



Bridging social capital: The experiences of Orang Asli communities in Malaysia in navigating information disruption

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Malaysia's Orang Asli indigenous communities navigate disinformation in the network society, challenging hegemonic, Western-centric digital literacy frameworks that prioritise individual critical thinking and overlook marginalised lived experiences. Drawing on Sherry Ortner's anthropology of the good and James Scott's *The Weapons of the Weak*, it explores agency, resistance, and resilience through collective practices amid vulnerability, oppression, and the digital divide. Employing qualitative methods, including interviews with government officers and community leaders, and four focus group discussions (FGDs) with 24 participants (elderly, youth, teachers, and community members) from June 2023 to February 2024, data were analysed thematically to uncover strategies for information verification and adaptation. Findings reveal the Orang Asli's reliance on interpersonal networks, family trust, and local leaders to combat misinformation, fostering bonding social capital for internal solidarity and bridging ties for external engagement. Despite government distrust and systemic isolation, communities transform precarity into resilience via culturally embedded tactics, such as community fact-checking meetings. The study contributes by reframing digital literacy as collective, context-sensitive, and affective, and by advocating inclusive policies that bridge social cleavages and empower peripheral voices to build humane, sustainable resilience against information disruption.

Keywords: **Digital literacy, Orang Asli, indigenous, misinformation, fake news, resilience**

INTRODUCTION

The internet has become an integral component of contemporary society, engendering widespread dependence on information networks. Consequently, individuals who lack the requisite capital to navigate these networks will encounter profound challenges, as all critical systems and structures will be embedded within and operated through them. These key systems encompass information, economic, cultural, social, and political domains—namely, the dominant structures that hold profound significance for human sustainability. Being decentered from these systems, individuals will face severe consequences, including isolation and marginalisation (Castells, 2004). Scholarly discussions on vulnerability to information disruption emphasise the digital divide and digital literacy, yet efforts to enhance literacy often ignore the divide's deeper roots beyond access and ownership, while prioritising critical thinking programs that favour urban middle-class users and exacerbate disenfranchisement. This highlights a key research gap: the underexplored potential of knowledge and practices from peripheral communities to foster more inclusive approaches.

In Malaysia, persistent inequalities across income, ethnicity, gender, and rural-urban lines undermine societal and economic well-being, fostering political polarisation and exclusion. Among the Orang Asli indigenous communities, these disparities are stark, with poverty rates surpassing 33% in 2019, resulting in food insecurity, adverse health effects (Sulaiman et al., 2021), and educational challenges such as high dropout rates and poor academic performance (Renganathan, 2022). This study extends the digital divide framework (van Dijk, 2005) by integrating cultural and social dimensions, consistent with views that digital engagement is embedded in everyday life and living conditions (Nguyen et al., 2021).

In the era of the network society, which prioritises information as its foundational backbone, there is a surge in the production of diverse forms of information, which has become pervasive, permeating human life on a massive scale (Qiu, 2019), including content with the potential to be harmful or even dangerous (Danescu, 2021). The vulnerability of those lacking adequate capital in digital competence has engendered a dominant belief system that underscores the necessity of global initiatives to build resilience to navigate disrupted information flows.

This study argues that global initiatives aimed at countering information disruptions operate within the framework of hegemonic functionalism, which should move beyond a Western-centric and top-down critical thinking framework to develop programs, curricula, and scholarships primarily targeting young, educated, urban, middle-class individuals. Drawing on Sherry Ortner's notion of anthropologies of the good (2016), this study examines power, inequality, and oppression to reframe hegemonic functionalism in digital literacy initiatives that highlight the specific contexts and lived experiences of marginalised communities.

In her review of major literature on dark anthropology, Ortner observed that individuals strive to find the best ways to live, even amid profound suffering (2002, 2006). That said, scholars argue that people tend to pursue what they perceive as right and good,

prioritising analyses of agency and possibility over mere constraints and oppression, to foster hope and well-being. Along with it, this study also employs arguments stating that resilience is deeply embedded in the culture, with this capacity arising from a profound sense of care for fellow members (Robbins, 2013; Scott, 1985).

Building on previous discussions, this study raises the question: How do the Orang Asli in Malaysia demonstrate their capacity to claim agency in reshaping hegemonic functionalism in digital literacy, appropriating it to recognise and manage risks in an era of information disruption? Thus, it aims to explore the appropriation and adaptive processes the Orang Asli employ to navigate disinformation using available resources. Centering Orang Asli experiences, this study reframes biased digital resilience strategies. It explores how group membership affects resilience to disinformation, emphasising social, cultural, and technological factors on access and understanding; uncovers strategies for detecting and responding to falsehoods; and analyses power dynamics, barriers, and socio-political influences. Findings aim to develop a context-sensitive digital literacy framework that empowers marginalised groups and informs Malaysia's policies on literacy and disinformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional definitions of the digital divide focus narrowly on access to the internet and devices (van Dijk, 2006; Warschauer, 2002). This limited perspective hinders effective digital inclusion efforts and ignores broader factors, emphasising a wide array of exclusions and inequalities underlying people's disengagement from ICT (van Dijk, 2006). It includes, to name but a few, demographic contexts (van Dijk, 2006), age, and level of education (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2011), precarious financial position (Bach et al., 2018), as well as race and ethnicity (Fairlie, 2004). Consequently, strategies to enhance digital literacy often prioritise bridging technological gaps (Khanlou et al., 2021; Neumeyer et al., 2020), which fail to address the contexts of marginalised communities.

In a broad sense, digital literacy encompasses technical skills for engaging with digital media, such as interpreting, managing, sharing, and creating content, to foster social participation (Ali, 2023; Chan et al., 2017; Chetty et al., 2018). However, several scholars acknowledge how the digital literacy programs preserve a Western-centric point of view, describing critical thinking as a context-free, technical skill or a generic set of mental operations (Bali, 2019; Qasserras & Qasserras, 2023). The very typical programs are delivered in formal, dominant structures such as schools and universities (Abiddin et al., 2022; Otieno, 2020). These hegemonic functionalism programs favour urban middle-class users and neglect disenfranchised groups (Stevenson, 2009). According to several scholars, such approaches superficially combat disinformation at the normative level (Hassan, 2024; Pajuste et al., 2022). Contrariwise, the existing literature demonstrates that these approaches significantly reproduce the exclusion of marginalised communities (Castells, 2011; Mariën & Prodnik, 2014).

However, there are critiques against this hegemonic functionalism in digital literacy, suggesting that it neglects sociocultural, political, and economic contexts,

including the lived experiences of the underprivileged (Helsper, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021). Thus, other scholars suggest to develop alternative or non-Western-centric program to leverage the underprivileged communities' technological competence (Bansal & Choudhary, 2024; Skuse et al., 2007), specifically programs with a distinctive nature in the context of people's lives and communities.

Taurino et al. (2023), for example, showed that emotional responses, including fear and anxiety, and prior personal experiences play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' decisions to accept or reject disinformation and to share or withhold it. Their arguments align with another study, which found that reliance on emotion led to a greater belief in fake news stories than either a control condition or a condition that induced reliance on reason (Martel et al., 2020). Phenomenological studies underscore that past experiences play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' acceptance or rejection of information, including disinformation. These prior experiences, filtered through personal and collective memory, serve as interpretive frameworks that guide how people evaluate, trust, or dismiss incoming content (Alhajjar, 2022; Wilson, 2022). Against the backdrop of their lived experiences, particularly in their encounters with dominant society, marginalised communities rely heavily on prior personal and collective experiences as the primary lens through which they process, evaluate, and respond to information (Gupta, 2021; Radford, 2022). This includes their lived experiences of marginalisation and oppression, which frequently foster belief in disinformation by fuelling ill-grounded hope and desperation, emotions that become powerful drivers of its consumption and circulation (Alibudbud, 2023; Young, 2021).

Ortner recognised that studies on human beings tend to focus on the intertwining of human experiences with power, domination, inequality, and oppression, thus tend to explain human existence within the framework of suffering (2016). She suggested that studies on humans should also focus on people's well-being, love, happiness, hope, imagination, and empathy. Thus, she encouraged investigating what gives people's lives a sense of purpose and how they seek the best way to live, even under hostile circumstances. This study focuses on the agency of the Orang Asli, specifically how they seek the best way to counter misinformation and disinformation amid marginalisation.

Drawing on his ethnography of a Malay peasant village, James Scott demonstrated that informal social networks, kinship ties, and shared moral understandings constitute the very foundation for building lives of hope and dignity among marginalised communities (1985). Rather than relying on open rebellion, these collective resources enable everyday "weapons of the weak" that sustain resistance and moral agency within structural constraints. Aligning with Scott, Das (2010) argued that marginalised groups actively pursue what they consider right and good precisely through the ordinary settings of everyday life—by engaging the claims of others and allowing themselves to be claimed in return. Together, these perspectives show that agency is not an abstract capacity exercised despite limitations, but a culturally embedded and collectively sustained practice that operates within the very cultural and structural conditions that constrain it.

This argument is in line with Ortner's discussion (2002) pointing out that individuals who share similar backgrounds and experiences of oppression, including

those from marginalised communities, recognise common struggles through a collective consciousness rooted in shared experiences. These shared struggles help individuals articulate their grievances and mobilise for change. The precarious conditions that are experienced by marginalised communities provide members of marginalised communities with peculiar adaptabilities (Gardikiotis, 2011; Moscovici, 2012; Nemeth, 2010).

Scholars underscore the importance of marginalised communities' subjectivity, which can be weaponised to build resistance, demonstrating powerful adaptability and resilience in the face of vulnerabilities. This argument signposts that marginalised individuals may have varying degrees of power. Moreover, it describes how marginalised communities can navigate and subvert power structures, thereby potentially transforming wider society through their agency (Nemeth, 2010).

Ortner described agency as a socially constructed phenomenon that varies across different cultural and historical contexts (2002). She emphasised that agency can manifest in both overt and subtle forms, depending on the circumstances and the individuals involved. Other scholars added that the construction that forms agency emerges as a result of ongoing oppression and hardship (Bottrell, 2007; Medina, 2013; Scott, 1985). However, Scott contended that marginalised communities do not intend to articulate grievances, frustrations, and resistance in a way that is immediately visible to those in power (1985). Instead, marginalised communities employ various strategies and tactics. Underprivileged communities often exert their agencies at a latent level. Contrariwise, other scholars argue that minority opinions can actively shape and enhance decision-making processes rather than merely being passive voices. It means that everyday practices responding to the marginalising practices of the dominant structures can contribute to broader societal transformations (Brink et al., 2023). However, the path from resistance to structural change is not straightforward, and gains from resistance efforts are often limited and temporary.

To a great extent, resistance describes a process more than a result-oriented path. The most important characteristic of resistance is the ability to rise above adversity by using the energy and skill that can be used in current struggles (Van Breda, 2001). Other scholars add important vantage points that, in order to survive, involve developing and strengthening internal and external resources (Rachmad, 2022). This includes enhancing social support, continuous learning, and the ability to quickly adapt to changes. In other words, the notion of resistance does not merely focus on rejecting adversity and enduring hardship. More than that, resistance heavily describes the efforts to recover from difficulties, adapt to changes, and continue progressing despite adversities.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the nuances of digital literacy in Orang Asli communities. The combination of interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) served as the cornerstone for gathering rich, context-specific insights into participants' experiences and perceptions, especially to address disinformation in

vulnerable contexts. Data collection started in June 2023 and continued through February 2024.

This study collected data, including the voices of Orang Asli, to discuss digital literacy and how they can build information resilience in the era of information disruption. The study included four subjects for interviews and 24 subjects for focus group discussions. The interview participants were two government officers from the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA, *Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli*), a community leader from *Majlis Belia Orang Asli Malaysia*, and a teacher teaching at one of the Orang Asli schools. For FGD, there were four groups: the elderly (age 50 years and above), community members, teachers, and youth. Each FGD group comprised 6-8 participants. Informed consents were obtained from all participants, emphasising voluntary participation and confidentiality.

Each participant was provided with the research information form and the informed consent form, which stated that they have the right to refuse to participate or to decline to continue at any stage. The informed consent also guaranteed their anonymity. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic content analysis. Emerging themes and patterns related to digital literacy were identified, coded, and organised to draw meaningful conclusions. FGDs were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using a similar thematic content analysis approach. The collective insights from the group discussions were expected to provide a broader perspective on shared experiences and community-level considerations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Living digital in marginalised experience

The community has gradually gained access to technology, including the internet and social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. Misinformation and fake news are often disseminated through these digital channels. However, this study found that the misinformation ecosystem among the Orang Asli includes non-mediated interactions, in which interpersonal and small-group communication goes beyond phatic communication and is central to information exchange. It aligns with scholarly arguments that information exchange is important for fostering cohesive community relationships. This illustrates how group dynamics are influenced by everyday relationships within the group. Additionally, how individuals interact, form connections, and make decisions play a crucial role in shaping the group's overall dynamics.

Yet, in the era of information disruption, community cohesiveness can lead to the same practices in spreading misinformation. Having said that, this study shows that the Orang Asli community's reliance on information contributes to the spread of misinformation and fake news. Although it indicates that misinformation often circulates among community members through casual conversations, it also shows that the precarious conditions of the Orang Asli prompt them to impulsively share matters important to them. Bearing that in mind, this study portrays how the vulnerability of the

Orang Asli is amplified in the era of massive information, which often makes it difficult to distinguish between information and misinformation.

In Malaysia, the Orang Asli defines disinformation as incorrect or misleading information that cannot be confirmed as true, regardless of its source. This underprivileged group struggles to find the fine line between information and misinformation. They emphasise the uncertainty and lack of verification associated with misinformation, highlighting the potential impact of sharing unconfirmed information.

One of our youths was trapped in a fake job advertisement. Turned out, it was a human trafficking syndicate. Due to our vulnerable condition, we want to upgrade our livelihood; we can hardly distinguish reality from the news.

(Interview, a community leader)

However, for the Orang Asli in Malaysia, the distinction between misinformation and fake news lies in their intentions. They acknowledge that misinformation may involve errors in details or figures, while fake news is deliberately created to cause harm or damage, often to incite conflict or panic.

There are different trends of disinformation among the elderly and youth in Malaysia. The trend of misinformation among Orang Asli elderly people often focuses on the alleged dangers of the COVID-19 vaccine, including claims of causing paralysis, side effects, and diseases. Orang Asli communities also encounter fake news about promised government assistance that frequently fails to materialise. The findings highlight health and mortality as critical concerns for marginalised elderly and youth populations. Evidently, due to eroded trust in government, many tribes opt to preserve their cultural heritage and traditional beliefs (Mahmud et al., 2022). This decision significantly influences their health, attitudes toward illnesses, and adherence to healthcare programs. Although advancements have been made, it is crucial to acknowledge that many discriminatory practices and prejudices still stem from those in authority:

The teachers sent by the government did not provide maximum education to our children. Many children from the Orang Asli community have been in school for years, but still cannot read.

(FGD with community)

This finding highlights that while the communities of Orang Asli in Malaysia show a willingness to engage with and adapt to modernisation processes, they continue to endure significant long-term marginalisation and discrimination, which, to a significant extent, affects their precarious attitude:

Most Orang Asli are afraid to voice their opinion. Maybe because other people hold higher positions.

(Speaker 7, FGD with community)

Despite their openness to change, Orang Asli communities face systemic barriers—including disrupted access to information—that limit participation, restrict

resources, and perpetuate inequalities. This fosters a deep distrust toward the Malaysian government, stemming from perceived shortcomings in addressing their needs. The government's inaction and indifference to communication issues, rather than proactive measures for transparency, exacerbates feelings of alienation and erodes confidence in its commitment to their rights and heritage.

Ultimately, this scepticism arises from the lived experiences of neglect and silenced voices. Moreover, communities observed that the government indirectly produces disinformation through incomplete and misleading releases. It includes the dominant system's indifference toward recognising their rights and contexts of the Orang Asli. For instance, the Malaysian government has neglected their essential needs, such as land rights (Dong et al., 2022; Yong, 2008). Echoing prior scholarship on land marginalisation, the data uncover similar trauma and distrust among the Orang Asli, with participants expressing feelings of neglect over unfulfilled promises regarding vital community resources.

They took the land because they said that the orang Seletar didn't live there. But they need to understand the cultures. Orang Seletar live in boats on the sea. So they only return to their land when there is a ceremony at death, or when they want to buy their soul. So they live on the surface, like in Sarawak? Yes. So if they want to go back to the land, they can do it in the boat. So they only go back if there's death? Yes, for the commemoration. And if you want to know how primitive is how they used to be, Singapore is actually Orang Seletar's land.

A leader from the Orang Asli, Bah Akok, cited misinformation on “free” driving classes—intended as discounted group lessons but misinterpreted and spread as entirely free due to partial online disclosure. Worse, such disinformation targets vital issues, including land acquisitions, fuelling anxiety, panic, and widespread distrust among indigenous groups.

The inclusions, for example, land rights, can be anything. So this is a very sensitive topic because it involves the state and federal governments, as well as communities. For example, you have 20 acres, right? They only give you 3 acres for a house, plus 3 acres for a plantation. Then we add the 40? Gone. But they didn't clear out for that. They only said the state government wants to grant you land rights. So there's some missing information and some omissions. Does it create any chaos?

(Bah Akok)

Scepticism among the Orang Asli fosters collective anti-government sentiment, as the government fails to engage in misinformation or education. Study evidence reveals they perceive it as neglecting their priorities and concerns.

These findings reveal the complex landscape of the Orang Asli's vulnerability in the era of information disruption. It encourages the Orang Asli to form solidarity,

thereby enhancing a sense of security amid the complexity of their fragile everyday lives. Michael de Certeau emphasised that cohesivity is often built around shared experiences, identities, and collective actions that allow these groups to assert their agency and challenge dominant structures (1984). Thus, cohesiveness is essential for fostering a sense of belonging that helps to recognise similar forms of oppression and burdens. To a great extent, this awareness enables them to navigate and subvert the constraints imposed upon them—in this case, the precarity condition rooted in misinformation.

The voice as minority influence: A network of trust

Major scholars acknowledge that the lack of capital exacerbates the precarious conditions within the marginalised community (Hammer & Ness, 2021). Various studies describe the internalisation of marginalisation and oppression, which instil a sense of inferiority that leads to a state of identity alienation (Bellioti, 2016; Fadaee, 2024). According to these studies, such conditions may nurture subalternity within marginalised communities. The results of this study confirm the scholarship that the Orang Asli community members reveal a sense of powerlessness and inferiority, including in their affairs of receiving and disseminating information:

Firstly, we have to make sure the information is accurate. Because the Orang Asli is not like other community. Like last time during COVID. They spread news that if you take the vaccine, you will die. Because the Orang Asli people are very naïve and gullible.

(FGD with the community)

This result shows that vulnerability can affect marginalised community members' interactions with the broader society and ultimately lead to the acceptance of misinformation. However, this study reveals that the Orang Asli community is a close-knit locus where members find fortitude within their community. Against the threads of the age of information disruption, they foster deep trust and support for each other, who share a 'similar' identity.

This research engaged community leaders who described Malaysia's modernisation agenda, including efforts to convert Orang Asli members to Islam. Conversations revealed that converts are often excluded as outsiders by their original communities. As one leader observed, converts typically distance themselves from the Orang Asli, aligning with the dominant group's values and priorities, thereby disadvantaging the Orang Asli community.

He gives misleading information to our community for his own benefit. He should have known that our community members are particularly vulnerable to falling into the traps set by misinformation. He should not have done such horrible things to his own community. He is not part of our community anymore.

The study also shows that the Orang Asli community is aware of its vulnerability to dominant groups, as well as aware of the systemic oppression and marginalisation, which

they have historically shared within the community. It is clear that the shared experience of oppression is the basis for solidarity and political mobilisation (Taylor & Whittier, 2013). Thus, when the bond in the community is frayed, it can manifest as resistance that eventually becomes the seeds of social capital (Daly & Silver, 2008). Through the instrumental lens, when social relations are treated, what are initially considered perils potentially become resources to leverage benefits. It concludes that social capital resides in social networks and relationships, enabling collective action by fostering ties built on shared experiences of oppression, vulnerability, and disadvantage.

Accordingly, a sense of solidarity is significant. Among the Orang Asli, it has emerged amidst the increasing disruption of information. Marginalised community members often depend more on each other for information to navigate their daily lives and make informed decisions. This reliance on accurate and accessible information underscores its critical role in their resilience and survival. In a close-knit community, the primary purpose of sharing news among its members is often twofold. First, it serves to alert family and friends about potential dangers that could pose a risk to their safety and well-being. Second, community members aim to raise awareness of important information that affects their daily lives, such as changes in local policies, upcoming community events, and support resources. By sharing these updates, they keep each other informed and strengthen their bonds. This means social cohesion is essential for community well-being, especially in the era of information disruption. Saegert et al., for example, argued that marginalised communities, such as poor people, rely on the support of extended family relationships and more formal organisations to strengthen their resilience (2002, see also Tengku Mahamad et al., 2021).

In line with Saegert et al.'s argument, this study found that Orang Asli community members trust family and friends for news credibility. They often discuss within small groups of friends and family for verification. Although they have some faith in the news provided by the government and aired through national media such as TV and radio, they remain cautious about its reliability. They are generally wary of social media and government news (see also Shekaliu et al., 2018). This shows how the distrust of dominant structures has a strong impact, especially on trust in state-provided information. Additionally, in assessing news credibility, members of the Orang Asli community consider information from family members and friends to be reliable. This means that for the Orang Asli community, the source of information plays an important role in determining whether it is credible.

However, despite trusting national news sources, the Orang Asli community relies on community leaders for news verification because of their close-knit communal living and high respect for these leaders: *“Usually when we hear any news that is related to the village, we will immediately go to Tok Batin to verify the news.”* (Community members, FGD on 26 August 2023). It shows the important role of local leaders in tackling viral fake news, as they are a vital reference point for verifying information, including being mindful of information from social media. This is a signpost of solidarity that emerges from the collective consciousness of the community, which is rooted in the similarity

and community of inferior feelings among group members, thus forming social capital (Symank, 2024; Thalos, 2012).

However, we cannot ignore the role of leadership in building solidarity in marginalised communities, which is also important for instilling new political awareness within the Orang Asli community, especially regarding the community's position within the broader dominant ecosystem. Having said that, local leaders introduce a new capital, namely, navigation of relationships with external dominant authorities.

The Orang Asli community members do not trust the Malaysian government. They are not interested in accessing the government-provided fact-checking sites. Therefore, we built a fact-checking system within the Orang Asli community by holding a meeting and gathering the Orang Asli community to discuss cases of hoaxes and misinformation and what to do about them.

(FGD with community leaders)

This study highlights the importance of navigating dominant structures, as long-standing vulnerabilities have fostered marginalised communities marked by apathy and submission to prolonged domination. Meanwhile, programs from these dominant structures are increasingly neglectful and, whether intentionally or not, embed further marginalisation, reflecting a systemic trend of isolating indigenous groups like the Orang Asli from broader societal interactions. This isolation limits access to the outside world, potentially hindering cultural exchange, economic opportunities, and overall development. Consequently, the community's sense of solidarity may not translate into genuine empowerment due to limited resources, inadequate representation in decision-making, or persistent socio-economic challenges that prevent collective strength from driving meaningful change. Without addressing these issues, unity alone may fail to improve individual and collective well-being.

Malaysia inquires us to join school, thus, we know how to read. Teachers from cities come into our community to teach us reading in classes. But I remain illiterate, as well as my children. Teachers do not give us chances to participate. They ignored us in classes. Turns out, the government provides them with additional remuneration if their class has more Orang Asli.

(FGD, community members, 25 September 2023)

Although local leaders appear to reinforce in-group and out-group sentiments, particularly toward dominant structures, this awareness ultimately helps marginalised communities build resistance through social movements against their vulnerabilities and oppressive systems, thereby fostering greater resilience.

This finding aligns with Robert D Putnam's argument, who coined the idea that close-knit, like-minded people within communities create strong ties to each other to build informal networks (Putnam, 2000; Putnam, 2015). Scholars believe this informal network produces bonding social capital (Claridge, 2018; Larsen et al., 2004) that

signposts traditional networks that are characterised by isolation, insecurity, and anomie (Sztompka, 1999) as members within the community are rarely or never exposed to the outside world. Decentring discussions on disfranchised in-group and out-group, Putnam focused on the value derived from social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness they foster.

Despite the characteristics of bonding social capital within the Orang Asli community, characterised by exclusive, inward-focused ties, our findings also show that local leaders empower the Orang Asli to create inclusive, outward-focused ties by fostering connections that span diverse social groups. Community leaders mobilise community members, organise collective actions, and create networks of solidarity to navigate the era of information disruption and the dominant structures, such as the government. Additionally, they often become representatives of the Orang Asli communities, providing a voice in broader political and social contexts. Local leaders in this study introduce the community members to external stakeholders whom they trust. They also seek confirmation from JAKOA officials on any related news.

But in terms of my experience here, every time there is any program, whether it is a JAKOA program or a program from a government or NGO, we will join the program and share any news with the Orang Asli. We advise the Orang Asli community that, whatever news is received, even if it does not involve the community, it should be reported. The news should be consulted with the JAKOA first. We want to give them an understanding of whether the news is true or not.

(JAKOA officer, interview on 26 September 2023)

This finding shows that local leaders successfully connect members within the Orang Asli community across diverse social groups and networks. Not only do community members in the Orang Asli community not share close social ties with NGOs such as JAKOA, but they also collaborate with JAKOA. Scholars suggest that this form of social capital is essential for fostering inclusivity, cooperation, and broader social cohesion within a community (Wallace & Pichler, 2007). This study shows that community leaders facilitate access to resources, information, and support from outside the Orang Asli community. According to the scholarship, this type of capital is crucial for collective action and civic engagement, as it enables individuals to collaborate with others to address common issues or advocate for change.

This study demonstrates that in terms of building resilience against information disruption, the Orang Asli community is not a passive recipient of the dominant structure's programs. Contrariwise, the Orang Asli community actively creates tactics that fit their daily context to navigate the era of information disruption. Members of the Orang Asli community never leave their identity. Results also show that even members acknowledge their vulnerability and marginalisation. However, the Orang Asli community also shows flexibility in its collaboration with external organisations, civic engagement, and trust in institutions. Through by bridging social capital, they enhance social

networks and promote democratic values. This balance helps them to be perceived as credible and reasonable.

CONCLUSION

This study addresses a central question: How do the Orang Asli in Malaysia demonstrate agency in reshaping hegemonic functionalism in digital literacy, appropriating it to recognize and manage risks amid information disruption? Findings show that marginalized communities do not passively absorb top-down resilience programs; instead, they actively appropriate, adapt, and subvert them through culturally embedded, collective practices, transforming vulnerability into resilience.

The research offers three key contributions. First, it extends the digital divide framework beyond access and ownership, revealing exclusion as deeply affective and experiential. Prior experiences of marginalisation and oppression, filtered through collective memory and emotions such as fear, ill-founded hope, and desperation, serve as the primary lens for evaluating disinformation (Taurino et al., 2023; Wilson, 2022). This challenges the rational, individualised “critical thinking” model dominating global initiatives, which fails by ignoring the affective core of information navigation (Nabi & Myrick, 2023).

Second, it reframes hegemonic functionalism, characterised by top-down, urban-middle-class biases in resilience-building—through Sherry Ortner’s anthropology of the good (2016). Rather than fixating on suffering and domination, the study highlights how the Orang Asli pursue hope, dignity, and communal care amid structural violence. Their strategies involve ordinary ethical practices of “engaging the life of the other” (Das, 2010), such as verifying news with kin, consulting leaders, and using informal discussions as low-profile filters (Scott, 1985), sustaining moral agency and cohesion within dominant constraints.

Third, it advances a context-sensitive view of agency and resistance, not as individual traits but as collectively sustained, culturally embedded practices operating within structural conditions (Bottrell, 2007; Ortner, 2002; Scott, 1985). Bonding ties foster internal solidarity and trust networks (Putnam, 2000), while bridging ties enable selective external engagement without surrendering autonomy. Local leaders act as “weapons of the weak,” instilling political awareness, organising fact-checking meetings, and promoting caution toward social media while preserving identity. This transforms disinformation sources into collective sites of sense-making. Thus, digital literacy emerges as a communal act of resilience through collaboration, responsible sharing, and ecosystem-building across public, private, and community sectors. However, the digital divide and literacy are ecosystemic, not individual; excessive bonding risks fostering bias.

Drawing on the Orang Asli insights, fostering social cohesion provides vital support and strengthens collaborations against misinformation. Yet, this study demonstrates marginalised communities as active architects of alternative resilience, countering digitocratic governance and urban-centric models. In a network society where

information underpins sustainability, peripheral knowledge may prove more humane than central prescriptions. Future research could extend this to Southeast Asian indigenous groups, exploring collective emotional literacy and “weapons of the weak” for locally grounded policies, shifting from dark anthropology to one of possibility, where hope is cultivated from within. Recommendations include digital literacy curricula that bridge social capital and design inclusive programs to connect diverse backgrounds and foster social competencies.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the ASEAN Foundation in Indonesia. These data are available under license and subject to restrictions. Data were made available for the corresponding author with the permission of the ASEAN Foundation.

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