant,  $t(190) = .60, p = .549, d = 0.09$ , 95% CI of the difference  $[-.49, .93]$ .

An independent samples *t*-test was used to compare the difference in perceived social cohesion between males and females. Levene's test was non-significant, thus equal variances can be assumed. Table 2 showed that females had higher perceived social cohesion compared to males however, the *t*-test was statistically non-significant,  $t(190) = -.63, p = .527, d = 0.10$ , 95% CI of the difference  $[-3.27, 1.68]$ .

*Table 2*

Means and Standard Deviations of Each Item of Perceived Social Cohesion between Genders and overall perceived social cohesion between genders

	Perceived Social Cohesion	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Sense of belonging – Male	33.61	7.10
Sense of belonging - Female	34.62	6.76



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	Perceived Social Cohesion	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Feelings of morale – Male	10.84	2.31
Feelings of morale - Female	10.62	2.51
Overall perceived social cohesion - Male	44.45	8.52
Overall perceived social cohesion - Female	45.28	8.46

For research question 5, a bivariate Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) was calculated to assess the direction of the linear relationship between students' overall perception of school uniform and perceived social cohesion. The correlation between the two variables was positive and statistically significant,  $r(190) = .74, p < .001$ .

For research question 6, an inductive content analysis was conducted to understand students' experience of wearing their school uniform and their perceived social cohesion in their own description, understanding and words.

## Students' experience of wearing school uniform and sense of belonging.

This main category indicates a broad description on how and in what ways Malaysian students depict their personal experiences and sense of how closely they identified themselves as part of their school and peers as they wore their school uniform. The subcategories and general categories which are grouped as the main category are listed in Table 3.

Table 3

Frequency of recurrence of words and categories grouped as the main category of students' experience of wearing school uniform and their perceived sense of belonging

Subcategories	General categories	Examples
Equal (19) Same (14)	Equality	"I felt similar because we were from different backgrounds but brought together by the school." (P43) "It gives me the impression that we are of the same social and economic status. I was able to interact freely without any pressure or impression that he is richer than me..." (P154)
Representing school (12) Symbol (6) Responsibility (5) Identity (5) Pride (3)	Representation of identity and school values	"Because my school is top-listed, I am proud of wearing and representing it." (P155) "Agree, because the school uniform was taken as our own identity and pride and the peers would get a chance to represent something and give student the responsibility that brought us closer." (P45)
Unity/United (6) Part of school (5) Community (4)	Sense of community	"[Agree], because we felt united together wearing the same uniform." (P117) "Felt like I was part of a community, which

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Subcategories	General categories	Examples
		made it even better because my school was very small.” (P159)
Similar appearance (10) Part of school regulations (4) School environment (3) Lack of freedom of choice/expression (2)	Restrictions of the school environment	“I felt that uniforms are enforced upon young students without them being offered a choice or freedom to express themselves.” (P111) “[Disagree], because my secondary school environment was not good enough. I didn’t feel comfortable showing off my school and telling people I was there.” (P23)

**Equality.** Some students who wore school uniform experienced sameness and equality due to the nature of the standardisation of apparel. The common opinion suggested by students was that wearing the same school uniform diminishes differences between backgrounds, economy, and social status which facilitated their ability to interact with peers and brought them together.

**Representation of identity and school values.** For many students, the appearance of school uniform acts as a symbol and representation of students’ identity. This identity is derived based on the distinctive features of the school uniform that differentiate students from the general society. Among the students themselves, students can be automatically identified and grouped into their respective schools by observing the distinct features of the accessories worn, for example, the school badge. Students who acclaimed to be from a reputable school felt proud to represent their school by wearing their school uniforms.

**Sense of community.** The standardised appearance of the school uniform gave students a sense of unity. It also showed prominently that they are a part of the community of the school from their school uniform from the familiarity of its appearance.

**Restriction of the school environment.** Students felt that wearing school uniform restricted their freedom of choice and expression due to being ‘forced’ to wearing the same apparel and looking similar with the rest of their peers. They expressed that wearing school uniform is just part of the school regulations but do not enhance sense of belonging. Poor school environment also attributed to students' lack of wanting to be associated with the school.

**Feelings of morale.** This main category indicates an overall positive and negative emotional response the students perceive from being in their school and with their peers. The subcategories and general categories which are grouped as the main category are listed in Table 4.

*Table 4*

Frequency of recurrence of words and categories grouped as the main category of students’ experience of their school and peers and their feelings of morale

Subcategories	General categories	Examples
Friends/Peers (63) Memories/Experiences (22) Good learning environment (21) Teachers (15)	Positive emotional response	“I was happy with my school environment (friends, teachers) who really welcome us.” (P122) “Through the activities, I also got to know myself better, and

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Subcategories	General categories	Examples
		obtained very valuable experiences.” (P75)
Unenjoyable (2) Strict rules (2) Incompetent educators (2)	Negative emotional response	“There are too many rules and regulations in my school.” (P29) “I hated my teachers (who were lazy and incompetent) and my peers were no better either.” (P3)

**Positive emotional response.** Majority of students who took the survey had a positive emotional response towards their school and peers. Students expressed that they had good memories and experiences in school which contributed to their overall positive feelings. 63 students expressed that much of their positive feelings came from the friends and engaging with their peers in school. Students also expressed that their teachers and the conducive, good learning environment which makes them feel positive about school.

**Negative emotional response.** Students had a negative emotional response towards the school by stating that their schools were really competitive and had too many rules and regulations which they had to abide. Students also commented about having educators that were incompetent and lazy which attributed to their negative response towards their school.

### Discussions

The aim of the current study is to investigate the perception Malaysian students have of their mandatory school uniforms and the relationship it has towards perceived social cohesion. While it is mandatory for Malaysian students to wear their school uniforms, the general acceptability among students towards their school uniforms were attributed to the tidy appearance, affordability and comfort of the school uniform. However, it was generally agreed among students that attractiveness of the appearance of school uniform suggest the least to attribute to the positive perception of school uniform. These findings highlighted the importance of considering students’ perception of appearance from wearing school uniform as they indicated a form of students’ self-expression that reflects their personal values and how they aspire to be seen, behave and represented as individuals and as members of their school (Park, 2013).

A significant positive relationship between students’ perception of school uniform and perceived social cohesion was found in this study. The general responses obtained to gain deeper understand to this relationship were largely determined by the judgement of students’ personal experiences in terms of interacting with their peers, educators and school environment. Students who generally have a positive perception of their school uniform believe that school uniform promotes equality amongst students by diminishing the differences of backgrounds, economy and social status, brought them together and facilitate interaction with one another. Students also reflected being a part of a community consisting of peers who wear the same school uniform. This idea coincides to the subjective notion of the sense of belonging as suggested by Bollen and Hoyle (1990) that is the sense of identification which leads the individual to display positive perception towards the school and stakeholders. However, opposing opinions were found among students who have a negative perception of their school uniform as supported by Park’s (2013) finding from her focus group. These students expressed that uniforms are part of school regulation imposed to make students appear similar to restrict their freedom of choice and

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expression. Rather than looking similar to their peers in terms of attire, students reflected that the interaction and bond formed with their peers reflected their sense of belonging towards their school. This idea was consistent with Brunnsma's (2006) finding who indicated that the visual standardised appearance of school uniform does not necessarily reflect onto the implicit sense of belonging which educators and policymakers proposed it served.

The response obtained for students' overall feelings of morale, suggests similar insight to how most students associated their school uniforms as the representation environment of their school. Additionally, school uniforms are also associated to the representation of values and reputation of their school. For instance, students' who had positive emotional response reflected good memories and experiences with peers, had good learning environment and good educators. Students who have claimed attended well-established and reputable schools were proud of wearing their school uniform and felt positive about being identified as part of a member in their schools. However, contrary opinions were given by students who attended schools with a poor learning environment as they expressed that they were uncomfortable of being associated and make known to be a part of their school. This goes to suggest that for students, school uniform is a symbol of students' reflection and a reminder of their sense of belonging and feelings towards their school developed from the outcome of interaction with their stakeholders and environment of the school.

### Limitations of study

One of the limitations of the study included the reliance on the retrospective recall of the participants since the sample consists of Malaysian college or university students. This may explain the general "positivity" bias in the findings as participants may romanticize the memories of their high school experiences rather than providing objective perception of the current experiences of their school uniform and perceived social cohesion. Another limitation also includes the uneven number of male and female student participants in the study. There were a total of 117 female students but only 75 male students who participated in the study. Hence, it may be construed that results from the male students' perspective were under-represented in the study.

### Recommendation for future study

One of the recommendations for future study to address the limitation of the current study is to recruit participants who are currently undergoing their primary or secondary education in Malaysia as this will allow researchers to obtain an objective perception of the current experiences of their school uniform and perceived social cohesion. The current demographic category considered for this study was only for gender. Since the current study act as a preliminary study in identifying gender differences in perception of school uniform, it is hoped that future quantitative and qualitative study will be dedicated to focus on studying gender differences to justify the findings. In line of participants and demographic study, this survey instrument could be administered to additional demographic variables on future research such as the types of school attended by students and the different school levels as this will give a broader understanding on how students of different demographics perceive their school uniforms and perceived social cohesion. An important finding from the current study was learning how students' interaction with peers and school environment has reflected their general perception of the school uniform and perceived social cohesion. It is hoped that future study to further

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investigate on this relationship by taking into account how students' interaction with peers and school environment could act as a mediating variable in the relationship between perception of school uniform and their perceived social cohesion.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study is a first step in understanding the relationship between students' perceptions and attitudes towards school uniforms, perceived social cohesion and the relationship between these two variables. Perceptions were found to vary depending on personal experiences and interactions with peers and school environment. Perceptions may reflect a symbolic discourse the school uniform have in the representation and reflection of these experiences and interaction amongst students regardless of whether they were positively or negatively attributing to the sense of belonging or feelings of morale. The current study hoped to act as a stepping stone for Malaysian educators and school policymakers as well as encourage future research to obtain deeper understanding of the perceived social cohesion amongst Malaysian students and how these experiences may contribute to creating a better school climate.

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