UNDERSTANDING BOUNDARIES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON SOCIAL STORIES AS A PREVENTIVE TOOL AGAINST INAPPROPRIATE SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR IN ASD TEENAGERS

Mohd Yusof Zulkefli[1]
Ahmad Farid Abdul Fuad[2]
Nur Aziemah Mohd Azman[3]
Tengku Elena Tengku Mahamad[4]
Mohd Fadly Khamis[5]

[1]Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia,
(E-mail: yusofzulkefli@uitm.edu.my)
[2]STEM Foundation Centre, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), Malaysia,
(Email: farid@umt.edu.my)
[3]Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Malaysia,
(E-mail: nuraziemah2753@uitm.edu.my)
[4]Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Malaysia,
(E-mail: Tengku.elena@uitm.edu.my)
[5]Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Malaysia,
(E-mail: mohdfadly@uitm.edu.my)

Abstract*: ASD teenagers commonly have difficulties in social understanding. Their emotional changes and increasing sexual urges may be delayed or prolonged. Moreover, families, therapists or caregivers are often concerned about the growing sexual behaviour in ASD teenagers. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the social story's impacts on controlling sexual behaviour among autism spectrum disorder (ASD) teenagers. The methodology used by the researchers in this study is the qualitative research method. Meanwhile, the case study served as the research design of this study. Fifteen participants were involved in this study. There are a few themes found in the triangulation data analysis. First, the findings show that the social story helped ASD teenagers to expect positive responses and adapt to social standards. Secondly, a social story is part of visual communication. It is another type of communication to convey a message. It also can be derived as a tool that can translate into effective communication. As for the recommendation of this study, the researchers would like to suggest that future researchers explore the integration between social stories and virtual learning. Secondly, the future researcher may conduct the research using experimental research. This research only narrates the impact and usefulness of the social story but lacks the figure to generalise the social story's impact explicitly.*

Keywords*: ASD, Social Story, Sexual Behaviour, Inappropriate, Teenagers*

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Introduction

Individuals and young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have impairments in three main domains. The three domains are communication, restricted behaviour and interest, and social interaction (Kenan, Zachor, Watson, & Ben-Itzchak, 2019; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These impairments may influence sexual development and concern such behaviour (Minshawi et al., 2014). Sexuality and sexual behaviour among ASD have recently caught parents, society, and professionals by surprise. As a result, many often ask about the difference between standard and not normal sexual behaviour, the deviant ones, and the signs of such behaviours as minors or adolescents. According to Tolman & McClelland (2011), the term routine or normality has been functionally and differentially defined by researchers in many disciplines, and the term is complex and still contested.

In general, Social Stories can be accepted as a priming strategy in identifying potentially inconvenient situations for an ASD individual from the stage the ASD is involved in the activity until the ASD understands or manages the situation. According to Quill (1995), the social interaction difficulties of ASD individuals can be categorised into three groups: (a) social recognition, which is described as a lack of interest in others; (b) social communication, which includes trouble expressing one is self and having a limited understanding of body language; and (c) social imitation and understanding, which includes an inability to understand the thoughts or feelings of others or to engage in imaginative play. Further research, among others, has demonstrated that they tend to display significant deficits in social skills (Bloomquist, 1996), understanding facial expressions (Garcia-Blanco, Yanez, Vazquez, Marcos, & Perea, 2017; Ilias, Liaw, Cornish, Park, & Golden, 2016 and Berman & Rappaport, 2008) and, imitation and social initiation with peers (Rabi, 2015).

In addition, a social story is created specifically for students based on behaviours that require modification. Fadzullah, Yasin, & Tahar (2016) found that this method (using a social story for an intervention) can be used effectively when the teacher gives appropriate instructions and cues in front of the student. Instructions will be given individually from time to time so that negative behaviours can be reduced. Supported by Kusrin et al. (2020), this method provides genuine and transparent social information that individuals do not understand or ignore. Information conveyed through social stories can clarify the overall picture of the social situation.

Since the social story is believed to assist ASD individuals in understanding or to manage the situation well, does it mitigate inappropriate sexual behaviour among ASD teenagers? ASD teenagers who display sexual behaviour are often concerned if these behaviours are socially inappropriate or harmful to others. In this sense, parents of ASD teenagers with such sexual behaviour problems are primarily concerned with teenagers' safety and others' misunderstanding of their teenager's behaviour (Nicholas & Blakeley-Smith, 2010). Although individuals with ASD may mature physically and sexually according to normal development stages, an ASD teenager can generally develop in some social and emotional understanding areas whilst having difficulties in others (Abrams, 2017). As ASD individuals have difficulties in social understanding (Travers & Tincani, 2010), their emotional changes and increasing

sexual urges may be delayed or prolonged (Huwaidi & Daghustani, 2013). Moreover, families, therapists or caregivers are often concerned about the growing sexual behaviour in ASD teenagers. However, it is generally not accompanied by a corresponding growth in social knowledge, leading to socially embarrassing behaviour. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the social story's impacts on controlling sexual behaviour among Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) teenagers.

Literature Review

ASD and Sexual Behaviour

Sustainable tourism as defined by The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is tourism that takes full account of current and future economic, social and environmental impacts… Sexual behaviour problems among ASD teenagers are by far too prevalent today. The statistics show that approximately 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 4 girls are implicated by sexual behaviour problems (Holmes & Himle, 2014). A study done in Nebraska showed that 55000 individuals with any intellectual disability were four times more likely to be sexually harassed and abused than a minor without disabilities, causing sexual behaviour problems (Corr & Santos, 2017). Although no specific numbers are reported about the sexual behaviour of autistic teenagers in Malaysia, Tin (2022) suggested this population is highly vulnerable; thus, it is time to teach them about appropriate behaviour concerning sexual behaviour. It is timely that ASD teenagers can control themselves against all mistranslated perceptions and convictions by controlling their sexual behaviour cues. A new mechanism must be endorsed to promote a healthy social environment to give ASD teenagers the proper and appropriate protection from being abused mentally and physically once they consciously know how to control themselves sexually.

According to Xin, Si, Vy, & Rahman (2017), in Malaysia, it is found that parents of ASD children scored the highest levels of stress and aggravation range (55%) compared to parents of children with other developmental problems (44%), parents of children with special healthcare needs (12%) and parents of typical development (TD) children (11%). In addition, 89% of them also rated that their ASD children were facing emotions, concentration and behaviour impairments in which parents of ASD children are anxious about their children's sexual development. Furthermore, Malaysian parents are hesitant to openly discuss sexuality with their ASD children due to societal taboos (Yaakub, Kusrin, Nasohah, & Yusof, 2020). As a result, it is not surprising that they skip this crucial parent-teacher sharing session to openly talk about the sexual development issue faced by their ASD child. As a result, parents permitted their ASD children to continue improperly acting in public, such as masturbating (Yaakub & Kusrin, 2015).

The lack of sexual education for ASD individuals in Malaysia raises concerns about the risks they would encounter as they grow up in transition to puberty. If none is intervened, they will commit inappropriate sexual behaviours, and the ignorant society would perceive this in a misinformed way (Hashim & Rahman, 2014). One of the reasons sexual education among ASD individuals is vital is because sexual harassment or molestation could become the most reported case engaged by ASD individuals (Sevlever, Roth, & Gillis, 2013; Yaakub et al., 2020). One typical example of such a case is an autistic teenager, Ahmad Ziqri Morshidi.

Social Story

Social Stories are short stories intended for ASD individuals to understand social situations. These stories help them predict and anticipate specific situations and teach appropriate behaviour within the situation (Alitani, 2018). The goals of Social Stories are to share accurate social information and to promote social understanding. These short, individualised stories support understanding the environment or situation and sometimes confusing social experiences (Gray, 2002; Ozdemir, 2010). As a result, a social story can help ASD individuals to understand social information in a given setting.

Thus, it proves that a visual approach, such as a social story, tends to work best with ASD individuals whose verbal abilities are frequently delayed or who find the spoken word difficult to process and respond to that particular situation. Social stories can help ASD individuals understand the consequences of their actions and appraise thought processes and feeling associated with scenarios (Gray, 2002; Fadzullah, Yasin, & Tahar, 2016). For example, it can be beneficial when parents work through issues about respect for self and others and enable their individuals to know that others may think and feel differently from them. Sometimes, ASD individuals need a picture to be drawn specifically for them, with their picture stuck to either a body or a drawing they instantly recognise. It will enable them to understand that the story or information the parents or educators gave is relevant to them (Adams, Gouvousis, VanLue, & Waldron, 2004; Gray, 2022). To date, Fadzullah, Yasin, & Tahar (2016) stern that the use of interventions through social stories showed a reduction in the disruptive behaviour of study subjects and improvement positive in current behaviour in the classroom. Hence, they suggested that the approach of the social story interventions and reinforcement are used as strategies for classroom management, especially in Special Education classes.

However, sometimes the static picture of the social story will make ASD individuals find it hard to understand the concept (Zulkefli & Rabi, 2021b; Zulkefli & Rabi, 2021c). Due to that, many of the teachers need to use the actual picture to explain the setting. The consequence is that preparing the social story will take time since the teacher needs to gather the actual picture and need the parents to provide the picture so they can create the social story. The social story also needs a person's commitment to reading it with the ASD individual. Finally, the social story needs to be read, printed and shown to the ASD individual.
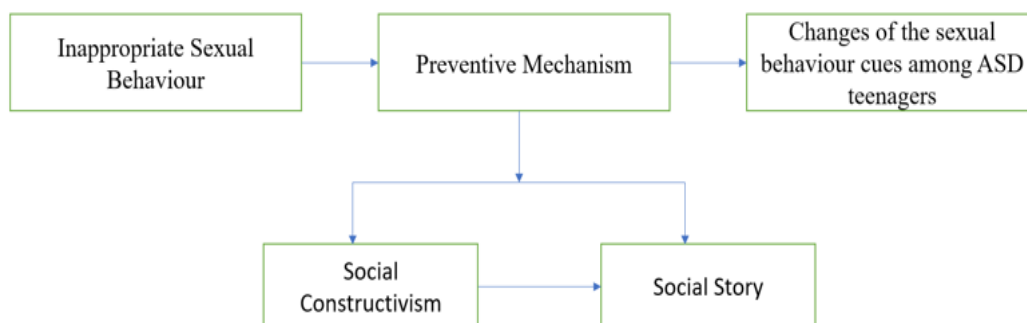

Figure 1: Research Framework of the Study

The research framework shown in figure 1 is adapted from Simina & Hamel (2005). Using social stories to assist ASD teenagers in understanding inappropriate sexual behaviour, assistance from the researcher or teachers to the ASD teenagers is required. This approach is

based on Vygotsky's Social Constructivism theory, which states that assistance from others may increase people's knowledge to the next level and that active learning happens in the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The aid and direction from adults are known as scaffolding (Harland & Mercer, 2009). However, consistent constructivism poses a severe challenge to the notion that, in an era of variety and difference, a fundamental objective of education may be to assist students in comprehending how knowledge is produced. Therefore, this research will highlight the theory to ensure knowledge is transferred to ASD teenagers about modifying sexual behaviour.

As social constructivism is a process of knowledge construction coherently, this brings to the fore the crucial role of communication in the construction of knowledge, not as a process in which individual constructions of everyday reality are exchanged, but rather as a process in which different realities are in a practical sense made "in common" (Vanderstraeten, 2002). Besides, Piaget believed that learners actively construct cognitive knowledge and that any account of knowledge makes essential references to cognitive structures. Moreover, ts knowledge comprises active systems of intentional mental representations derived from past learning experiences (Liao, 2012). Thus, the learner interprets experiences and information in light of their actual knowledge, stage of cognitive development, cultural background, personal history, etcetera (Duffy & Jonassen, 2013).

Methodology
The methodology used by the researchers in this study is the qualitative research method. The research design of this study is a case study using the inductive approach. Generally, Moglia, Alexander, & Perez (2011) mentioned that case studies using an inductive approach are appropriate for increasing human comprehension of situations and providing context-dependent information required for theory formulation. Hence, in this study, the case study research, in particular, was utilised for abductive reasoning. The researcher used the non-probability and purposive sampling method in this study, often used in the qualitative research approach. In order to achieve the objective, in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation are the sources yielded by the researchers in this study. According to Yao et al. (2020), these data collection procedures involved triangulation.

This study involved 15 participants. As for the observation and documentation procedures, the researchers collaborated with the therapist to observe three ASD teenagers ranged 13 to 18 years old. These ASD teenagers were having issues with sexual behaviour. The consent from the parents was gathered before the observations were made. Three social stories assisted ASD teenagers in understanding inappropriate sexual behaviour and intended to mitigate their sexual behaviour problems. Again, two observers, the researcher and the therapist, were together to observe and record data during the observation session. After that, inter-observer agreement (IOU) or agreement between observers was calculated to improve the reliability of the results study findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). In addition, these field notes would provide extra information for the researcher to develop a checklist for sexual behaviour problems.

Then, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 12 informants. They were five parents to the ASD participants, two clinical psychologists, three therapists and two caregivers. Through this in-depth interview, the researchers chose the semi-structured interview because

it allows informants to have the freedom to express their views from their perspectives and tell their own experiences regarding the topic of concern. As mentioned, semi-structured interviews provided reliable and equivalent qualitative data (King & Nigel, 2010). Moreover, it was beneficial because the questions could be prepared ahead of time and helped the researcher prepare early before the interview session. Using this method, the researcher could have extended questions for the informants if needed. It helped both parties get constructive and comprehensive information about the phenomena.

In order to analyse the data, the researcher used thematic analysis. This technique can be considered to immerse researchers in the data to know the depth and scope of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Moreover, familiarisation assisted the researcher in getting to know the contents of the informants without missing information, for example, the informants' sentiments or unconscious conduct. In addition, the ethical issue has become the researcher's primary concern before analysing the observation documents and the progress report documents. To overcome that, the researchers examined the possible ethical problems during the study and how these concerns must be tackled during the planning and development phase. Creswell (2014) recommended that researchers take a gander at ethical considerations, including the role of researchers as insiders or outside participants, that researchers assess issues they may be afraid to communicate, build supportive, respectful and stereotypical relationships and, use non-participant labels, recognise their voices. All of those concerns were resolved and fulfilled.

Findings

Qualitative research is based on subjective, interpretive and contextual data. Thus, the findings need to be believable, consistent and applicable. Data in this study include field notes and audio and video recordings. Detailed analysis using qualitative analysis is adapted from Creswell (2013), generating meaningful data units and classifying and ordering these units. These include coding, categorisation, comparison, integration and interpretation, which are essential in overall conclusions.

Table 1: Themes from qualitative data analysis.

Data Collection	Themes
Observation	Expectation
In-depth Interviews	Positive Response
Documents	Adaptation

Expectation

Situation 1:
On one occasion, Participant 1 (P1) asked how he was born on this earth. The therapist explained to him from the aspect of the biological nature (explanation at the level of his understanding). He seems to understand and requests to peek at others in the toilet while laughing. The therapist then showed him the social story of the appropriate behaviour, and he complied with it.

Situation 2:
On 20th March 2022, one tragic unpleasant incident happened on P2. P2 leans his back on a wall. There is a stain on his trousers; thus, the sister wipes it. P2 pushed his sister away, then ran towards her and rubbed his private part at her sister's hand. After a while, the father slapped P2's face and scolded him badly. Due to that incident, the mother was concerned about his situation. The mother asked for help regarding the sexual education program. From this situation, the researcher discovered that P1 does not understand social expectations. Lacking that understanding has trapped him in a complicated situation. Therefore, a social story intervention was used to help in Positive Behaviour Support (PBS). As a result, there were changes in the behaviour. However, the progress is slow because the parents have no time to sit and read the social story because they are busy with their business.

Situation 3:
P3 encountered another situation where he was still disturbed by the incident, and the therapist refused to hug him. Thus, the following week when P1 had another session with the therapist, the previous incident's emotion still influenced him. He did not comply with the instruction given and showed his tantrum by echolalic the same term "hug". The therapist kept reminding him about the phrases "no hugging" and "not family". The episode repeated. He is showing his tantrums and hitting himself. The therapist needs help to wrap him into the blanket and give him the time-out. After the time-out, he seems stable, and his emotion is also under control. The therapist showed him the social story about his family and teacher using an accurate picture. He sat on the chair nicely and continued the session with the therapist. Based on this situation, the researcher connotes that the social story helped to deliver a piece of information. The ASD individual also could grasp the idea. However, the researcher found it a bit challenging to read the social story when the ASD individual throws a tantrum.

Positive response
One impact of the social story is when it could affect the ASD individual to change their behaviour from negative to positiv*e*. The positive response will happen when the ASD individual may adapt to the situation after frequently reading or being taught about something. The informants were convinced that the social story had been created following their capacity for understanding. Although the progress might be slower, they can still understand the social expectation and reduce their negative responses. Therefore, it shows that the social story can transform their behaviour, and they can also adapt to it.

The social story to be used to explain about appropriate and inappropriate of a certain thing. Usually, will be used to remind them of something. For example, about proper behaviour, about new things or a new transition and many more.
(CG/25042022)

Adaptation
Based on the progress report, the researchers found that the ASD individual can adapt to the situation after the ASD individuals have been introduced to or taught about specific issues frequently related to their struggling behaviour. Besides. The social story usually rectifies the expected new social situation, which tries to tackle and enhance the positive behaviour in every situation likely to trigger negative responses. Therefore, using the social story helps the participants adapt to the social expectation. For instance, when the therapist of parents needs

to explain to the participant if they need to move or change to a new school or when they will face any new situation, such as if they want to go for a holiday or visit their family during the festive season. Besides, they will also be using the social story to explain or tell the participants about the negative or positive effects if they get something done with it.

Discussions

Using social stories can be derived as visual communication. Thus, it is another type of communication to convey a message. It also can be derived as a tool that can be translated into effective communication. Communication is a broad concept that applies to various disciplines of study. The notion of communication remains a distant delusion, no matter how much humans try to disregard it (Shakirova, Adelina, & Akhunzianova, 2018). In education, effective communication is critical. Aligned with Diloyan (2017), effective communication is essential to ensure the learners' success, whether an educator educates a student, colleague, parent, or vice versa. Although the student and the educator may appear to be continuously communicating, this is not necessarily the case. In special education, especially on ASD subjects, the pace of communication between educators and parents must be the same. It is to ensure that ASD individuals do not fall into confusion.

In each scenario, based on this study, the social story is an effective communication tool to communicate with ASD individuals. It is essential for ordinary or exceptional people (Huff & Christensen, 2018). This study proves that daily, ASD individuals will almost certainly find themselves in various unpleasant situations in which they are attempting to avoid communicating with the other party. These circumstances may result in a communication barrier between teachers and students or between parents and children. Especially when the parents notice that their ASD child is transitioning to puberty, and once they need to explain the biological changes, they might be hard to explain. Agreed with Zulkefli & Rabi (2021b), these obstacles can lead to false information or a poor image, impacting an individual's overall performance if they struggle with verbalisation. As a result, it would also cause frustration. This study also affirmed that poor communication would make ASD individuals not in a good mood to the extent of throwing a tantrum because they might feel unpleasant.

Although the social story is beneficial in conveying information, this study proved that a lack of time, resources, or knowledge on communicating information might result in poor communication. Hence, it will be allotting the ASD individuals to continue with the inappropriate behaviour. That is one reason inappropriate sexual behaviour is brutal to manage in the home setting. However, it varies in the school or the therapy centre setting. This study indicated that inappropriate sexual behaviour happens, but ASD individuals will commit it by "isolating" themselves unless someone is too addicted. Although it seems appropriate since the ASD individuals are looking for a safe place to commit it, upon this study, that action is still considered inappropriate as the "isolation" area is still accessible by anybody. In addition, it is not a private area.

On top of it, this research study also indicated that poor communication between caretakers and ASD individuals is occurring. In this sense, poor communication refers to understanding the social norms and the effect of committing such negative behaviour in the school or therapy centre locations. According to Odine (2015), when teacher-student communication is good, both parties' benefit: the learners' excitement will develop, and the instructor will have a crucial

impact on the individual's learning. Effective communication makes it simpler for individuals to learn. It develops the instructor and student relationship effectively (DeVito, 2016) and cognitively fosters a happy learning environment (Poehner, Kinginger, Compernolle, & Lantolf, 2017).

Conclusion and Recommendations

As people start to grow, such as from childhood to adulthood, someone would have a more substantial need to express and demonstrate their emotions. The same thing happened to an ASD person. However, the emotions expressed by the ASD individuals were contextual. It is due to the environment's impact on ASD teenagers to set an example. As indicated in this study, many parents let their ASD children play with the phone to let them be fascinated by it. Then, the ASD individual is less likely to create an episode, and parents can continue their routine, such as the house chores, without difficulty. The social stories could help ASD individuals understand a particular situation's social rules and expectations. This study has indicated that the social stories helped ASD teenagers modify their sexual behaviour and enhanced communication and social skills. However, the lacking of a social story is that the parents, therapists, or caregivers need to sit and read the social story together with the ASD individual. In the home, the setting would be complex when the parents, such as the mother, need to find a particular time to read the social story. Furthermore, the situation is hectic when the ASD individual throws a tantrum. At that time, the social story is helpless. Therefore, as a recommendation, firstly, the researchers would like to suggest to the future researcher to explore the integration between social stories and virtual learning. Animating the social story is another way to enhance understanding and reduce time spent manually reading the social story. Secondly, the further researcher may continue to conduct the research using experimental research. It is because this research only narrates the usefulness but lacking in the figure to generalise the impact of the social story explicitly.

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