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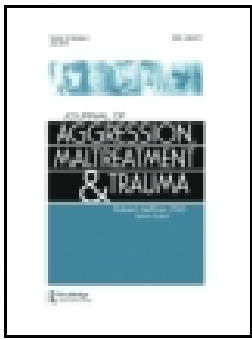
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Published online: 13 Oct 2022.

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Perceived Severity of Stalking Behavior and Blame Attributions among Malaysians: The Influence of Prior Relationship, Belief in a Just World, and Dark Tetrad Personality Traits

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ABSTRACT

The 'just world hypothesis' is often used to explain victim blame attribution in assault cases, while dark personality traits are known to predict victim-blaming attitudes in sexual harassment situations, but little work has empirically tested these hypotheses within the context of stalking perpetration. Research investigating perceptions toward stalking is also scarce in the Asia region. This study examined whether the prior relationship between the stalking perpetrator and victim, just world beliefs, and Dark Tetrad traits influence judgments of severity of the behavior and perceptions of victim responsibility in a country that does not currently have anti-stalking legislation. Three hundred and thirty university students and general community members in Malaysia read a fictional stalking scenario in which the perpetrator was depicted as a stranger, acquaintance, or ex-partner. Participants evaluated whether the perpetrator's behavior constitutes stalking, requires police intervention, would cause the victim alarm, personal distress, or to fear the use of violence, and can be attributed to the victim's behavior. There were significant differences between the perpetrator-target prior relationship conditions on perceptions of stalking. Just world beliefs, Machiavellianism, and narcissism were positively associated with perceived victim responsibility, while each Dark Tetrad trait had differential associations with perceived severity of the stalking behavior, albeit with small effect sizes. Further regression analyses revealed that belief in a just world was a consistent predictor of perceived victim responsibility. Findings confirm that the individual observer's internal and external factors influence how stalking is perceived, which have implications for victims of stalking and the legal system.

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Introduction

Perceptions of stalking

While research on stalking has increased in the past few decades, there is still little consensus on how stalking is defined (Owens, 2016). Its broad definition is an unwanted repetitive behavior pattern aiming at a targeted individual, which is persistent, intrusive, and obsessive, which causes the individual to feel distressed or threatened (Miller, 2012). Unlike most crimes, stalking has not been defined by the perpetrators' intentions but rather based on the perceptions and responses of the victims. It is particularly challenging for the criminal justice system to deal with stalking cases, given the gray area that exists between seemingly endearing or harmless courtship behavior (e.g., giving presents, making phone calls) and persistent, unwanted intrusive behavior that can be fear-inducing (Spitzberg, 2002). Stalking cases do not always result in prosecutions and convictions, given the difficulty in proving as well as tracking the progress of such cases (Boehnlein et al., 2020). Moreover, victims are often required to identify stalking behaviors, recognize their victimization, and even take responsibility for collecting evidence of the harassment behaviors (Brady & Nobles, 2017).

Stalking is, nonetheless, recognized as a global problem with serious economic, social, health, and psychological consequences (Blaauw et al., 2002). Despite this, and the prevalence of cases, Malaysia remains a nation that does not have specific anti-stalking legislation (Joint Action Group for Gender Equality, 2018). A recent survey conducted by the Women's Aid Organization (WAO) with approximately 1,000 respondents found that over 36% of Malaysians have been subjected to routine and unwanted harassment that caused them fear, but more than two thirds of these respondents did not make a police report because they did not believe that the police could or would help (Yap, 2020). The survey also revealed that half of those who made a police report were not satisfied with the action taken. These data highlight the fact that the country's collective response to stalking needs to be improved to enhance victim engagement and safety (Backes et al., 2020). However, it is crucial to understand how the public perceives, understands, and reacts to stalking, as people's perceptions are inextricably linked with their likelihood to report a stalking case to criminal justice authorities.

There is clear evidence to show that people's perceived severity of the stalking behavior is influenced by the prior relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. However, these perceptions are often biased, in that ex-partner stalkers tend to be viewed as less dangerous than stranger or acquaintance stalkers, even though in reality ex-partner stalkers are more likely to use physical violence and be more persistent in their harassment behavior (for a review see, A. J. Scott, 2020). For instance, previous studies have found that college students judged police intervention to be more necessary (Sheridan

et al., 2003) and more likely to occur (Cass & Rosay, 2012) when the stalker is a stranger as opposed to an ex-partner. As shown by Lynch and Logan (2015), even police exhibit these relational biases, albeit officers who had previously charged a stalking perpetrator tended to view stalking as more serious compared to officers who had never dealt with stalking charges.

The role of just world beliefs and the dark tetrad in blame attributions

The 'just world hypothesis' has been used to explain the distorted perceptions of stalking, particularly in relation to victim blame attribution (A. J. Scott, 2020). According to this hypothesis, people want to believe that the world is a fair place where people get what they deserve (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Drawing upon the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977), when an event threatens people's belief in a just world, they tend to focus on dispositional explanations for why the misfortune has occurred. Belief in a just world is a variable known to predict negative attitudes toward sexual assault victims and is hypothesized to have a causal effect on victim-blaming (for a review see, Van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). In stalking cases where the perpetrators and the victim share a history, people may rationalize the event by reasoning that the victim must have done something to trigger the perpetrator's actions. Interestingly, there has only been one study that empirically examined the role of just world beliefs in stalking perceptions (A. J. A. J. Scott et al., 2014). Through a thematic analysis of participants' open-ended responses to a question concerning victim responsibility, A. J. Scott and colleagues found victim-blaming tendencies to be consistent with the underlying assumptions of the just world hypothesis – participants tended to reinterpret the cause of a stalking situation in a way that the victim's fate was attributed to something they did or did not do. To the authors' knowledge, there are no studies that have used quantitative measures to empirically test the role of just world beliefs, hence the current study aimed at filling this gap.

The Dark Tetrad – a set of socially aversive personality traits comprising Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism – have also been found to be related to negative perceptions toward assault/abuse victims. Machiavellianism is centered on manipulativeness and indifference to morality; narcissism is characterized by grandiosity and a sense of entitlement; psychopathy is associated with poor behavioral control and callousness; and sadism is marked by a penchant for cruelty (Paulhus, 2014). Brewer et al. (2019) found that females high in primary psychopathy (characterized by callousness and shallow affect) more readily assign blame to the victim but were more reluctant to blame the perpetrator when presented with sexual harassment scenarios. In the case of cyber abuse, narcissism and sadism have been reported to be predictors of victim-blaming perceptions (Hand et al., 2021; G. G. G. G. Scott et al., 2020). A recent study by Chung and Sheridan

(2021) on the role of the Dark Tetrad in stalking perceptions found narcissism to be a significant predictor of lower perceived severity of stalking behavior and higher perceived victim responsibility in hypothetical stalking situations. Paulhus and Williams (2002) in their seminal work demonstrated that each of the dark traits should be considered on a continuum – everyone is Machiavellian, narcissistic, psychopathic, and sadistic to some degree. It is particularly problematic if such traits are core tendencies of certain individuals, such as frontline workers for abuse perpetrators and victims, as they are likely to undermine victims of abuse who come forward.

Stalking legislation in Malaysia

At the moment, Malaysia does not have specific anti-stalking legislation. What this means is, if a person who experiences unwanted, intrusive behavior such as being followed, pursued, and/or contacted repeatedly, were to lodge a police report, there is little authorities can do because in the eyes of the law, the pursuer has not committed a crime. The Malaysian Penal Code does not recognize such behavior – that often appear harmless when considered in isolation – to be offenses or provide any preemptive protection orders against them. Section 354 of the Code provides an offense where an assailant '*assaults or uses criminal force to any person, intending to outrage or knowing it to be likely that he will thereby outrage the modesty of that person*' (Penal Code Act 574, 1936, rev. 1997). The fact that the assault or criminal force is tied to an 'outrage of modesty' means that these offenses may be limited to physical acts of sexual nature. The Domestic Violence (Amendment) Act (2017) has expanded the definition of domestic violence to include threatening behavior with the intent to cause the victim to fear for their safety and enabled stalking victims to receive some form of protection against a spouse or former spouse. The act now includes expedited protection orders which can be issued by social welfare officers (instead of having to go to Court) to prohibit a stalker from being in close proximity to a victim. It has also expanded the definition of domestic violence to include threatening behavior with the intent to cause the victim to fear for their safety or the safety of their property, suffer distress, or to insult the victim's modesty. The Domestic Violence Act however has no application between non-familial adults, thus provides no protection against harassing behavior from strangers.

The present study

Taken together, findings indicate that both contextual and individual differences factors have an impact on the perceived acceptability and blame attribution in cases of stalking. How one perceives stalking behavior has implications, as it can affect the extent to which victims identify their own experiences as stalking, as well

as the public's intent to intervene and offer support to victims. Perceptions that fail to reflect the reality of stalking perpetration and victimization can influence arbitrary decision-making of legal professionals, police officers, community members, and victims, resulting in insufficient response from the criminal justice system (Pathé et al., 2004). It is therefore of importance to examine how stalking is understood, and determine which circumstances contribute to inaccurate understandings of stalking, so that people can be educated about its reality, improving their ability to recognize and respond appropriately to such behavior.

What is less clear from the literature, however, is the concept of just world beliefs in relation to the Dark Tetrad traits and stalking perceptions. Furthermore, belief in a just world is said to be stronger in countries with high power distance (Furnham, 1993), but research investigating perceptions of stalking (and violence in general) is scarce in Asia, where countries in this region tend to have high power distance indices according to the Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions framework.

In light of the above, the present study investigated whether perpetrator-victim prior relationship, just world beliefs, and the Dark Tetrad traits influence perceptions of stalking in Malaysia, a developing Southeast Asian country where stalking is currently not classified as a crime. This study adopted a common methodology in perception studies, whereby stalking vignettes are manipulated to evaluate people's subjective perceptions of the severity of the behavior and culpability of the pursuer or target (see A. J., Scott, 2020). It was predicted that greater degree of prior intimacy between perpetrator and victim is associated with lesser tendency to perceive the stalking behavior as severe, and greater tendency to attribute responsibility to victims. It was also expected that higher just world belief and Dark Tetrad scores are associated with lower perceived severity of stalking behavior and higher perceived victim responsibility.

Method

Participants

The participants were 330 Malaysians (159 males, 162 females, 1 other, 8 preferred not to say) from university and community samples aged 18 to 100 years ($Mdn = 21$, $M = 26.69$, $SD = 13.63$, 13 did not report). Most were ethnic Chinese (64.5%), followed by Malay (16.1%), Indian (11.2%), other ethnicities (3.3%), and a small number preferred not to reveal their ethnic group (4.8%).

Measures

Following Chung and Sheridan (2021), there were three versions of a stalking vignette that represented the different types of prior relationship between

perpetrator and target: stranger, acquaintance, and ex-partner. The ex-partner condition is illustrated below:

> *Liza first met Adam when they worked together at an estate agents office. They formed a romantic relationship. Liza ended it on the grounds that they wanted different things from the relationship. During the 3 months that followed, Adam sent Liza between 5 and 10 text messages a day, many of these messages asking why she was not interested in him. Adam also approached Liza on her way to work and telephoned her at home. Liza asked Adam to stop calling her, but he continued to call her regularly. In the end Liza disconnected the phone and Adam left several messages blaming her for what was happening. Most recently, Adam arrived at Liza's home soon after she returned from work. Liza pretended that she was out.*

In the stranger condition, Liza first met Adam when she visited the estate agents office where he works to renew the lease on her apartment. She was asked to join him for lunch as she was leaving the office, but she declined the invitation. In the acquaintance condition Liza and Adam had worked together for three months when Liza was invited by Adam to lunch, but she declined. The harassing behavior was identical for all conditions.

Also following Chung and Sheridan (2021), perceptions of stalking were assessed on five 11-point Likert scales. These items measure whether the perpetrator's behavior: (1) constitutes stalking; (2) necessitates police intervention; (3) would cause the victim alarm or personal distress; (4) would cause the victim to fear that the perpetrator will use violence; and (5) can be attributed to the victim. The first four items relate to perceived severity of behavior whereas the last item assesses perceived victim responsibility.

Just world beliefs were measured using the Global Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJWS; Lipkus, 1991), which compromises seven 7-point Likert items (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). An example item is "*I feel that rewards and punishments are fairly given.*" The GBJWS has demonstrated good internal consistency as well as concurrent validity with other major belief in just world scales (Reich & Wang, 2015).

The current study also tested the predictive reach of the recently published Short Dark Tetrad (SD4; Paulhus et al., 2020). The scale contains 28 items, with seven items assessing Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism, respectively. It uses a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Example items include "*Manipulating the situation takes planning*" (Machiavellianism), "*I have some exceptional qualities*" (narcissism), "*I tend to fight against authorities and their rules*" (psychopathy), and "*I enjoy watching violent sports*" (sadism). This is a fairly new scale and therefore there are limited studies that have examined its structure, but a recent study by Neumann et al. (2021) provided evidence for this scale in terms of structure and validity.

Procedure

This study was administered anonymously via the Jisc Online Surveys platform. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling, whereby the link to the online study was shared on the University of Reading research participation pool and on social media networks of the researchers. Participants were provided with an information sheet, and if they chose to participate, they would tick a box on the consent form to confirm this. Participants were also asked to provide a security phrase; if they wanted to remove their data after completion of the study, they would provide the unique security phrase for data withdrawal. One of three versions of a stalking vignette was randomly presented to each participant, followed by five corresponding questions. Participant-observers then answered the personality inventories and demographic information questionnaire. A debrief sheet was presented upon completion. Ethics approval for this study was granted by the University of Reading Malaysia Research Ethics Committee [Approval Reference Number UoRM REC 2020/12].

Results

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance was run to determine the effect of prior relationship status on perceptions of stalking, as assessed by five perception items. There was a significant difference between the prior relationship conditions on general perceptions of stalking, $F(10, 646) = 3.22$, $p < .001$, Wilks' $\Lambda = .91$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. Tukey post-hoc tests showed that participant-observers were more likely to consider the behavior as stalking (item 1) and requiring police intervention (item 2) when the perpetrator was depicted as a stranger rather than an acquaintance or an ex-partner. Participant-observers were also more likely to agree that the victim is responsible for the perpetrator's behavior (item 5) in the ex-partner condition. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and F ratios for all five perception scale items.

A number of researchers have criticized the use of revisualized analyses to interpret findings in studies that have highly correlated constructs, such as the Dark Tetrad. Lynam et al. (2006) argued that partialing in regression-based

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Univariate Analyses of Variance F Ratios for the Five Perception Scale Items by Prior Relationship Conditions.

	Stalking	Intervention	Alarm	Violence	Responsibility
Condition			M (SD)		
Stranger	8.65 (1.54)	7.84 (2.09)	9.20 (1.26)	8.61 (1.61)	1.98 (2.38)
Acquaintance	8.37 (2.09)	7.04 (2.43)	8.97 (1.70)	8.09 (2.09)	2.48 (2.82)
Ex-partner	7.97 (2.27)	7.04 (2.42)	8.87 (1.55)	8.21 (2.12)	3.72 (2.93)
F	3.22*	4.43*	1.35	2.08	11.92**

*$p < .05$, **$p < .001$.

analyses makes it challenging for researchers to meaningfully interpret what construct an independent variable represents after variance shared among the constructs is removed. Given these issues, the present study prioritized zero-order correlations and individual regression analyses. Assumptions of normality, linearity, independence of residuals, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity were checked, and there were no significant outliers. Table 2 shows descriptive data and Pearson's correlations among just world beliefs, Dark Tetrad traits and perceptions of stalking. Just world beliefs were positively correlated with only Machiavellianism and narcissism. Participant-observers with higher just world belief scores were less likely to perceive that the harassment behavior will cause the victim alarm or personal distress as well as fear of violence, but were more likely to attribute responsibility to the victim. Participant-observers with higher Machiavellianism and narcissism were also more likely to attribute responsibility to the victim. Individuals with higher narcissism were less likely to consider the harassing behavior as stalking, whereas those with higher psychopathy were less likely to think that the behavior requires police intervention. Individuals high in sadism were less likely to think that the behavior requires police intervention, will cause alarm or distress and fear of violence. These effect sizes were small, ranging from |0.11| to |0.24|.

To examine the role of just world beliefs and the Dark Tetrad on perceptions of victim responsibility, four separate regression analyses were also conducted to predict perceived victim responsibility from perceiver age and gender, perpetrator-victim prior relationship status, just world beliefs, and each of the Dark Tetrad traits, as summarized in Table 3. For these analyses,

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Just World Beliefs, Dark Tetrad Traits, Perceived Severity of Stalking Behavior, and Perceived Victim Responsibility.

Variable	α	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
(1) Just world beliefs	.78	4.10 (.96)	-	.22**	.12*	.07	.02	−.06	−.08	−.12*	−.12*	.24**
(2) Machiavellianism	.63	3.54 (.55)		-	.16**	.17**	.27**	.03	−.01	.07	.01	.12*
(3) Narcissism	.77	2.85 (.62)			-	.22**	.12*	−.11*	−.09	−.08	−.10	.12*
(4) Psychopathy	.76	2.31 (.66)				-	.55**	−.05	−.09	−.13*	−.11	.05
(5) Sadism	.84	2.30 (.87)					-	−.06	−.18**	−.13*	−.13*	.08
(6) Constitute stalking	-	8.33 (2.01)						-	.60**	.51**	.51**	−.25**
(7) Necessitate police intervention	-	7.30 (2.34)							-	.50**	.58**	−.22**
(8) Cause alarm or distress	-	9.02 (1.52)								-	.64**	−.18**
(9) Cause fear of violence	-	8.30 (1.96)									-	−.13*
(10) Victim responsibility	-	2.73 (2.81)										-

*p < .05, **p < .01.

Table 3. Regressions Predicting Perceived Victim Responsibility from Perceiver Age, Gender, Perpetrator-Victim Prior Relationship, Just World Beliefs, and Each Dark Tetrad Trait.

	B	SE	β	t	95% CI
Age	.004	.01	.02	.39	[−.02, .03]
Gender[a]	.09	.31	.02	.29	[−.53, .71]
Male	−1.82	.37	-.30	−4.92*	[−2.55, −1.10]
Prior Relationship[b]	-1.26	.37	-.21	-3.37*	[−1.99, −.52]
Stranger					
Acquaintance					
Belief in a Just World	.70	.16	.24	4.33*	[.38, 1.02]
Machiavellianism	.18	.29	.04	.63	[−.39, .76]
Age	.004	.01	.02	.36	[−.02, .03]
Gender[a]	.08	.30	.01	.27	[−.52, .68]
Male	−1.78	.37	-.30	−4.83*	[−2.51, −1.06]
Prior Relationship[b]	-1.33	.37	-.22	-3.61*	[−2.05, −.60]
Stranger					
Acquaintance					
Belief in a Just World	.69	.16	.24	4.36*	[.38, 1.00]
Narcissism	.47	.25	.11	1.93	[−.01, .96]
Age	.004	.01	.02	.40	[−.02, .03]
Gender[a]	.12	.31	.02	.40	[−.49, .73]
Male	−1.84	.37	-.30	−4.96*	[−2.56, −1.11]
Prior Relationship[b]	-1.30	.37	-.22	-3.51*	[−2.02, −.57]
Stranger					
Acquaintance					
Belief in a Just World	.72	.16	.25	4.56*	[.41, 1.03]
Psychopathy	.08	.23	.02	.35	[−.38, .54]
Age	.006	.01	.03	.56	[−.02, .03]
Gender[a]	-.002	.32	<.001	-.01	[−.64, .64]
Male	-1.81	.37	-.30	-4.88*	[−2.53, −1.08]
Prior Relationship[b]	-1.30	.37	-.22	-3.53*	[−2.02, −.58]
Stranger					
Acquaintance					
Belief in a Just World	.72	.16	.25	4.58*	[.41, 1.03]
Sadism	.24	.19	.07	1.26	[−.13, .61]

Note. $N = 309$. Participants who did not report their age, gender, or identified as 'other' were excluded from this analysis.
[a]'Female' as the reference category.
[b]'Ex-partner' as the reference category.
*$p < .001$.

participants who did not report their age ($n = 13$), gender ($n = 1$), or reported identifying with another gender ($n = 8$) were excluded due to low numbers. Belief in a just world – but not age, gender, and the Dark Tetrad – was a significant predictor of greater blame attribution toward the victim.

Discussion

This study demonstrated that prior relationship between perpetrator and victim influence whether a harassment situation was perceived to constitute stalking and necessitate police intervention, as well as whether the victim was blamed for the perpetrator's behavior in the harassment situation. The findings largely support existing literature, but it is unexpected that prior relationship did not significantly predict participant-observer's perceptions of whether the harassment situation would cause the victim alarm or personal distress and

to fear the use of violence. Currently, Malaysia does not have anti-stalking laws, and this can be due to the lack of understanding of the severity of the behavior among its populace. It is thus possible that the lack of awareness surrounding stalking and its danger have influenced the way Malaysians view such behaviors. The absence of anti-stalking laws may correspondingly lead to failure of the authorities in criminal justice system to recognize stalking behaviors and respond appropriately when cases arise. There are also some cultural and social contexts that normalize violence and harassment, and this may explain why there were no significant differences in the perceptions of whether the stalking behavior would cause the victim alarm or distress and to fear violence among the relationship conditions. In a review by Kadir Shahar et al. (2020), it was argued that individuals within patriarchal communities may perceive gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, as acceptable under certain circumstances. That being said, with reference to Table 1, the mean rating across relationship conditions for whether the harassing behavior would cause the victim alarm or personal distress was 9.02 (SD = 1.52) on a 0–10-point scale, while the mean rating for whether the behavior would cause the victim to fear the use of violence was 8.30 (SD = 1.96), which do not seem to indicate a large underestimating of the severity of stalking. This observation hopefully indicates that there is no need for intense intervention or awareness programs to drastically change the public's attitudes and behavior toward stalking cases, however educational or informational programs that highlight the dangers of ex-partner stalking would be useful to tackle misperceptions.

The correlational findings in relation to the Dark Tetrad traits are in line with existing theoretical conceptualizations of the dark personalities. Machiavellianism and narcissism were positively correlated with perceived victim responsibility. Theoretically, Machiavellian individuals are cautious, calculating, and deliberate in their approaches (Jones, 2016), often making decisions that are divorced from personal bias and sympathies. When evaluating harassment behaviors, participant-observers high in Machiavellianism may think that the world is a fair place, and that everyone is entitled to endorse tactics that would help them achieve goals. In their view, the victimization is therefore a manifestation of the victims' own behavior, in a manner consistent with the belief in a just world. Another potential explanation these findings is that individuals high in the Dark Tetrad seem to harbor negative-other biases in which they have a general tendency to judge others in an unfavorable way (Rauthmann, 2012). Machiavellian individuals hold a misanthropic world view, in which they regard people as fallible and gullible (Christie & Geis, 1970); whereas narcissistic individuals typically hold others in contempt by devaluing and denigrating others (Sedikides et al., 2002). Individuals with higher narcissism were also less likely to think that the harassing behavior constitutes stalking. In fact, given their attention-seeking

tendencies, it may be the case that narcissistic individuals do not view the attention given by the perpetrator as unwanted or deviant, but rather as deserving.

Participant-observers with higher psychopathy and sadism scores were less likely to think that the harassment behavior would cause alarm or distress and fear of violence. Further, those with higher sadism were less likely to think that the harassing situation would require intervention by the police, cause alarm or distress and fear of violence. Traits of antagonism including callousness as well as lack of remorse and guilt are fundamental features psychopathic individuals possess (Widiger & Crego, 2021). Individuals with sadistic tendencies have been shown to experience greater *schadenfreude*, that is, an emotion of enjoyment when others suffer from a misfortune (Schumpe & Lafrenière, 2016). Hence, these individuals may not perceive the harassing situation as problematic, nor would they employ strategies that will attract police detection or involvement in a harassment context. An important caveat, however, is that the observed effect sizes in the current study were small.

Just world beliefs scores were positively associated with perceived victim responsibility, but negatively associated with the perception that the harassment behavior would cause the victim alarm or distress and fear of violence. Regression analyses also demonstrated that belief in a just world was a consistent predictor of greater blame attribution to the victim. This provides further empirical evidence that beliefs in a just world predict victim-blaming in perceptions of stalking, and this is consistent with previous work examining blame attributions in rape situations. For example, Strömwall et al. (2013) reported in their study that participants with stronger beliefs in a just world viewed the perpetrator in a sexual assault scenario as less blameworthy, but the victim as more blameworthy. Arguably, participant-observers who believe in a just world may not see the point of feeling distressed or fearful when the victims themselves should be responsible for their own fate.

The study by Strömwall et al. (2013) is relevant to the discussion here, as it was pointed out that Sweden, where the study was conducted, is a society that has historically adopted a more gender-egalitarian model. The study also showed that there were generally lower victim-blaming than perpetrator-blaming attitudes among the Swedish public. Tengku Hassan et al. (2015) argued that in the context of Malaysia, where traditional attitudes on gender roles are still prevalent, there is a need to initiate cultural change to address people's perceptions toward gender-based violence. Victims' experience with support institutions will impact their help-seeking patterns; in the study by Tengku Hassan and colleagues, victims preferred to turn to women's organizations instead of the police for help, as the responses from police were not always encouraging. Charity organizations are arguably more aware of the severity of harassment behaviors and therefore more supportive of victims when they come forward. This highlights the fact that social judgments of

stalking behavior (and any other interpersonal violence for that matter) and victims influence law enforcement responses, which in turn shape the public's views of such crimes.

Limitations and future directions

Given the brevity of the SD4 scale, its adequacy in the assessment of the four multidimensional domains may be questioned, as essential content found in more protracted measures are no longer available. For instance, in Brewer et al.'s (2019) study, primary psychopathy, which is characterized by callous and shallow affect, was the only significant predictor of victim-blaming. However, the psychopathy domain of SD4 appears to have a stronger emphasis on impulsivity, which renders its conception closer to secondary as opposed to primary psychopathy (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). It is also worth noting that Chung and Sheridan used the Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014) and the Varieties of Sadistic Tendencies (VAST; Paulhus & Jones, 2015) questionnaires, which are marginally longer and contain slightly different items to the SD4, yielding different results to the current study (they found that all Dark Tetrad traits were positively associated with perceived victim responsibility, with small to medium effect sizes; the correlations were also based on combined data from Malaysian and English participants). While more comprehensive scales do offer better coverage of all constructs, since individuals high in dark traits are likely to lose interest easily if they do not gain anything from completing a given task, lengthy multi-item instruments may increase the risk of participant fatigue and annoyance.

Data for the current study was collected between October 2020 and June 2021, a period in which the country underwent a series of lockdowns in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This meant that a non-probabilistic online survey was the most feasible and cost-effective way of data collection; hence the findings may not accurately represent the entire population. Additionally, this anonymous study was set up in a way whereby it was impossible to identify how many respondents were drawn from campus versus community samples. To gain a more in-depth understanding of people's perceptions, there is a need to complement the current study with key informant interviews from a wide range of people, including victims, as well as those working in the criminal justice system and helping professions.

Moreover, Malaysia is a unique nation with an ethnically diverse Asian population, and therefore these findings should not be generalized to other cultures. Data collection in other countries with and without stalking legislation would allow cross-cultural comparisons detecting contextual and individual factors. This is pertinent in the assessment of the dark traits and cultural values such as hierarchy versus egalitarianism, which have been shown to fluctuate across societies (Jonason et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This study provides unique insights into how Malaysians perceive stalking behavior as a function of the prior relationship between the perpetrator and victim. Findings point toward a need for better understanding of stalking behavior in general, especially given the current situation where there is a demand for anti-stalking legislations in Malaysia. Notably, government and non-government agencies have taken concerted efforts to make stalking a crime since 2018, and the bill with proposed amendments to existing laws has just recently been passed in the lower house of the Malaysian Parliament. It is hoped that deserving victims will be offered greater constitutional protection as a result of this policy change.

This is also one of the few studies that empirically tested the role of individual differences on perceptions of stalking. Individuals differ in the ways they view intrusive and harassment behavior, and this influences the degree to which they intervene or help. It is posited that the current study serves as a useful reference point for law enforcement agencies and policy-makers when it comes to raising public awareness and improving criminal justice responses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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