

MY BODY, MY BUDDY: FORGING PARTNERSHIP WITH LOCAL PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS TO PROMOTE BODY POSITIVITY AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN

¹Joseph Malaluan Velarde, ²Lee Yee Ling

^{1,2} School of Education, Taylor's University Lakeside Campus, Subang Jaya, Malaysia.

^{1,2} Education for All Impact Lab, Taylor's University, Subang Jaya, Malaysia.

¹joseph.velarde@taylors.edu.my, ²yeeling.lee@taylors.edu.my

*Corresponding Author: Lee Yee Ling (yeeling.lee@taylors.edu.my)

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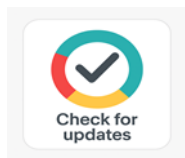
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Abstract

Keyword:

University-community partnership;
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Sustainable Lifestyle; Body Positivity;
Bullying; Body Shaming



Exposure to various notions of physical beauty on social media has led to cases of bullying and body shaming in primary and secondary schools. Partnership projects between universities and local communities can promote body positivity among school children to address this issue. This paper aims to present the perspectives of university students on how a university-community partnership (UCP) project enabled them to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote a sustainable lifestyle and positive self-image among school students. This study adopted a narrative research design to describe the university students' experiences and challenges faced during the implementation of this partnership project. Interviews with the project participants (university student volunteers and partner school students) were triangulated with documentary evidence (i.e., portfolios, journals) and observation field notes. The results from data analysis using ATLAS.ti rendered the following themes: student involvement; key learning from a UCP project; and dealing with challenges in the process. The findings of this research can guide other educators and project developers in higher education ways to design meaningful learning engagements for student volunteers and local communities. It also highlights policy implications for fostering impactful university-community partnerships.



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Introduction

Exposure to idealised body images on social media often leads to intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts. Advertisements, celebrity endorsements, and influencers have all contributed to the modulated imagery of what constitutes an ideal body image. These distorted images make teenagers confused, anxious and have low self-esteem (Sastre, 2014). Worse, in formal school settings, this confusion leads to dissatisfaction and social anxiety. Students tend to compare themselves with their peers and face body-shaming related bullying cases (Itzoe & Frasso, 2021). Hence, early interventions should be made in the education system through meaningful partnerships between universities and communities. A structured implementation of university-community partnership (UCP)

programme can promote body positivity among school children and advance dialogues on sustainable, university-led community engagement through

In advancing the conversation on sustainable partnership between local school communities and higher education organisations, this study contributes to this advocacy by highlighting that higher education institutions (HEIs) have always been instrumental in addressing issues faced by school children. This partnership takes place when universities work collaboratively with groups of community members either by geographical proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those communities (Bidandi et al., 2021). Universities are obliged to foster partnerships with diverse stakeholders to yield mutual benefits in terms of educational outcomes, societal improvement and economic growth (Bidandi et al., 2021). UCP is a vehicle for university students to achieve learning outcomes and support their holistic development. For the community, successful UCP has been found to enhance students' learning experiences and bring about positive attitudes and well-being. Though universities increasingly engage in UCP with schools through initiatives such as workshops, peer tutoring, and training programmes, significant gaps remain in the literature. In particular, research has insufficiently examined how UCPs are forged in multicultural and multilingual school contexts. In addition, how the impact of UCP is communicated to stakeholders, and how such partnerships are perceived by the wider community is under-researched (Bidandi et al., 2021; Cano & Arya, 2023). Moreover, little is known about university students' perceived benefits, challenges they face and coping mechanisms when they design and implement UCP initiatives.

The issue of body shaming in schools is exacerbating. Despite growing interest in UCP, little is known about how student volunteers experience, negotiate, and sustain partnerships in multicultural school contexts addressing psychosocial issues such as body positivity. Responding to these gaps, this study explored how a body positivity workshop series facilitated partnership-building between a university and local schools in Malaysia's multicultural context. With the goal of promoting body positivity among local school children, this study took place within the context of a UCP project named "My Body, My Buddy" (MBMB). MBMB was a project under the "Education for All Impact Labs" initiative of a private university in Malaysia. In this project, student volunteers from the private university facilitated a three-day workshop on body positivity spanning for three weeks in a local primary and a secondary school. With MBMB as the case community project of this study, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How can a partnership with a higher education institution and local community be formed through a community project promoting body positivity?
2. What are the key learnings of the participants from both the higher education institution and local community in this partnership?
3. How do the participants in this partnership overcome challenges in working on a community project for better collaboration to further promote a sustainable lifestyle?

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundation of the Study

Constructivism is rooted in two premises: (a) knowledge is actively constructed by the cognizing subjects, not by transmitted or communicated; and (b) learning is an adaptive process which organises an individual's experiential world (Glaserfeld, 1989). Learners' cognitive structures are continuously shaped when they explore new experiences, reflect on their existing experiences and make connections between existing information with new experiences (Schunk, 2019). Believing that knowledge is contextual and is never separated from the knower, constructivists advocate creating experiential and situated learning opportunities for learners.

In line with this, experiential learning, based on Dewey's progressivist ideals, emphasises learning by doing, reflection and active engagement in real-life situations for meaningful learning (Mesquita, 2016). Similarly, situated learning highlights authentic contexts and real-life application for the development of deep knowledge when learners participate in a community of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In the context of experiential and situated learning, social engagement is crucial. Social engagement entails interactions, connections, and participation of individuals within a social context. There are numerous ways learners can engage socially

including volunteering, participating in programs for underprivileged groups and joining organisations, either inside or outside the institutions (McLaughlan, 2023). UCP enhances the learning process by encouraging learners to form relationships with the communities, sharing experiences and proposing feasible plans to solve real-world issues.

Additionally, Vygotsky's social constructivism theory assumes that an individual's mental function is social in origin. Vygotsky believed that social learning through interaction precedes development. Learning is not simply an active construction of knowledge by learners but a process by which learners participate in a knowledge community (Zigelman, 2018). Interactions with more knowledgeable people (MKP) contribute to the development of knowledge and thinking skills (Ackermann, 2004). Every function in a learner's cultural development occurs at two levels. First, knowledge is initially shared between individuals and then, it is actively reconstructed and internalised inside the learners (Zigelman, 2018). UCP encourages people from all areas of life to engage in school activities. It provides opportunities for students to interact with members of the communities, sharing knowledge and experiences. This partnership will subsequently lead to intellectual development and better learning outcomes (Wang et al., 2018).

On top of these constructivist philosophies, humanism posits that humans have free will and personal agency. Humans have the right to choose their own life paths and be responsible for the consequences of their choices. Rooted in the belief that humans are motivated to self-actualise, humanistic approaches encourage learners to pursue their personal growth and fulfillment in life. In the educational context, humanistic approaches focus on nurturing learners' holistic development, highlighting the importance of emotional well-being, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships in learning (Oniskovets, 2023). Since humanistic approaches center on learners' unique experiences, perspectives and growth as well as a supportive and trusting relationship between members of the communities is vital (Oniskovets, 2023).

This research operates on a humanistic framework anchored on constructivist and progressivist perspectives to put forth the notion that MBMB is a human and social learning experience. Drawing on Dewey's experiential learning theory, university students engaged in reflective, hands-on tasks that connected personal experiences with broader social narratives surrounding body image. Grounded in social constructivism, MBMB emphasised dialogic learning and shared meaning-making through peer interaction and collaborative activities with school children. From the perspective of humanism, MBMB highlighted the importance of school children's self-worth regarding their self-image. Notably, this workshop promoted their well-being by educating the negative impact of body shaming.

University-Community Partnerships and Impact on Stakeholders

University-community partnership (UCP) refers to "any endeavours in which universities and local communities are mutually involved" (Medved & Ursic, 2021, p. 79). UCP takes place in various forms, including awareness campaigns, outreach programmes, community services, professional development workshops and scholarly research to address community needs (Bidandi et al., 2021; Bott-Knutson et al., 2019; Desta & Belay, 2018). UCP benefits both participating university students and community members.

From the perspective of personal growth and empowerment, UCP surpasses the traditional boundaries of lecture halls, catalysing university students' development. One key impact of UCP is to empower participating university students (Bott-Knutson et al., 2019). When they are engaged in planning, implementing and evaluating their projects, they develop essential skills such as collective knowledge building decision-making, problem-solving, collaboration and communication (Angwaomaodoko, 2024; Cano and Arya; 2023; Wijerathna & Kopyawattage, 2021). These skills are instrumental in developing future leaders, who can serve as change agents in society (Bott-Knutson et al., 2019). Students are also more academically and emotionally prepared for future careers (Desta & Belay, 2018). Students show higher self-efficacy and positive attitudes towards learning if they perceive that they are making an impact on the communities (Haines & McClure, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020). Palpacuer-Lee et al., (2018) added that students gained international citizenship experiences and intercultural competence when they engaged in a community-based English language program. Their global views were broadened as they began to see the world, the communities and their roles from different angles. In teacher education, student teachers can gain better insights into a teacher's role and develop their professional identity when they are engaged in UCP

(An, 2019).

In terms of experiential learning, authentic learning contexts created by UCP expose students to societal real-world issues, which can help them see the interconnectedness between individual, school and society (Bott-Knutson et al., 2019; Desta & Belay, 2018; (Wijerathna & Kopyawattage, 2021). Through UCP, students develop a sense of social responsibility (Bhatnagar et al., 2019; Bidandi et al., 2021). UCP closes the gaps between classroom knowledge and practical application (Angwaomaodoko, 2024; Bidandi et al., 2021). Students reported that they could transfer their knowledge to the community members as well as apply their knowledge and skills to improve the lives of the communities in the real world (Bidandi et al., 2021; Bott-Knutson et al., 2019; Bryer et al., 2020). Participating undergraduate students in Cano and Arya's (2023) added that they built socioemotional relationships with the community members. They emphasised the importance of knitting meaningful connections with communities to understand the culture and prior knowledge of the community members.

More importantly, the value of UCP lies in the impact on community members. They gain support in the forms of expertise and educational resources (Desta & Belay, 2018) through UCP engagement. Training and workshops by universities help community members develop their capacity in responding to and solving community problems (Phiri, 2024). For instance, in the study by Phiri (2024), the participating communities became more adaptive to global issues such as climate change. They were able to adjust farming systems and crop variation based on expert advice. Hence, UCP in the context of the previous studies has been identified as the core concept of this current study due to its potential in creating a socially meaningful and impactful learning experience.

Challenges in Fostering University-Community Partnerships

Many challenges hinder effective implementation of UCP. One of these challenges is limited resources in terms of time and funding (Angwaomaodoko, 2024; Desta & Belay, 2018; Phiri, 2024). In many HEIs, UCP activities are not prioritised but academic matters and research. Some universities have tight budgets that limit their ability to cover transportation fee, resource costs and payment for professional services (Desta & Belay, 2018). Challenges also stem from university students and staff who lack knowledge, experience and skills in conducting impactful UCP projects (Angwaomaodoko, 2024; Desta & Belay, 2018; Medved & Ursic, 2021). This may be caused by programme curricula which do not address the issues targeted in UCP projects (Phiri, 2024). Specialised degree curriculum may not prepare students to effectively address community issues that require transdisciplinary thinking (Phiri, 2024). As a result, they are less proficient in achieving the educational outcomes of UCP projects. In the study by Bidandi et al., (2021), community members perceived that they seldom received feedback from university students and staff after the completion of a project. Consequently, UCP did not yield fruitful outcomes. Desta & Belay (2018) add that negative attitudes and lack of initiatives by participants including university staff also impede the progress of UCP. Negative mindset such as ignorance of purposes of UCP, unaccountability towards assigned responsibilities and priority on personal gain underscore the significance of UCP (Phiri, 2024).

Other than the aforementioned challenges, language plays an important role in connecting participants together. In community projects involving participants from diverse cultural, social and language, language barriers cause isolation and incohesiveness in social participation (Townsend, 2021). Language barriers result in ineffective communications, leading to misunderstandings, misinterpretations and limited access to information (Devkar & Waghmare, 2024).

In a more socially relevant context, some community members also perceive that HEIs do not have enough sensitivity towards the needs of the communities (Bidandi et al., 2021). There is always a tension between universities and communities on what constitutes a "significant agenda" for mutual benefit of UCP, leading to unfulfilled expectations (Bryer et al., 2020). The participants in Desta and Bela's (2018) study stated that there was a power inequality, in which university partners appeared to be more influential in decision-making. Often, community members became the recipient of ideas and depended on universities to provide solutions for the community issues they faced. Harmful power imbalances between partnering parties are detrimental for sustaining long term partnerships (Clifford & Petrescu, 2012). In addition, bureaucratic restrictions which involve various policies and procedures delay decision making and implementation of innovations (Clifford & Petrescu, 2012; Desta and Bela, 2018; Medved & Ursic, 2021).

With these challenges in mind, this study offers to explore “My Body, My Buddy” as a case study in university-community partnership. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, this partnership program provides the university students with a humanistic, constructivist learning experience through the facilitation of workshops on body positivity and body shaming as a part of promoting a healthy and sustainable lifestyle among primary school children in an underprivileged community. Thus, “My Body, My Buddy” as a UCP project presents potentials, opportunities, and challenges in student involvement and community engagement. Through the data collected from the university student volunteers and the beneficiary students, as further explained in the methodology section, the concepts illustrated in the diagram below will be explored substantially.

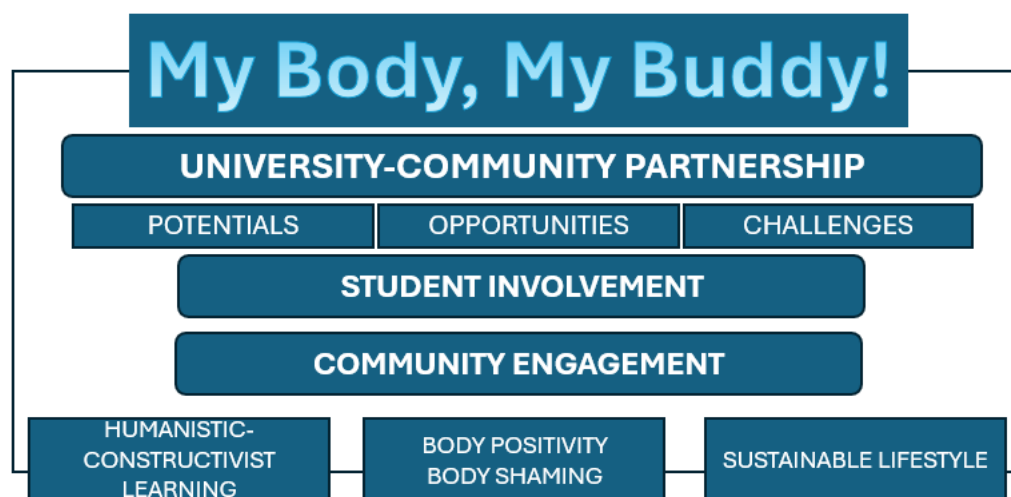


Figure 1: Conceptual Diagram of the Study

Methodology

Research Context

This study took place in the MBMB project. In this project, student volunteers from a private university facilitated a three-day workshop on body positivity and self-image spanning for three weeks in a local primary and a secondary school in Subang Jaya, Malaysia. These two schools were selected due to their geographical proximity to the university. For three consecutive weeks, the student volunteers engaged with the school children through various activities for 60 minutes. These activities included discussions, games, poster making, chant creation, quizzes and video integration to help school children become more aware of body positivity, act against body shaming, have a more positive mindset, and start initiatives in their school to promote body positivity. The school children were also given the opportunity to showcase their group posters, chant slogans, share their lived experiences regarding body shaming and reflect on their engagement with this project. Two guest speakers were also invited to give motivational talks to the school students.

Data Collection

Following the narrative research design (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018), this study took into account the personal experiences of university students who took part in the MBMB project to show how meaningful partnership could be forged between volunteers and local community participants in a workshop series designed to promote body positivity. An interview protocol was designed and developed based on studies on UCP, and a pilot interview was conducted with three students after the protocol had undergone a content review from an expert in qualitative research. Using purposive sampling, the individual stories were taken from interviews from five volunteer students, known as pod leaders, from the university who were mainly involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the community project as the main criteria for their selection.

Field texts were taken from the journals and portfolios of ten university student volunteers, as well as from observation field notes. The journals and portfolio templates were designed by the lecturers teaching and these

materials have undergone moderation from two experts in the field of sociological education and curriculum development. The selection of journals and portfolios were determined based on the extent of information the texts provide in response to the research questions. For the purpose of data triangulation, interviews were conducted with the participant students from the local school communities. Five primary school students and three secondary schools were interviewed to understand the key takeaways from the workshops. Similarly, the beneficiary students were purposively selected after the workshop based on the observations of the facilitators on their level of engagement and commitment during the activities. The table below provides demographic information of the participants in this research:

Table 1: Demographic Information of Interviewees

University Students	Age	Gender	Degree
S1	20	F	Education
S2	21	F	Education
S3	20	M	Education
S4	22	F	Psychology
S5	21	M	Bioscience
Beneficiary Students	Age	Gender	Level
PS1	10	F	Primary
PS2	11	F	Primary
PS3	11	F	Primary
PS4	10	M	Primary
PS5	11	M	Primary
SS1	16	F	Secondary
SS2	15	F	Secondary
SS3	16	M	Secondary

N=13

Data Analysis

In the process of “restorying” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018), the researchers ensured that the accounts gathered from the interviews, journals, portfolios, and observation field notes were analyzed to identify key information and form themes following the three-dimensional-space narrative structure. With the use of ATLAS.ti, subthemes and themes were formed from codes that show interactions, continuity, and situations related to forging partnerships between university student volunteers and community stakeholders (i.e., local school children). To ensure credibility of the accounts and the research process, member checking with the interviewees and triangulation with the use of journals or portfolios were utilized as shown in Figure 2 below. In this narrative research, a narrative analysis framework (Creswell & Guttermann, 2019) was employed in the coding process by identifying key themes or patterns from the stories relayed by the interviewees as supported by their journals and portfolios. The code-occurrence function of ATLAS.ti ensures that the reported quotes in the findings section of this study could be supported by multiple sources. Moreover, in this process of thematic analysis, saturation of data from the 13 selected participants has been determined by the researchers based on the transcript and initial coding process where no new themes emanate and data have been redundant in response to the objectives of this research. To ensure credibility of the coding process, measures were taken by the researchers by sharing the codes with two experts in qualitative research for auditing and suggestions were given to collapse certain codes and rename certain sub-themes to be aligned with the research framework. Table 2 connects each research objective with the corresponding research question, methodology, and analysis procedure in this study.

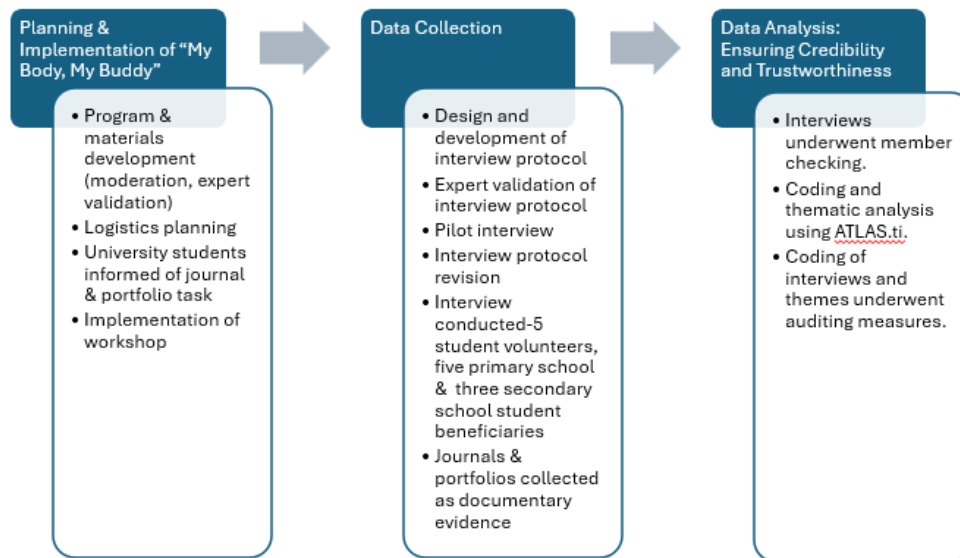


Figure 2: Visual Representation of the Research Process

Table 2: A summary of Research Objectives, Research Questions, Data Collection and Data Analysis Method

Research Objectives	Research Questions	Data Collection	Data Analysis
RO1: To investigate the formation of university-community partnership through a community project promoting body positivity	RQ1: How can a partnership with a higher education institution and local community be formed through a community project promoting body positivity?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journals and portfolios from 10 university student volunteers • Field observations • Interviews with 5 pod leaders 	Narrative analysis framework using ATLAS.ti to code the data and categories the codes into subthemes and themes based on the research questions.
RO2: To explore the key learnings of the participants from both the higher education institution and local community in a university-community partnership.	RQ2: What are the key learnings of the participants from both the higher education institution and local community in this partnership?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journals and portfolios from 10 university student volunteers • Field observations • Interviews with 5 pod leaders • Interviews with 5 primary school & 3 secondary school students 	
RO3: To explore the ways the participants overcome challenges in a community project for	RQ3: How do the participants in this partnership overcome challenges in working on a community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journals and portfolios from 10 university student volunteers 	

Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adhered to ethical standards for qualitative research involving students or child participants. Firstly, informed consent was obtained from all university student volunteers and beneficiary student participants

from the local school community, with parental or guardian consent secured for minors. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without any consequence. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured using pseudonyms and secure data (i.e., labels were used for students S1, S2, etc.).

Findings

Following the three-dimensional-space narrative structure (interactions-continuity-situations), the themes in this section help shed light on how meaningful partnership can be forged between university students and the local communities through a project on body positivity. For such partnership to exist, there should be evidence of involvement by the university students as well as engagement of participants from the school communities. In an educational context, community projects and partnership should enable both parties to acquire new knowledge and skills. Like any other collaborative initiative, both parties reported how they dealt with challenges in the course of this project. Table 3 below shows an overview of how the themes and sample supporting quotes respond to the research questions of this study, which will be reported in detail in the succeeding sections.

Table 3: Overview of Research Questions, Themes, and Sample Supporting Quotes

Research Question	Key Theme	Supporting Data/Quotes
RQ1: How can a partnership with a higher education institution and local community be formed through a community project promoting body positivity?	Student Involvement in Partnership	“Breaking our workshop into three separate sessions turned out to be a smart move... built up some trust.” “Being able to interact and communicate with students... helped the students realize their self-worth.”
RQ2: What are the key learnings of the participants from both the higher education institution and local community in this partnership?	Exposure to Social Norms Knowledge & Skill Acquisition Real-world Application Socio-emotional Well-being	“I saw with my own eyes the effect of social inequalities... helped me to better understand the content.” “...it was really eye-opening to witness these effects in person.”
RQ3: How do the participants in this partnership overcome challenges in working on a community project for better collaboration to further promote a sustainable lifestyle?	Challenges Overcome: Language Barrier Student Anxiety Logistics & Time Management Facilitating Anxiety	“...language barrier since none of us in our group were fluent in BM...” “...prepared the terms in Malay to help the students better understand.”

Student involvement in forging university-community partnerships

The findings on student involvement in forging university-community partnership is in response to the first research question, “How can a partnership with a higher education institution and local communities be formed through a community project promoting body positivity?” The involvement of university student volunteers in this project has been reported to be crucial even during the planning stages of this initiative with the guidance of their lecturers. In the planning phase, the lecturers from the university had to set up correspondence with the partners from the community schools for logistical matters (i.e., date, time, venue, number of students, etc.) before reaching out to the student volunteers. Once the dates of the community project have been confirmed, the lecturers asked for volunteers among the students taking modules in educational sociology and psychology. A briefing session was conducted during the tutorial classes of the module where the lecturers explained the background and objectives of this community project. It was explained that the workshop sessions on body positivity were to be conducted in two schools (40 primary students and 20 secondary school students) and the roles of the students were to ensure that they can create awareness on body positivity and instill confidence or body-positive mindset among the school children of the communities.

Out of the 78 students taking the modules, 56 signed up and 12 of them took the lead as members of the core group. One of the core group students explained her involvement during the planning phase:

“During the planning phase, I had been always thinking about how this activity could benefit the children and how we make them understand what we were trying to relay. Many considerations were taken into account, for example, the language - the choice of words which could be understood by Grade 4 and 5 students.” (6:1 p 3 in Journal_S4, 11/18/2023)

Although the core group students reported to have been involved in preparing activities and materials before the workshops, much of the involvement of the university student happened during the workshop sessions as described by one of the volunteers:

“Breaking our workshop into three separate sessions turned out to be a smart move. It allowed us to really connect with the students we were working with and make a difference that lasted. In the first session, our main goal was to find out what the students already knew about body positivity. We wanted to start where they were at. This step helped us introduce the concept in a way that clicked with them, and we got to know the students better through fun activities and chats. By the second session, things had changed quite a bit. The students had gotten used to us, and we had built up some trust. This trust was very important because we were diving into the topic of bullying. With that trust in place, the students felt comfortable opening up about their own experiences.” (5:3 p 5 in Journal_S3, 11/18/2023)

Interacting with school children was also one of the many ways students were involved as relayed by one of the volunteer facilitators in the interview:

“Being able to interact and communicate with students, working with my course matés and being able to do this meaningful volunteer work with lovely students. Aso, being able to listen to the students be more open about body image issues and bullying they faced. I was glad that all of us were able to help the students realize their self-worth.” (1:6 26 in Interview_S3, 11/24/2023)

Aside from that, the student volunteers also described their pedagogical roles and the way they used technology, as well as their knowledge of psychology, in facilitating the workshop sessions. As elaborated in one of the portfolios:

“The activities implemented from our impact pod centered around the primary focus of body positivity and addressing body image concerns. By taking advantage of IR4.0, we utilised the use of technology by using a slideshow presentation, videos, etc, projected on a laptop or iPad throughout the workshop. Overall, enhancing the learning experience through interactive visual aids and digital engagement. For the first workshop, the slideshow consisted of an explanation of what body image and body positivity are, utilizing visual aids such as a YouTube video and images to deepen the student’s understanding of it. We also incorporated activities such as making students do a positive affirmation note board and creating a mind map on things they liked about themselves. The second workshop included a recap of the prior session, followed by us acting out a scenario involving being bullied based on appearance. Which then prompted students to reflect on what they saw and what they would do. Lastly, the students did an activity where they created a poster and slogan based on what they learned.” (8:2 p 5 in Portfolio_S1, 11/30/2023)

From this involvement, the student volunteers described how they were able to create an impact among the participants from the local schools in terms of understanding body positivity, taking action against body shaming, and having a positive or more confident mindset.

“Through this project, we were able to send a message regarding Body Positivity. During our project, we created a poster and kept emphasizing on the slogan which is “I love my body”. This slogan will stay in their mind forever and it may impact their life in the future. In the current society, some of the classmates or even a teacher would look down on you saying that you are fat or not handsome. In the worst situation, getting bullied by a whole group of people. I was able to teach the students about the significance and the importance of body positivity, and I believe the students did learn through this project. We kept emphasizing on the body-positive affirmations included, such as “I love my body.” Until the end of the session, they still remembered our slogan, “All bodies are good bodies.” And they still remembered what we did in the previous workshops.” (6:6 p 5 in Journal_S4, 11/18/2023)

The student volunteers described several ways in which they were able to engage with the participants from the local schools. A volunteer noted:

“I believe that this project has helped the students of SK Bandar Sunway to properly understand the objective of the project. As they are young, sitting in a classroom for half of their day may drain their energy a little. However, this project was done physically, and it was much more productive to educate them on body positivity and body image through the activities that we had.” (2:8 75 in Interview_S1, 24/11/2023)

As observed during the workshop sessions, the student volunteers were actively involved in facilitating the discussions and activities with their participant groups. In an interview with one of the participating students from the primary school, it was noted that this active involvement by the student volunteers enabled the participants to be aware of body positivity and to take the necessary actions personally to avoid getting bullied in school or in their communities. Generally, the participants felt that the student volunteers from the university were helpful during the workshop sessions.

Student volunteers’ key learning from university-community partnerships

Exposing to social norms and realities: Because of this engagement, the student volunteers from the university were exposed to a different environment with norms and expectations different from theirs. However, this further motivated the students to engage with the students from the local schools according to a member of the core group:

“I saw with my own eyes the effect of social inequalities in societies and schools, and it helped me to better understand the content we learned in class. It also gave me such a good opportunity to interact with the children and get to know a bit more about their lives, and the fact they were willing to talk to us was very encouraging.” (2:1 19 in Interview_S2, 24/11/2023)

In a journal entry by a student volunteer, this engagement helped her become more aware of social realities and how the concepts or theories explained in their modules transpire in the real world:

“Through this project, I observed the real effects of social class disparities on children and their education needs. It made sense in theory that a lower social class would affect the opportunities for education, but it was really eye-opening to witness these effects in person. I also noticed a range of personalities amongst the students in my group, some being extremely extroverted, while others were more reserved and shy. This could be influenced by upbringing, or the prevailing teacher-centered classroom environment which seems to be the popular approach in government schools. Personally, I learned how to effectively manage both types of students. This involved encouraging the extroverted ones to share their ideas and facilitating a supportive atmosphere where quieter students felt comfortable expressing themselves by consistently asking questions and coaxing out their responses (putting the micro-theories into practice).” (3:1 p 3 in Journal_S1, 18/11/2023)

Acquiring new knowledge and skills: More than forging partnership, this community project also provided opportunities for both university student volunteers and local school participants to acquire new knowledge and skills. Considering that a number of university students who volunteered came from overseas, this project enabled them to know more about Malaysian culture, schools, and society. For most students who took part in the

workshop sessions, they had to equip themselves first with substantial information about body positivity and body shaming before they were able to produce materials for their sessions as one volunteer explained:

“I get to see that by partnering with an external collaborator such as students from Taylor’s University, we can grab the students’ attention to learn about something new (some of them were not aware of this body image issue). Hence, community/societal work is important in enhancing our learning. I also got to know that I can speak in front of many people. Coming from an introverted person, I’m surprised with myself.” (1:14 96 in Interview_S4, 24/11/2023)

In addition to knowledge acquisition, the student volunteers were also able to develop skills, which they think would be very useful in their future career as teachers.

“I learned how to use those technologies, such as using iPad to play Youtube videos, to teach students and enhance their understanding of body positivity. Through this workshop, I learned organizational skills, in which I can manage to work with my teammates effectively. Lastly, I have a deeper understanding about the relationship between education, school and society. In school, we facilitate our workshop to educate them on body positivity. Together, build a society free of discrimination and body shaming.” (2:21 201 in Interview_S1, 24/11/2023)

Even for a non-education student, this community project also enabled her to develop skills in line with her prospective work:

“This project allowed me to gain substantial knowledge about teaching and interacting with younger children. I am in Biomedical Science, and I hope to work in the health service line, possibly in pediatrics. Therefore, by learning how to communicate and interact with children it would aid in my future workplace capabilities. This is because aside from just performing medical tests, I need to be able to teach the patients about the test and provide assurance which is a skill I have learnt by participating in this project.” (2:20 195 in Interview_S3, 24/11/2023)

Connecting theoretical knowledge with real-world application: The journals and portfolios of the student volunteers documented the wide array of learnings they acquired from this community project. Mostly, the students were able to make clear connections between what they learned in their educational sociology and psychology modules with what they experienced in the days they spent in the local schools. Their key takeaways include the effects of social stratification in education, managing diverse learners with different needs, creating a safe learning environment, and the relationship between education, school, and society. As elaborated by a member of the core group:

“I have a deeper understanding about the relationship between education, school and society. School as a platform for us to facilitate our project in order to educate students from SK on body positivity. Through this project, we could build a society free of discrimination and body shaming. Apart from that, I gained some experience when dealing with different students. For example, using different languages to communicate with them as some of the students may not understand English. Using different languages helps to enhance their understanding and also, they can learn other languages.” (6:5 p 4 in Journal_S4, 18/11/2023)

Local community’s key learning from university-community partnerships

Developing social emotional well-being: In the days the student volunteers spent in the local schools, the engagement with the school communities, particularly with the students was deemed to be generally positive as recounted by one of the volunteers in an interview:

“The kids were very good and very excited. They are highly motivated. Through this project, we were able to interact with the students and along the way, we managed to build rapport that leads to the students feeling safe and comfortable to share their ideas and story.” (1:1 6-8 in Interview_S3, 24/11/2023)

The student volunteers highlighted that this project did not only allow them to talk about body positivity but also inspire the participating students through their conversations and as they worked together during the games and activities. According to a university student:

“The impact we have made on the students throughout these 3 weeks is that they are getting more comfortable and relaxed to tell us about their experiences with bullying that they have experienced and the pretty and handsome part of their body, which they were more confident to tell us about in this workshop. They have also become more attentive when saying things like, ‘Your eyes are pretty, your hair is smooth, your fashion sense is good’, and things like that.” (5:5 p 6 in Journal_S3, 18/11/2023)

Developing creativity: To ensure that the participants were engaged throughout the workshop sessions, the student facilitators shared ways they designed the activities to keep the school children motivated. The portfolios of the student volunteers showed meticulous planning of activities and resources with a list of topics, guidelines, and question scripts to guide them in facilitating the sessions. A student facilitator explained:

“In the poster design activity, magazines played an important role as there was a lot of information and images inside it so students could make decisions on choosing their preferred pictures to paste on the manila card. Scissors and glue were used by them to cut the images out and paste it, while colour pencils and marker pens were used by them to decorate the manila card. When they chose pictures of different people from the magazines, they would also learn about different types of body shapes and increase their concept of embracing differences.

In the slogan creation activity, we provided sample slogans online for students to think of their own. This had stimulated students’ creativity as they were exposed to a wide range of slogan examples. After they had decided on the slogan, they could use the colour pencils and marker pens to draw the slogan and decorate the colour paper. These resources prompted students to amplify their imagination and creativity, as the tools provided were complete.” (11:1 66 – 67 in Portfolio_S4, 30/11/2023)

As observed during the workshop sessions, the school children were engaged in the activities because of how the student volunteers facilitated the workshops and interacted with the participants despite their socio-cultural differences. As evidence of engagement, the participants were able to produce mind maps, posters, and chants to show their understanding and reflections on body positivity. When asked about their engagement, one of the participants remarked that he learned about body positivity because he had fun during the activities with the help of the student volunteers who felt like “*abang*” or “*kakak*” (older brother or sister) to them.

Acquiring knowledge and skills: As for the participants from the local schools, they were also able to share that they learned about body positivity by engaging in different activities during the workshop sessions. During interviews, two primary school students shared,

“I learned not to mock others and also, we need to care and love ourselves...We made drawings and mind maps. I felt nice...(In the future, if I see people mocking others), I’d say Why bother others? Be more aware of yourself before mocking others.” (0:21 204 in Interview_PS2, 27/9/2023)

“I learned to not be insecure and not to bully others...I like the workshop. It is very good. I had a lot of activities like making a poster and a lot more...(In the future, if I see people mocking others), I will tell the counseling teacher.” (0:38 204 in Interview_PS4, 27/9/2023)

Two secondary school students shared the same thoughts,

“I learned that my body is my buddy and how to love our body... and how to control our emotions (when

mocked). The experience was good. I was so happy and excited to learn about the new topics...In the future I will tell my friends that they must love their body, take care of their body and be grateful.” (3669 Interview_SS1, 26/9/2023)

“I learned about our own physical, knowing and appreciating our body and not to mock others if they have a body which is different from ours...This workshop on body positive helps us develop positive mentality...(3671 Interview_SS2, 26/9/2023)

More importantly, the participant students also shared how they were able to practice their communication skills, especially the use of English in expressing themselves. It was observed that they constantly interacted with the facilitators in a mix of English and their local language, Malay.

In addition, throughout the workshop sessions, it was observed how the participants from the local schools applied their learnings about body positivity through creative outputs such as posters, mind maps, drawings and slogans.

Dealing with challenges in university-community partnership projects

In the weeks that the university students spent with the participating children from the local schools, certain challenges arose but were also dealt with by the volunteers to forge better partnership with the stakeholders from the local communities. The most pressing concern reported by the volunteers was the language barrier. Since a significant number of the volunteers are international students and local English-speaking students, communicating with the participating students in their language (Malay) proved to be a challenge. One student shared in an interview how she overcame language issues:

“The challenges we encountered had to do with the language barrier since none of us in our group were fluent in BM, however our group leader, Zahra, did the best she could in translating and communicating. Some of the students did know and understood English and were a big help in helping us communicate better.” (2:14 128 in Interview_S1, 24/11/2023)

Another student reflected and explained in his portfolio the measures he undertook when he realized the existence of language barrier between him and his participants:

“Although there is a language barrier between me and the students, I was trying to actively participate in the implementation process. For instance, I prepared the terms in Malay to help the students better understand the concept or prepared a translator when communicating with them. During the discussion, I also provided some guiding questions in helping the students to share their ideas and opinions. Taking an example of completing the worksheet. I asked them questions such as “what are you good at?” or “what do you like about yourself?” (10:2 p 11 in Portfolio_S3, 30/11/2023)

Aside from the language barrier, some students also acknowledged the difficulty of keeping the participants engaged during the workshop sessions. Since most of them are aspiring to be teachers, the student volunteers recognise the value of motivating learners as elaborated in an interview:

“The sessions were amazing, but I do think it could benefit from including more physical activities. We facilitated good group discussions, however maybe the ice breaking sessions can be more physically active such as ball toss or the human knot. For me the sustained engagement and enthusiasm of students may fade over time. They are still shy to express their emotions, opinion about body image and positivity. To address this, it may be helpful to incorporate ongoing activities, reminders to maintain students' interest and commitment to the project.” (2:15 142 in Interview_S2, 24/11/2023)

Since it was also the first time most student facilitators led a workshop, some of them felt anxious as they were intimidated by the number of students they were working with. Also, since they did not really know the participants personally, they were afraid they wouldn't be able to communicate with them well as shared in one of the journals:

“At first, I was worried that secondary students may be intimidating, but the students are much more open-minded and nicer than I thought. I shouldn’t have let my fears allow me to believe people are not kind.” (7:1 p 4 in Journal_S5, 18/11/2023)

Other than that, logistical issues in organising and implementing community projects were also highlighted by the student facilitators. Being part of a big group of volunteers, one of the students talked about how the organization could be streamlined so that everyone could be in line with the directions of the sessions:

“Getting everyone aligned and informed about the flow of the event? Because for sure I’ve been missing out a lot of information on the flow of the event. Will there be a mc or a big leader that leads most part of the event or only activities for small group leaders for a set amount of time?” (1:11 65 in Interview_S3, 24/11/2023)

Another prevalent issue was time management. The workshop sessions ran for three days with an hour to one and a half hours per session. In each session, the group discussions ran for 20-30 minutes. Hence, one student volunteer reflected on this in her portfolio:

“Managing time constraints was a significant challenge in our project. To mitigate this risk, we carefully planned each activity with specific time allocations, ensuring they were both educational and achievable within the given timeframe. During implementation, we remained vigilant, making on-the-spot adjustments to stay on schedule without compromising the quality of the experience for the children. Effective communication and quick decision-making were crucial in navigating this challenge, ultimately allowing us to deliver a successful project within the allotted time. Our proactive approach to research, collaboration, and addressing potential language barriers enabled us to overcome challenges and deliver a project that was not only educational but also accessible and enjoyable for the primary school children we aimed to impact.” (9:6 p 26 in Portfolio_S2, 30/11/2023)

In observing the student facilitators and participants, language barriers and time constraints were evident during the group discussion parts of the workshop sessions. At times, only one facilitator could be seen chatting with the participant students as he or she was the only proficient in using the local language. However, this did not stop most of the students from interacting with the children in English during activities. As for time management, there were several instances when the time allotted for an activity had to be extended for a bit to enable the student volunteers and participating school children to complete their output.

Discussion

This study investigated the perceptions of the university students and the local school children who were engaged in a collaborative UCP project. The aim of this partnership was to promote a sustainable lifestyle and a culture of harmony. The research findings indicated that partnerships between HEIs and the local communities is a complex interactive process. It involved the concerted efforts by the university students in designing and implementing activities to promote body positivity among the school children. At the same time, the school children’s active participation and the cooperation from the school administrators were crucial to ensure the achievement of the project outcomes. There is a need to develop synergistic relationships between HEIs and communities to make progress and impact on the lives of next generations for sustainable development.

This study has added valuable insights to the application of constructivist and humanist theories in teaching and learning in higher education. As a theoretical implication, community projects entail active engagement with local communities, consisting of school gatekeepers (e.g., teachers or counselors), school leaders (e.g., principals) and student participants to understand education-related issues and social responsibility (Bhatnagar, 2019). Consistent with the previous studies (Bhatnagar et al., 2019; Bidandi et al., 2021), the research findings indicated that the university students gained insights into issues such as inequity in education, social class disparities, passive participation of introverted students and unique strengths of each child. They reflected on their social responsibility to provide quality education to the school children through designing student-centered activities and active interactions with the school children. Involvement in community-based workshops can help discard racism and biases (Walker, 2023). Participants will become more open-minded and more willing to foster equity

in education by adopting culturally responsive pedagogy (Palpacuer-Lee et. al., 2018; Walker, 2023).

The research findings showed that the university students learned to integrate knowledge from different fields to deal with the challenges they encountered during the projects. These findings were consistent with the previous studies which reported that working with community-based projects expanded university students' knowledge and experiences, providing them with opportunities to practice instructions and facilitate small group activities (Bidandi et al., 2021; Bott-Knutson et al., 2019; Hamilton & Margot, 2019). Student volunteers learn how to adjust lessons and develop new pedagogies to accommodate participants' needs following critical reflections on their practices (Green, 2016). These hands-on experiences deepen their understanding of theoretical knowledge when they transform theory into practice (Bott-Knutson et al., 2019; Desta & Belay, 2018; Mesquita, 2016; Wijerathna & Kopyawattage, 2021). This UCP allows academicians to probe UCP from a more refined and structured level with key integrations with sustainability and social responsibility.

The narratives of the student volunteers, as supported by documentary evidence and interviews with the beneficiaries, shed light on how challenges were overcome leading to reflections on the practical implications of this study. In agreement with the previous research, the university students encountered a few challenges such as achieving a mutual understanding of the common goals, shortage of manpower, time constraints and language barrier during their engagement (Devkar & Waghmare, 2024; Townsend et al., 2021). When it comes to creating social networks with communities, it is essential to achieve a shared common goal to ensure active participation, belonging and connection (Hamilton & Margot, 2019; Townsend et al., 2021). In this regard, language is another key factor in bonding with participants. In community projects with culturally, socially and linguistically diverse participants, language barriers cause isolation and lack of cohesiveness in social participation (Townsend, 2021).

In contrast with previous studies (Desta and Bela, 2018; Medved & Ursic, 2021), local communities did not see university students as someone who has absolute authority. This is evident when they addressed the university students as “*abang*” (brother) or “*kakak*” (sister). Departing from this idea, our study suggests that dialogues between partnering parties before the implementation of UCP projects are essential to ensure the success of projects. It is crucial for universities to gain insights into the needs of communities and participants' demographics to design appropriate projects for them. Local communities also need opportunities to discover their own strengths and assets to realise mutually beneficial engagement and to sustain long-term partnerships (Clifford & Petrescu, 2012).

Contrary to other studies which reported the issues of incompetent volunteers (Angwaomaodoko, 2024; Desta & Belay, 2018; Medved & Ursic, 2021), this study found that the university students were capable of designing meaningful UCP projects which inspired the communities. This fruitful outcome can be attributed to early preparation and student commitment. This study suggests that early preparation in terms of activity planning and resource development contributes to the quality of projects. Over a month before the implementation of MBMB workshops, the student volunteers received on-going constructive feedback from their lecturers to refine their activity plans. Since the project stretched over a period of three weeks, the university students reflected on the strengths and areas of improvement after each workshop and adjusted their plans based on the school children's learning gaps. This study highlights that care, empathy and commitment from student volunteers are cornerstone for the success of UCP projects. Empathy enables university students to design inclusive and culturally responsive activities for community members (Bryer et al.'s, 2020).

Conclusion

This paper emphasizes the value of meaningful partnership between the university and local communities through active student involvement and engagement with external stakeholders for holistic and sustainable education for all. To show how this research meets its objectives and responds to the research question, Table 3 below presents a final self-review of how each section is aligned with the research aims. The narrative accounts from the student volunteers from a private university in Malaysia shed light on how partnership between a higher education institution and local communities could be forged through active student involvement and engagement with local school children through a workshop series on body positivity. “My Body, My Buddy” programme is not only a venue to promote body positivity among local school children, but it also serves as a bridge between the university and the local communities. For a partnership to be regarded as meaningful in an educational context, both parties

should regard it as a learning experience and as an opportunity to acquire new knowledge and develop relevant skills or attitudes. In this case, both the university student volunteers and the local community school children became more aware of the concept of body positivity, developed interpersonal skills to promote a positive learning environment, and had a different mindset in looking into oneself and others. Despite the logistical challenges commonly present in any community-based projects, the students narrated how they dealt with time constraints and language barriers by employing what they learned from their modules in educational sociology and psychology.

Table 4. Self-review Checklist

Section	Link to Stated Aims	Evidence of Alignment
Introduction	Defines the study's aim to explore university-community partnerships promoting body positivity.	Stated in Abstract and Introduction; Three RQs clearly address aims.
Literature Review	Establishes theoretical framework and prior studies that support the rationale for community engagement.	Constructivist and humanistic foundations; past UCP literature cited to justify study relevance.
Methodology	Explains how data was collected from both university and school participants to answer the research questions.	Narrative design, triangulation, purposive sampling, ATLAS.ti thematic analysis linked to all RQs.
Analysis (Results)	Describes student involvement, learning outcomes, and challenges faced—each mapped to respective RQs.	Themes (e.g., Student Involvement, Key Learnings, Challenges) clearly align with RQ1–RQ3.
Conclusion	Summarizes how the MBMB project fulfilled the goals of fostering partnerships and promoting sustainability.	Highlights student and community impact, learning, and implications for UCP sustainability and scale-up.

Despite the richness of the narratives of the student volunteers of this study as shown in Table 4, the perspectives are restrained by the experiences of the participants from the private university in Malaysia. Though the findings of this research can be applied in other community-based projects and partnerships, organisers of such initiatives should still be critical of the extent the views and experiences cited in this research could be applied in a different community setting. In particular, when it comes to the impact of UCP, how its longitudinal impact can be evaluated. Hence, a longitudinal study can be conducted on participating school students to examine the changes that may occur in their knowledge and attitudes towards body positivity over a period of time. This will help researchers to gain better insights into how a UCP project impacts participant's lives. In addition, since community needs and university resources vary, it would always be advantageous to consider exploring these factors first before implementing any partnership projects. Notably, sustainability issues in UCP are widely reported (Clifford & Petrescu, 2012). It is crucial to develop community capacity so that local communities can sustain MBMB projects without continued intervention from the university. Thus, future study can focus on developing a training workshop for stakeholders, such as teachers and senior school students, to assist them in adapting MBMB to their school settings. This can be followed by a study on exploring the transformative shift in stakeholder roles—moving from passive beneficiaries to empowered agents within UCP.

Co-Author Contribution

Author 1 carried out the fieldwork, wrote the research methodology, carried out data analysis, reported the findings as well as overlooked the whole article's write up. Authors 2 carried out the fieldwork, prepared the literature review, did the data entry and wrote the conclusion.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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