

Narratives of Resistance and Survival: Lifelong Gang Involvement Among Marginalized Indian Men in Malaysia

Naratif Penentangan dan Kelangsungan Hidup: Penglibatan Geng Sepanjang Hayat dalam Kalangan Lelaki India Terpinggir di Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores gangsterism as a form of social adaptation among marginalized Indian men in Malaysia, examining how long-term gang involvement shapes identity, survival, and community belonging. Using a qualitative narrative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with two high-ranking gang leaders to trace their trajectories of gang affiliation, identity formation, and survival strategies within structurally disenfranchised environments. While the small sample reflects the difficulty of accessing hidden populations, it offers rich, narrative-driven insights consistent with the study's exploratory nature. Guided by Marginal Theory (Vigil) and Differential Association Theory (Sutherland), the findings reveal that gang involvement emerged as a rational response to intergenerational poverty, disrupted family structures, limited educational opportunities, and spatial marginalization. Gangs functioned not only as sources of income and protection but also as symbolic institutions that provided identity, belonging, and social order amid systemic exclusion. Ritual practices and internal hierarchies reinforced loyalty and cohesion, while social capital through informal governance sustained long-term participation. Disengagement, where it occurred, was mediated by personal transformation, marriage, or spiritual awakening, though often constrained by fear and social obligations. These findings reframe gangsterism not as simple deviance but as a survival strategy shaped by structural inequalities. The study contributes to a nuanced sociological understanding of gang culture and offers policy implications for culturally grounded reintegration and community-based interventions.

Keywords: Gangsterism; Indian Men; Marginal Theory; Differential Association Theory; Malaysia

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneroka gangsterisme sebagai satu bentuk adaptasi sosial dalam kalangan lelaki India terpinggir di Malaysia, dengan meneliti bagaimana penglibatan jangka panjang dalam kumpulan kongsi gelap membentuk identiti, kelangsungan hidup dan rasa kebersamaan komuniti. Pendekatan naratif kualitatif digunakan dengan menjalankan temu bual mendalam bersama dua ketua kumpulan kongsi gelap berpangkat tinggi bagi menelusuri trajektori penglibatan mereka dalam kumpulan, pembentukan identiti, serta strategi kelangsungan hidup dalam persekitaran yang terpinggir secara struktur. Walaupun saiz sampel yang kecil mencerminkan kesukaran mengakses populasi tersembunyi, ia menawarkan dapatan naratif yang kaya dan selaras dengan sifat kajian penerokaan ini. Berasaskan Teori Marginal (Vigil) dan Teori Differential Association (Sutherland), dapatan menunjukkan bahawa penglibatan dalam kumpulan kongsi gelap muncul sebagai tindak balas rasional terhadap kemiskinan antara generasi, struktur keluarga yang rapuh, peluang pendidikan yang terhad dan peminggiran ruang bandar. Kumpulan ini bukan sahaja berfungsi sebagai sumber pendapatan dan perlindungan, tetapi juga sebagai institusi simbolik yang menyediakan identiti, rasa kebersamaan dan susunan sosial dalam konteks pengecualian sistemik. Amalan ritual dan hierarki dalaman mengukuhkan kesetiaan serta kohesi, manakala modal sosial melalui tadbir urus tidak formal menyokong penyertaan jangka panjang. Proses keluar (disengagement), apabila berlaku, dimediasi oleh transformasi peribadi, perkahwinan atau kebangkitan spiritual, namun sering dihadkan oleh ketakutan dan kewajipan sosial. Kajian ini menilai semula gangsterisme bukan sekadar sebagai penyimpangan, tetapi sebagai strategi kelangsungan hidup yang dibentuk oleh ketidaksetaraan struktur. Dapatan ini menyumbang kepada pemahaman sosiologi yang lebih bernuansa serta menawarkan implikasi dasar bagi program pemulihan dan intervensi berasaskan komuniti yang sensitif budaya.

Kata kunci: Gangsterisme; Lelaki India, Teori Marginal; Teori Differential Association; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Gangsterism in Malaysia is not merely an expression of individual criminality, but a manifestation of more profound structural, economic, and cultural dislocations. In peripheral urban zones, especially within Malaysia's plural society, gangs often function as informal institutions that provide identity, protection, and symbolic capital to individuals systematically excluded from mainstream socio-economic structures (Venkatesh, 2000; Wacquant, 2008). Within public discourse, Indian men are disproportionately represented in narratives of crime and gangsterism. Media portrayals and policy rhetoric have contributed to an ethnicized stigma, framing Indian youth from low-income urban neighbourhoods as emblematic of deviant urban masculinity (Peter & Raj, 2021).

However, these representations frequently obscure the broader structural conditions that underpin gang involvement, including intergenerational poverty, displacement from former plantation estates, educational disenfranchisement, and systemic institutional neglect (Sringa, 2023; Buccellato, 2004; Iavarone & Girardi, 2018; Denny, 2019). According to Royal Malaysia Police data, although Indians constitute just 7.1% of the national population, they account for over 70% of identified secret society members (Presiden Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang, 2017). Among 49 documented gangs, 38 are Indian-dominated, with the majority of members between the ages of 20 and 30. This overrepresentation has triggered heightened law enforcement interventions and moral panic surrounding the perceived violent nature of Indian gang activity. However, criminality in Malaysia is not the exclusive domain of any single ethnic group; structural inequalities, urban developmental gaps, educational exclusion, and the erosion of institutional support systems drive it.

The tendency to ethnicize gangsterism not only deepens social stigma and reinforces negative stereotypes associated with specific ethnic groups (Allerfeldt, 2024). It also diverts critical attention away from the structural and historical conditions that underpin marginalization, including poverty, displacement, and institutional neglect (Dean, 2023). Existing literature remains disproportionately focused on enforcement and crime statistics, with limited qualitative inquiry into the lived experiences of gang-affiliated Indian men. Such narratives are complex to access due to safety concerns, legal risks, and pervasive social stigma. The Malaysian Indian Blueprint (Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2017) itself acknowledges that social exclusion, under-education, and urban neglect continue to shape the everyday realities of Indian communities, particularly in the Klang Valley. In such settings, gangs emerge not merely as criminal entities but as alternative socio-economic structures that offer order, recognition, and livelihood in the absence of state support.

This study addresses this critical gap by employing a qualitative narrative methodology, focusing on high-ranking Indian gang leaders based in Klang Valley. Grounded in Marginal Theory (Vigil, 2002) and Differential Association Theory (Sutherland, 1947), the research explores how peer dynamics, familial disruption, and spatial marginality coalesce to normalize and sustain lifelong gang involvement. The objective is to offer a more nuanced, sociologically grounded understanding of gangsterism as a mode of adaptation, identity construction, and informal governance operating within contexts of structural abandonment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gang involvement, particularly among socially marginalized populations, has been extensively examined in relation to urban poverty, social exclusion, and the development of deviant identities. International research highlights how participation in gangs often emerges as a rational response to structural disadvantage and institutional failure, especially where access to education, employment, and upward mobility is limited. In the United States and Latin America, gang affiliation frequently originates in communities marked by high unemployment, school dropout, and family instability (Vigil, 2002; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). In such contexts, youth are socialized into criminal subcultures, internalizing deviant behaviors as part of their survival strategies.

Empirical studies also underscore the role of peer influence in both gang recruitment and sustained membership. Youth embedded in environments with entrenched gang presence often have relatives or peers involved, facilitating early exposure to deviant norms. Such consistent contact fosters values like loyalty, hypermasculinity, and group solidarity (Thornberry et al., 2003). Rituals such as tattoos, initiation rites, and loyalty oaths further reinforce emotional bonding and collective identity (Hagedorn, 2008; Brotherton & Barrios, 2004).

In Malaysia, recent studies have begun to offer a more critical and empirically grounded view of gangsterism, particularly among Indian youth. Morgan and Suhaili (2020) report that gang involvement in Penang has significantly increased, with familial neglect, peer pressure, and economic hardship identified as central contributing factors. Their qualitative findings emphasize the role of parental disengagement as a leading cause of gang affiliation. Further, Subramaniam and Sundaram (2021) highlight how fractured family structures, including absentee fathers and household instability, serve as primary drivers of gangsterism among Indian youth. These findings are echoed by Raviechandran and Tharshini (2023), who found that gang membership among Malaysian Indian young adults is often motivated by social alienation, a lack of parental guidance, and the pursuit of identity and belonging in marginalised settings.

Wilson et al. (2024) provide additional insight, suggesting that many youths do not view gangs solely as deviant groups, but as social structures that confer protection, respect, and symbolic capital in otherwise hostile socio-economic environments. These views align with Vigil's (2019) Multiple Marginality Perspective, which posits that gangs are adaptive responses to layered forms of exclusion, such as racial, economic, spatial, and institutional. In terms of psychological and criminogenic dimensions, Durairaja, Mat Saat, and Kamaluddin (2019) found that negative emotionality, low self-control, and exposure to antisocial peers are key psychological correlates among Indian gang members. Their study reinforces the need to view gangsterism not simply as criminal behavior, but as a product of cumulative psychosocial vulnerabilities.

From a policy perspective, Ganapathy (2023) critiques Malaysia's punitive drug laws, arguing that they disproportionately affect marginalized ethnic groups, particularly Malays, leading to cycles of incarceration that increase susceptibility to gang recruitment within prison institutions. Meanwhile, structural inequality and community displacement continue to be significant drivers of gang proliferation. Nagarajan (2008) illustrates how the Indian community in Malaysia faces persistent barriers to education and employment, which in turn create fertile ground for deviant youth subcultures to emerge as coping mechanisms.

Despite these contributions, Malaysian research on gangsterism remains under-theorized and fragmented. Many studies have yet to systematically integrate theoretical frameworks such as Differential Association Theory (Sutherland, 1947) or concepts of social capital. Nonetheless,

recent empirical evidence points to the need for holistic interventions that are grounded in family support, inclusive policies, and structural reform. This study contributes to that gap by analyzing narratives of Indian gang members, offering sociological insight into how gangsterism operates as an alternative system of survival, identity, and belonging within the context of systemic marginalization.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

This study applies two key sociological theories, Marginal Theory (Vigil, 2002) and Differential Association Theory (Sutherland, 1947) to explain gang involvement among Indian men in Malaysia. These frameworks provide complementary insights into structural exclusion and social learning, enabling a multi-layered analysis of gangsterism as both contextually driven and interpersonally sustained.

Marginal Theory, rooted in the Chicago School, views cities as competitive spaces where marginalized groups are pushed into transitional zones with limited access to education, employment, and institutional support. In these socially disorganized areas, gangs arise as informal institutions, offering identity, protection, and material access. Recent research shows how structural exclusion fosters parallel governance and moral economies that sustain cohesion (Cayli Messina, 2024), while leadership and hierarchical organization reinforce their adaptive functions (Gravel, 2025). In Malaysia, the displacement of Indian estate workers into low-income urban areas has produced socio-spatial marginalization, enabling gangs to function as adaptive institutions for survival and identity formation.

Differential Association Theory offers a micro-sociological lens, emphasizing how criminal behavior is learned through sustained interactions. Among Malaysian Indian youth, early exposure to gang-affiliated relatives, peers, and ritualized violence normalizes deviant behavior in the absence of positive institutional role models. Recent studies highlight how peer networks and hierarchies intensify these transmissions (Leverso, 2021) and how rituals reinforce loyalty and identity (Murer, 2020; Phillips, 2025).

Together, these theories frame gangsterism as a sociocultural response to structural marginality, highlighting both its systemic roots and interpersonal reproduction.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design and adopted a narrative inquiry approach, which is particularly suitable for exploring lived experiences and the meaning-making processes embedded within sociocultural contexts (Creswell, 2013; Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry emphasizes how individuals construct and interpret their personal stories within broader structural and cultural frameworks (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This design is especially appropriate for examining complex phenomena such as gang involvement, where personal histories, social conditions, and identity negotiations are deeply intertwined.

SAMPLING AND INFORMANTS

The sample comprised two individuals who previously held top leadership positions within a gangster organization. Purposive sampling was used to identify these informants because of their extensive insider knowledge and direct experience with the phenomenon under study (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2002). The small, information-rich sample aligns with the narrative approach, which privileges depth over breadth in understanding individual trajectories. While this approach allows for deep, contextually grounded insights, it does not aim for statistical generalization. The findings should therefore be understood as analytically transferable to similar contexts rather than universally representative.

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF INFORMANTS

This study involved two Indian male individuals who served as leaders of gangster groups and had long-standing involvement in gangster-related activities. Both informants are married men. In this research, pseudonyms were used, namely Mr. X and Mr. Y, to protect their real identities and for security reasons. Mr. X has been involved in gang activities for approximately 41 years, while Mr. Y has been active for about 35 years. Both informants attained their highest level of education at the secondary school level.

Informant 1 – Mr. X

Mr. X is 58 years old and originates from Puchong, Selangor. He is the second of eight siblings. He is married and has two children. He was raised in a squatter settlement in a wooden house with only three rooms. He received formal education up to Form Two (equivalent to Year 8) due to the need to take over his family's business following his father's death. He joined a gangster group at the age of 17. Initially, he became aware of gangster groups through his friends who had long

Informant 2 – Mr. Y

Mr. Y is 51 years old and hails from Negeri Sembilan. He is married and has two children. Following the death of his father, he was raised by his grandmother from the age of two in a rubber estate settlement. His interest in gangsterism began during his youth, as he frequently observed adult community members attending meetings with gangster groups. He became actively involved in gangster activities at the young age of 15. Together with friends from his village, he founded a gang known here pseudonymously as the "Hitam" group, initially to protect their village.

Mr. Y was involved in a violent altercation with his peers that resulted in a fatality. Consequently, he fled to Kuala Lumpur. After relocating to the city, his gang became more active, engaging in criminal activities such as robbery. Throughout his time in the gangster world, he was arrested by the police 15 times. He was sentenced to internal exile and had also been imprisoned under the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA) at Sungai Buloh Prison. To this day, Mr. Y remains active in the Hitam group, where he continues to serve as the group leader.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews, conducted at least twice with each informant. Each interview session lasted approximately two hours. Locations were chosen by the informants, namely, the private home of the first informant and a private room in a restaurant owned by the second informant, to ensure psychological safety, comfort, and openness during the conversations (Knox & Burkard, 2009). Only the researcher and the informant were present at each session to maintain confidentiality and trust.

The researcher explained the study's objectives prior to each interview, assured confidentiality, and emphasized voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including permission to audio-record the conversations, in line with ethical guidelines for qualitative research (Orb et al., 2001). One informant declined to be recorded; in that case, the researcher took comprehensive manual field notes to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the data.

INTERVIEW PROCEDURE AND REFLEXIVITY

The interview process was carefully structured to foster trust and rapport. A flexible narrative interview protocol guided each conversation, allowing participants to tell their stories in their own words and at their own pace. The researcher maintained a reflexive stance throughout, being attentive to tone, pace, and cultural sensitivities to avoid leading the narrative. Reflexive field notes were documented immediately after each session to capture contextual information and the researcher's reflections, which were later integrated into the analytical process.

DATA ANALYSIS

After data collection, the researcher analyzed the data using thematic analysis, a flexible and rigorous method widely used in qualitative research to identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning across datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The recorded and written interview data were transcribed verbatim, which is essential for preserving the authenticity of informants' narratives and enabling thorough analysis (Poland, 2002). The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process:

- i. Familiarization with the data
- ii. Generating initial codes
- iii. Searching for themes
- iv. Reviewing themes
- v. Defining and naming themes
- vi. Producing the report

This approach allowed the researcher to construct an empirically grounded understanding of gangsterism in the Indian Malaysian community through the lens of the informants' own stories and reflections.

TRUSTWORTHINESS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured following the framework of Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement and member checking. Dependability and confirmability were enhanced by maintaining an audit trail and reflexive memos to minimize researcher bias. Transferability was achieved through rich, thick descriptions of the participants' contexts, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings. These strategies collectively enhanced the rigour of the study by ensuring data authenticity, transparency, and methodological consistency.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

The researcher occupied a partial insider position, sharing a similar cultural and linguistic background with the informants, which facilitated trust-building and openness during interviews. Simultaneously, as an outsider to gang structures, the researcher maintained critical distance and analytical reflexivity, balancing rapport with objectivity. This hybrid positionality enabled access to sensitive narratives while upholding methodological rigour. Reflexive documentation throughout fieldwork helped acknowledge and manage the researcher's influence on data collection and interpretation, thereby enhancing data quality and credibility.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explores the lived experiences of individuals previously involved in gangsterism, particularly among Malaysian Indian men, focusing on their trajectories of recruitment, adaptation, and eventual disengagement. Through narrative inquiry, the data reveal that gangsterism operates not merely as a vehicle for deviance but as a substitute institution offering symbolic identity, economic survival, and emotional belonging. The integration of informant narratives, empirical literature, and sociological Theory allows for a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and structural dimensions underpinning gang involvement.

RECRUITMENT AND EARLY EXPOSURE

The narratives of informants reveal that involvement in gang life frequently begins during adolescence and is commonly facilitated through informal, relational networks such as friendships, familial ties, and interactions within school settings. These pathways of recruitment were not institutional or structured but occurred organically through social proximity and routine engagement with gang-affiliated individuals.

For example, Informant 1 shared that recruitment often hinged on visible demonstrations of toughness in school:

"We saw this kid was brave at school, always in fights, so we pulled him in"

(Informant 1)

Such testimonies highlight how traits like aggression and fearlessness were socially rewarded, positioning certain youths as ideal candidates for gang inclusion. Instead of being reprimanded, these behaviors were encouraged, thereby reinforcing deviant norms as acceptable and even admirable. Likewise, familial grooming emerged as a significant route into gangsterism. Informant 2 recounted:

"My cousin was already in the gang... they told me, 'Now it is your turn to carry the name.' I was only 15"
(Informant 2)

This account highlights the intergenerational dynamics of gang recruitment, where membership is often inherited, and kinship operates as a mechanism of obligation and early socialization into gang culture. Informants also emphasized the absence of preventive infrastructure in schools. Many described their educational environments as under-resourced, with weak discipline, inadequate counseling, and a lack of positive adult role models. This institutional vacuum left youth vulnerable to external influences, particularly in areas where gangs exert social dominance.

These findings resonate strongly with Differential Association Theory (Sutherland, 1947), which posits that criminal behavior is learned through interaction with close personal groups. Central to the Theory are the concepts of priority (early exposure), frequency, duration, and intensity (emotional significance of the relationship). Informants' early exposure to violence and gang normalization, whether through family or peers, demonstrates how deviant values are learned, reinforced, and internalized through repeated and emotionally significant associations.

The valorization of aggression, as described by Informant 1, illustrates how deviant traits function as a form of social capital within marginalized peer groups. This aligns with Durairaja et al. (2019), who identified peer reinforcement, emotional instability, and low self-control as key psychological and criminogenic drivers of gangsterism among Malaysian Indian youth. Informant 2's narrative of familial induction substantiates the intergenerational transmission of deviant learning. These observations mirror Morgan and Suhaili (2020) and Subramaniam and Sundaram (2021), who found that youth from families with weak parental structures or prior gang involvement are more likely to be recruited. Raviechandran and Tharshini (2023) similarly document the role of family members and close relatives as active recruiters who normalize criminal values.

These patterns also align with Marginal Theory (Vigil, 2002), which conceptualizes urban transitional zones as socially disorganized spaces where formal institutions fail to function effectively. These zones, often inhabited by economically marginalized community gangs, fill the void left by weakened families, underperforming schools, and limited state presence. The narratives indicate that gangs function not only as protective networks but also as informal institutions meeting socio-economic and emotional needs.

In sum, early exposure to gang culture is not the result of isolated deviant choices but a sociologically patterned response to structural dislocation. Gang affiliation emerges in contexts where deviance is learned, reinforced, and legitimized through sustained interpersonal relationships within fragile social environments. Rather than being inherently criminal, many gang-involved youth are shaped by interlocking systems of exclusion, making deviant pathways one of the few accessible routes to recognition, security, and social agency.

HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE AND INTERNAL DISCIPLINE

Informant narratives suggest that gangs in Malaysia function as highly organized entities with defined hierarchical structures and formalized systems of internal governance. Informants described not only clear leadership roles but also the presence of codified rules and enforcement mechanisms that regulate behavior and instill discipline. Informant 2 recounted a symbolic initiation ritual:

"They pricked the finger, mixed the blood with water... everyone drank. After that, you belonged to the group and no turning back"

(Informant 2)

This ritual underscores the emotional and symbolic gravity of gang membership, where initiation involves both physical symbolism and psychological commitment. Such ceremonies mark the individual's transition into a tightly bonded community, reinforcing loyalty and a sense of irreversible belonging. In addition, Informant 1 elaborated on the internal hierarchy:

"There is a captain, a second-in-command, and so on. You do not just go around doing what you like. There are rules, and if you break them, you get punished"

(Informant 1)

This description illustrates how discipline within gangs is maintained through structured hierarchies, revealing that they operate not as chaotic collectives but as organized entities mirroring bureaucratic institutions. In marginalized urban settings, gangs function as pseudo-institutions, filling the void left by absent or failing state systems. Recent scholarship highlights that gang structures often display formalized leadership, division of roles, and ritualized procedures that parallel legitimate organizational forms (Gravel, 2025). The ritualized initiation described by Informant 2 aligns with Brotherton and Barrios' (2004) concept of symbolic integration, where emotionally charged rituals legitimize belonging, reinforce moral codes, and deepen psychological commitment. Other contemporary studies confirm that rituals act as performative mechanisms of identity and loyalty, sustaining participation and strengthening the group's moral economy (Murer, 2020; Phillips, 2025).

These forms of emotional allegiance and governance reflect Vigil (2002) Marginal Theory, which explains how informal organizations emerge to restore order in socially disorganized spaces. Informant 1's account of hierarchical enforcement illustrates how gangs create internal systems of discipline where formal institutions have failed.

In Malaysia, this dynamic is evident among urban Indian youth relocated from plantations to under-resourced low-cost flats. As Subramaniam and Sundaram (2021) observe, these communities often lack access to quality education, employment, and civic support, enabling gangs to become de facto authorities that provide predictability, protection, and belonging. This aligns with Loïc Wacquant's (2008) theory of urban marginality, which links state retreat in segregated spaces to the privatization of violence and the rise of alternative moral orders. Similarly, Morgan and Suhaili (2020) highlight that gang structures in Penang resemble organized institutions through their use of ranks, rituals, and internal discipline.

In sum, gang involvement among Indian youth is best understood not as simple delinquency but as a sociocultural adaptation to systemic neglect and spatial exclusion. Hierarchical systems, rituals, and internal codes reveal how gangs operate as moral, symbolic, and institutional alternatives in environments where formal structures have eroded.

RITUALS AND SYMBOLIC LOYALTY

Informants' accounts highlight the central role of ritual in affirming group loyalty and regulating behavior within gang settings. These rituals are not arbitrary; instead, they draw heavily from Tamil-Hindu cultural traditions, thereby grounding gang practices within a familiar spiritual and moral framework. Informant 1 described a spiritual initiation ritual involving a shrine-based oath:

"We had to take the oath at the shrine. If you break the oath, bad luck will follow you"

(Informant 1)

This illustrates how gang membership is not merely a social affiliation but a sacred commitment, where breaking the oath is believed to invite supernatural misfortune. The use of religious symbolism confers emotional and spiritual gravity to gang allegiance, effectively internalizing moral codes among members. Another account by Informant 2 emphasized spatial taboos rooted in traditional values:

"You could not fight near temples or homes. There was respect. Now the new kids do not follow those rules"

(Informant 2)

The findings demonstrate that rituals in gang life function as symbolic mechanisms of moral regulation, emotional commitment, and cultural continuity. The oath-taking at a shrine, as described by Informant 1, reflects the sacralization of deviant affiliation, transforming it into a spiritually binding act that legitimizes group membership. This aligns with John M. Hagedorn (2008) and Sudhir Venkatesh (2000), who argue that deviant subcultures construct parallel moral universes grounded in ritual, loyalty, and collective belief systems. Recent scholarship strengthens this view by framing rituals as performative acts of status and belonging, anchoring group identity and sustaining internal moral economies (Murer, 2020; Phillips, 2025). These practices are not merely symbolic; they embed members within a shared moral order that structures loyalty, emotional bonds, and intergenerational continuity.

In the Malaysian Indian context, this fusion of spirituality and gang culture constitutes a hybrid moral economy, where gangs selectively appropriate religious forms to legitimize their structures. Subramaniam and Sundaram (2022) document how Indian gangs incorporate community rituals such as shrine offerings, oath-taking, and fasting, blurring boundaries between gang allegiance and cultural heritage.

From a theoretical standpoint, these acts can be read through Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic capital, where spiritual rituals confer recognition and legitimacy within local communities. By embedding themselves in culturally respected practices, gangs accrue symbolic power, especially in neighborhoods where religious and civic institutions have weakened. This aligns with research on how marginalized groups mobilize cultural symbols to build moral economies and informal governance systems in neglected urban spaces (Cayli Messina, 2024).

This ritualized moral order also reflects Loïc Wacquant (2008), who argues that in spaces of urban marginality, alternative moral systems emerge to fill institutional voids. In zones where state regulation is weak and religious authority fragmented, gangs construct symbolic orders that mimic traditional structures. Contemporary studies emphasize how these orders regulate behavior, define in-group ethics, and provide belonging and spiritual anchoring that may outcompete formal institutions (Phillips, 2025; Murer, 2020). These dynamics reveal how cultural and symbolic practices become instruments of power in contexts of structural neglect.

However, Informant 2's reflection on the erosion of these taboos among younger members indicates an intergenerational shift in symbolic norms. This weakening of ritual boundaries may mark a move away from regulated, culturally embedded practices toward more volatile and unpredictable forms of gang expression, signaling broader transformations in the gang's institutional role and potential future trajectories of violence.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND MUTUAL PROTECTION

Informant narratives illustrate that gang membership extends beyond acts of criminality—it offers a comprehensive social support system encompassing economic, legal, and emotional aid. These internal mechanisms function as a parallel institution, often compensating for absent or inaccessible state-provided welfare and protection, particularly within marginalized Indian communities in Malaysia. Informant 1 shared a striking example of financial protection provided by his gang:

"If someone dies, the family gets insurance up to RM900,000... it is a family"

(Informant 1)

This insight reveals that the gang operates like a welfare provider, where support mechanisms akin to life insurance are in place to assist families in times of crisis. Such support mimics formal institutional structures, offering members a sense of security and communal care that may otherwise be unavailable. Informant 2 described how legal defense is similarly institutionalized within gang networks:

"When you get arrested... the lawyer is ready"

(Informant 2)

The availability of immediate legal representation illustrates that gangs not only anticipate encounters with law enforcement but also strategically invest in protective infrastructure for their members. This legal preparedness minimizes fear of prosecution and deepens members' sense of loyalty and embeddedness within the organizational structure.

These findings strongly resonate with the concept of bonding social capital as articulated by Putnam (2000) and Portes (1998). Bonding capital refers to dense, emotionally charged networks that foster solidarity, mutual aid, and internal loyalty. Recent studies show how marginalized networks replicate key institutional functions to sustain member security and allegiance (Cayli Messina, 2024; Gravel, 2025). The legal and financial support described by the informant mirrors Portes's argument that, in marginal communities, social capital substitutes for weakened state structures. Through these mechanisms, gangs institutionalize themselves as quasi-legitimate actors, providing legal aid, welfare, and death benefits that reinforce their authority and moral economy.

Empirical evidence from Rahim and Krishnan (2022) shows that gang membership among Malaysian Indian youth offers access to resources, protection, and identity denied by formal institutions. Similarly, Durairaja et al. (2019) highlight how criminal organizations emerge as strategic responses to structural deprivation, particularly in contexts marked by unemployment, school dropout, and ethnic discrimination.

From the lens of Vigil (2002) Marginal Theory, gangs evolve in disorganized urban zones to fill the vacuum left by state retreat. This pattern is visible in low-cost flats where displaced Indian communities lack institutional support (Subramaniam & Sundaram, 2021), enabling gangs to act as self-organized systems offering protection, identity, and symbolic legitimacy.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu (1986), the social capital cultivated within gangs often converts into symbolic and cultural capital, granting members recognition and influence in their communities. In the absence of traditional status markers like education or stable employment, gang membership provides an alternative path to prestige, authority, and belonging. However, this capital is ambivalent: it empowers individuals while simultaneously reinforcing marginality and exposing them to legal and social risks.

This duality is critical. Gang-based social capital functions not only as a safety net but also as a system of reciprocal obligation, internal surveillance, and behavioral discipline. Members who benefit from legal or financial aid are bound by loyalty and complicity, making exit costly. Leaving threatens not only loss of protection and resources but also identity and belonging.

In sum, gangs operate simultaneously as sources of protection and instruments of control. Their embedded social capital fosters resilience and mutual support, yet also entrenches marginality under the guise of care, reflecting the complex ambivalence of gang structures in structurally neglected communities.

STRUCTURAL MARGINALIZATION AND DISENGAGEMENT FROM FORMAL INSTITUTIONS

Informant narratives consistently reveal that gang affiliation among Indian youth is deeply rooted in chronic poverty, disrupted education, and systemic neglect. Rather than engaging in delinquency as a conscious rejection of societal norms, informants describe their involvement in gangs as an adaptive strategy in response to long-standing socio-economic exclusion.

"I only completed transition class. No money for school, and my parents were too busy working. So I just followed the boys in the area."

(Informant 2)

This statement highlights a chain of structural disadvantages: financial hardship, parental labor-related absence, and educational disengagement. These factors coalesce to sever youth from formal institutions, particularly schools, which traditionally serve as critical sites of socialization and upward mobility. Informant 1 further described the everyday realities of life in urban low-income housing:

"We lived in PPR flats. Every day there is a fight, someone gets robbed. No one tells us what is right or wrong. The gang tells you what to do"

(Informant 1)

This phenomenon aligns with Vigi (2002) Marginal Theory, which explains how structurally displaced populations develop alternative systems of governance and belonging in response to exclusion from mainstream society. In Malaysia, this is particularly evident among Indian communities historically tied to estate labor systems and later relocated to PPR flats urban zones, often lacking adequate education, social services, and civic engagement opportunities.

This structural displacement has been well documented by Pillai (2013) and Idris and Chong (2021), who argue that relocation without institutional support erodes traditional community authority, leaving youth vulnerable to peer influence and criminal networks. The findings of this study support their argument: spatial and institutional marginality create conditions in which gangs emerge as alternative avenues for structure, protection, and recognition.

Importantly, these narratives challenge individualistic explanations of gang involvement. They highlight the structural failures of education, economic planning, and social policy. School disengagement and weak local support systems frequently precede gang entry, which is less a reflection of personal pathology than of institutional neglect.

The Malaysian case mirrors broader global patterns. Wacquant (2008) demonstrates how urban marginality in Western cities leads to welfare state retreat and the rise of informal institutions, including gangs, which reshape the urban moral economy. In these parallel systems, youth secure identity and survival but become entrenched in informal circuits that are both stigmatized and heavily policed.

CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES AS ECONOMIC STRATEGY

Informants in this study consistently described their involvement in criminal activities as a strategic economic decision, rather than an impulsive or irrational choice. These narratives revealed that crime offered not only faster financial returns but also symbolic status and control over time resources that were largely unattainable through formal employment, particularly in Malaysia's low-wage urban labor market.

As Informant 2 remarked:

"Our biggest hijack earned RM2 million. My juniors got RM100,000 each. That is more than working 10 years in a factory."

(Informant 2)

This reflection demonstrates that gang members weighed the economic risks and benefits of illegal activity. For them, high-stakes criminal operations were a rational means of economic advancement, far more lucrative and socially affirming than extended engagement in precarious formal sector jobs. Similarly, Informant 1 emphasized the appeal of drug sales as a form of entrepreneurial autonomy:

"Selling weed was safer than working odd jobs. Less hours, more respect, and police also scared of us back then"

(Informant 1)

The findings highlight symbolic rewards such as peer recognition, fear-based authority, and territorial influence. These forms of social capital confer legitimacy within the subculture, even as they remain criminalized in broader society.

This aligns with contemporary rational choice perspectives in criminology, which emphasize how individuals make calculated decisions about offending based on perceived costs, benefits, and constraints (Piquero et al., 2020; Bouffard, 2021). For marginalized youth facing structural barriers such as unstable income, weak educational opportunities, and limited upward mobility, criminal activity emerges as a rational economic strategy rather than mere deviance. Informants in this study described their choices in explicitly instrumental terms, seeking efficiency, control, and symbolic dominance where legitimate pathways were closed. Rational

choice is also situationally bounded, shaped by environmental conditions and constrained opportunity structures (Matsueda, 2021; Sweeten & Piquero, 2022).

This economic rationality is increasingly evident in the corporatized structure of Malaysian gangs. Ganesan (2023) observes that contemporary networks employ strategic planning cells, income redistribution mechanisms, and task-based hierarchies mirroring formal business organizations. These developments blur the line between organized crime and informal economies, reinforcing gangs' role as shadow institutions within neoliberal urban contexts.

The appeal of gang enterprise also reflects Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic capital, where illicit success provides visibility, status, and autonomy in marginalized settings. As Informant 1 noted, the respect gained through drug operations far exceeded that of low-wage, insecure employment. Here, power is derived not from legality but from risk, control, and local influence.

These dynamics correspond to Vigil (2002) Marginal Theory, which predicts the rise of informal economies in socially disorganized peripheries. In Malaysia, displaced Indian estate communities and residents of PPR flats are systematically excluded from formal economic opportunities (Subramaniam & Sundaram, 2021; Pillai, 2013). The emergence of economic criminality in these spaces is therefore not anomalous but structurally induced.

This pattern mirrors global trends. Wacquant (2008) argues that in neoliberal urban regimes, the retreat of welfare systems fosters criminal economies as survival infrastructures for marginalized groups. In Malaysia, where racialized labor markets, weak protections, and high dropout rates disproportionately affect Indian youth (Durairaja et al., 2019), gangs fill the economic vacuum left by systemic neglect.

LOYALTY, EXIT BARRIERS, AND SPIRITUAL REDEMPTION

Informants' narratives reflect the profound difficulty of exiting gang life. Disengagement is not a straightforward event but an ongoing process fraught with fear, emotional entanglement, and symbolic obligations. These stories illustrate that gang loyalty is more than social allegiance—it becomes a deeply embedded form of moral debt rooted in survival, brotherhood, and shared history. As Informant 1 bluntly articulated:

"If you betray... they will cut you up alive. If you join another gang, it is war. You only slow down, never really quit"

(Informant 1)

This statement illustrates how gang structures enforce loyalty through coercion and symbolic threat. Betrayal is perceived not merely as personal failure, but as a destabilizing act that threatens the moral order of the group. The expectation of absolute commitment ensures cohesion, while any deviation is punishable by severe retaliation. Informants described these boundaries as unspoken but rigid, suggesting that exit is not simply discouraged but morally and physically dangerous (Sleat, 2024; Phillips, 2025).

In addition to fear, emotional dependency emerged as a core obstacle to desistance. Informants described their gangs as surrogate families that filled the void left by absent or dysfunctional homes and unsupported social institutions. This emotional reliance intensified the difficulty of withdrawal, even when physical risk subsided. However, amid these constraints, informants also expressed the possibility of transformation anchored in spirituality and new social roles. Informant 2 described:

"I stopped after I got married. But it was only after I started praying again that I could let go. Spiritually, I needed peace"

(Informant 2)

The mechanisms of loyalty described by the informants reflect the concept of bounded loyalty, in which gang commitment operates as a comprehensive moral framework. Loyalty is sustained not only through external coercion (e.g., violence, ostracization) but also through internalized obligation rooted in the gang's role as provider, protector, and moral anchor. These embedded loyalties make disengagement more than a behavioral shift; it is a symbolic rupture of identity. Recent scholarship emphasizes that tightly bound group commitments generate enduring moral orders that extend beyond instrumental ties (Sleat, 2024).

The findings also align with identity transformation theories of desistance. Cognitive transformation perspectives stress that successful desistance involves constructing a new self-narrative that transcends the criminal past (Giordano, 2022). Informants' pathways toward marriage, prayer, and family reintegration exemplify this process, where transformation is anchored in new relational identities as husbands, fathers, or spiritual adherents. The role of spirituality is particularly significant. Informant 2's account illustrates how desistance is often facilitated through renewed religious practices within Tamil–Hindu or Islamic traditions, consistent with empirical research demonstrating that spirituality and religious participation can enable identity change and reintegration (Mohler et al., 2024). Religious rituals and belief systems function as counter-structures to the gang's symbolic world, providing alternative moral universes through which individuals can reconstruct their identities.

In Malaysia, this re-spiritualization is culturally specific. As shown in earlier findings on ritual loyalty, many gangs incorporate religious motifs into their own initiation and moral codes. Exit through spirituality thus constitutes not an external break but a rechanneling of existing symbolic structures. Subramaniam and Sundaram (2022) observed similar patterns: disengagement among Indian gang members often occurs through renewed engagement with family rituals, temple activities, or religious vows. Marriage also plays a crucial transformative role, offering both symbolic legitimacy and social reintegration.

However, desistance is often partial rather than absolute. As Informant 1 stated, "you only slow down," indicating that while overt participation may end, social ties, internalized identities, and community perceptions persist. This enduring attachment reflects structural entrapment, where limited legitimate mobility options restrict full re-entry into conventional society. This aligns with Loïc Wacquant (2008), who argues that in conditions of urban marginality, exit from informal institutions is constrained by persistent socio-spatial inequalities.

CONCLUSION

This study offers an empirically grounded and sociologically rich exploration of gangsterism among Indian youth in Malaysia, revealing it as a complex social phenomenon rooted in structural marginalization, disrupted institutional pathways, and the search for identity, belonging, and protection. Drawing on the lived narratives of former gang members, the findings move beyond reductionist or criminalizing interpretations and instead frame gang involvement as a rational and adaptive strategy in response to systemic exclusion, educational disengagement, and socio-spatial displacement.

Gangs, as illustrated by informants, function not only as networks of criminal enterprise but also as informal institutions that fulfill essential roles traditionally served by the family, education system, and the state, providing economic access, moral codes, social security, and symbolic status. These insights align with Marginal Theory and Differential Association Theory, reinforcing the argument that gang affiliation must be understood through the intersections of structure and agency, as well as the symbolic economies that sustain loyalty and constrain exit.

Accordingly, effective interventions must adopt a multi-dimensional approach that addresses both the macro-level structural conditions and the micro-level social dynamics that underpin gang formation and persistence. Solely punitive or surveillance-based strategies are insufficient and often counterproductive. Instead, policymakers must confront root causes, including intergenerational poverty, educational exclusion, urban housing precarity, and institutional neglect, that create fertile ground for deviant subcultures.

Community-based programs aim to cultivate both bonding and bridging social capital, offering meaningful alternatives through education access, vocational training, skill-building workshops, mentorship by credible role models, and social enterprise development. These initiatives not only divert youth from gang involvement but also rebuild agency, aspirations, and social integration.

For individuals seeking to disengage from gang life, reintegration strategies must go beyond legal amnesty or basic rehabilitation. Instead, they should include trauma-informed psychosocial support, spiritual and cultural renewal, and identity reconstruction through relational healing and community reintegration. The findings suggest that spiritual redemption, familial reconnection, and cultural rituals can play a decisive role in transforming the self-concept of former gang members and sustaining their path out of deviance.

Significantly, this study contributes to the growing body of sociological scholarship that emphasizes the voices of those often excluded from mainstream discourse. Centering the insider perspectives of ex-gang members provides a bottom-up lens for understanding gang dynamics, institutional failures, and pathways to resilience.

Looking ahead, future research should adopt a comparative and intersectional lens, including cross-ethnic studies, gendered experiences (particularly the roles and trajectories of female informants), and the influence of digital platforms in shaping contemporary gang identity, recruitment, and disengagement. Such work is essential to expand the empirical terrain and policy relevance of gang studies in Malaysia and Southeast Asia more broadly.

Ultimately, reducing gangsterism in Malaysia requires a paradigm shift—from reactive containment to proactive social investment, from criminal labeling to structural justice, and from exclusion to inclusive urban citizenship.

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