

Socio-economic issues of Kratom: A Qualitative Study

Abstract

Kratom is well-known as a tropical medical plant from Southeast Asia, and it is used as a supplement in several countries. Kratom can be found in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Papua New Guinea, Laos, and the Philippines. However, there are many countries that have outlawed kratom products. Processing kratom leaves and kratom products are illegal in Malaysia. However, some political parties are calling for the legalization of kratom products. This study investigates the socio-economic issues related to kratom products in Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews with experts from government agencies, NGOs, industry, and local farmers are conducted in order to achieve the research objectives. The results found that there are both positive and negative impacts of kratom products, such as kratom being used as an immediate treatment for stomach aches and diarrhoea, providing energy for labor and recovering energy for women after giving birth by locals in Northern Malaysia. However, kratom is also said to cause addiction and threaten the users' health if excessively used. According to the participants, kratom can generate income for the farmers and government, but there are many misuse cases by teenagers and black market activities in Malaysia. Therefore, the government is advised to conduct further research on the medical benefits of kratom and study the acceptance of society on the legalization issue while developing the policy.

Keywords: kratom, qualitative, social, economic

1. Introduction

Kratom (*Mitragyna speciosa*. Korth), a tropical medicinal plant from Southeast Asia that belongs to the Rubiaceae or coffee family. Kratom has historically been used for a number of different purposes (Saingam et al., 2012; Hassan et al., 2013; Singh et al., 2016). Kratom has been used for intestinal infections, diarrhoea, and cough in folk medicine, as well as for its purported analgesic and euphoric benefits (Lu, Tran, Nelson, and Aldous 2009). Kratom has been utilised by locals in Malaysia and Thailand to help them work long hours under the heat (Tanguay 2011). Kratom, which can be smoked or taken orally, is now widely accessible throughout the United States and Europe, both online and in street shops. People have started using "kratom cocktails"—a concoction of boiled kratom leaves, coke, syrup, coffee, or codeine, served with ice—in Thailand (Chitttrakarn, Penjamras, and Keawpradub 2012). Large-scale cultivation of kratom can be found in Thailand, Malaysia, Borneo, Philippines, and New Guinea (Lee, 1957). In Southeast Asia, kratom has been used for a medicinal benefits and as a recreational drink. In fact, in some villages in Thailand, kratom is also used in small religious rituals. Women in rural areas often use kratom

leaves as home remedies for conditions such as fever, cough, hypertension, diabetes, discomfort, and anxiety (Assanangkornchai et al., 2007).

The use of kratom has been discussed in several journal articles (Stanciu et al., 2019; Prozialeck et al., 2012; Raini, 2017), however there is still a debate on the pros and cons of the kratom related to the usage, effect and legal status in the world, including Malaysia. In Malaysia, kratom is always associated with the discussion on the misuse among the teenagers, the issue of black market, and smuggling the kratom leaves to other countries. Kratom is known as psychoactive drug which is placed under the Poisons Act 1952 in Malaysia. Although kratom is classified under this act, the cultivation of kratom is neither prohibited nor illegal (Ikhsan, 2021). Under Section 30(3) of the Poisons Act 1952, people who process and sell kratom can lead to a maximum prison sentence of four years or a fine not exceeding RM10,000 or both of them. However, this issue does not show any sign of decrease, in fact the cases are increasing especially during COVID-19.

According to Stanciu et al. (2019), the use of kratom in a small dose is not harmful to the user. However, excessive intake can cause various symptoms and it is difficult to detoxify. Stanciu et al. (2019) also claimed that kratom users will increase the quantity even though they may do not have intended to do so in the beginning. When the quantity of kratom is reduced, severe symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, sweating, and abdominal cramps will occur.

In addition, cases of illegally exporting kratom are also increasing in Malaysia. This case increases when the price of kratom increases (Domnic et al., 2022). This is because processing and selling kratom is illegal in terms of the law. Therefore, a detailed study of the socioeconomic issues related to kratom cultivation should be carried out to study the views of the farmers, representatives from government bodies, representatives from non-government bodies, and industry in order to assist the government and the public to understand the kratom issue in depth.

2. Methods

To answer the research question of this paper—"To what extent do the representatives from government bodies, non-government bodies, farmers, and industry accept kratom cultivation in Malaysia, taking into account the variables of social and economic expectations?", a qualitative method is used to gather the data. According to Schostak (2006), the purpose of the interview is to gather 'in-depth' information on a specific topic or subject. Therefore, a semi-structured interview with predetermined questions developed based on the project objectives were used for data collection. Participants are contacted via a phone call or text message to be given a brief explanation on the purpose of the interview and to ensure they have basic comprehension of English before proceeding with the interview. All participants are invited to volunteer to take part in the interview. Feedback from respondents related to the objective will be collected by using a voice recording tool.

A total of 5 respondents from the different government agencies, 4 respondents from the different non-government agencies, and 2 local framers are interview to explore of multiple perspectives the socio-economic issue related to kratom in Malaysia.

Table 1 Interviewee profile

Respondent number	Agency	Position
1	Government Agency 1	Deputy Director
2	Government Agency 2	Head of Department
3	Government Agency 3	Staff with more than 20 years experience
4	Government Agency 4	Staff with more than 5 years experience
5	Government Agency 5	Deputy Director
6	Non-government agency 1	Academician
7	Non-government agency 2	Secretary of the Organization
8	Non-government agency 3	Chairman of the District
9	Non-government agency 4	Assistant Manager (industry)
10	Farmer 1	Farmer with more than 15 years experience
11	Farmer 2	Farmer with 7 years experience

An interview guide was designed to serve as an interview agenda, encompassing subjects that are to be discussed during the interview. The interview is conducted by the researchers. The interview was audio-recorded so that the researcher can fully devote their attention to the interviewee. The audio-recorded was transcribed using Google Text-to-Speech and then translate into English as most of the interviewees are using Malay language which is a natural language in Malaysia during the interview. The data is then analysed using the software Atlas.ti 22. Eleven interviews were conducted, as, after eight interviews, a saturation level was reached. The results were similar, where additional interviews might cause data redundancy.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the research objective and question of the study, the themes were divided into two; social and economics.

3.1 Social Aspects

3.1.1 Kratom has health benefits

There are many statements related to the health benefits such as kratom can provide immediate treatment, provide energy to users who do heavy work, etc. Based on the analysis, there are 20 statements appears from eleven interviews that is related to kratom has health benefits to human. Some of the statements are reported as follows:

Respondent	Statement
R6	<i>"kratom leaf is use as an immediate treatment for stomach aches and diarrhoea in some of the urban area in Malaysia."</i> <i>"can restore a woman's inner energy after giving birth. Take a leaf and boil it. The water is drunk and it can give instant energy to the drinker."</i>
R7	<i>"From a social point of view, kratom is an original plant that is said to have benefits in terms of traditional medicine. The community uses it for medical purposes to treat diseases, such as worm medicine for children by applying kratom leaf water on the stomach or taking a bath. For adults, it is said to cure high blood pressure, and diabetes. In addition, the use of kratom leaf water is said to be able to cure the internal diseases without mixing with other things. It is also understood from people who take herbal water that it is said to bring energy and be able to survive for those who do hard work"</i>
R10	<i>"It's beneficial to the health. Because it gives energy."</i> <i>"From a health point of view, people with high blood pressure can drink."</i>
R11	<i>"kratom can provide energy, especially to those who work as a labor"</i>

3.1.2 Health affected or threatened

Although kratom is believed to bring benefits in terms of traditional treatment, there are also side effects that can threaten the health of users if it is taken excessively or mixed with other substances. According to respondent 8, where he is a chairperson for a non-government agency and at the same time a medical doctor who is an expert on drug rehabilitation, kratom can have a harmful effect on the whole body as well as the mind. This statement is supported by respondents 1 and 5.

Respondent	Statement
R1	<i>"Kratom is not good for health and it has negative effects if practised regularly."</i>
R5	<i>"It has effects on the liver, kidneys, and brain and also has social effects, such as making it easy to get angry"</i>
R8	<i>"No appetite, constipation, bruises on the face, and heart problems are the common issues if people take excess kratom"</i>

3.1.3 Addiction

The use of kratom is said to cause symptoms of addiction. Consuming kratom water in large quantities, whether mixed with certain ingredients or not, continuously will cause hallucinations and addiction. In general, addiction is defined as a repeated and continuous behaviour towards something and a strong desire to do it, which has a negative effect on the person who experiences it, such as loss of self-esteem. Addiction also includes the condition experienced by a person who abuses a substance and then produces negative implications such as physical harm, psychic conditions, or requires psychological dependence.

Respondent	Statement
R1	<i>"kratom products can cause addiction"</i>
R2	<i>"It will be addictive if added with cough medicine."</i>
R3	<i>"kratom users normally have symptoms of addiction."</i>
R4	<i>The negative effect of the kratom chemical "mitragynine" is that it can cause addiction. The effect is long-term in nature. For young people, it will make them lose focus."</i>
R6	<i>"can't be taken excessively because it causes addiction"</i>
R7	<i>"kratom has substances that cause addiction."</i>
R8	<i>"the person will have insomnia or lack of inhibition if they stop taking it."</i>
R11	<i>"very dangerous, kratom can cause addiction"</i>

3.1.4 Misuse

Kratom products are usually used by people of all ages for different purposes. Young people are often associated with the abuse of kratom products. This is because most of them are using it for

recreational purposes. Kratom water is mixed with inappropriate ingredients such as cough medicine and soft drinks, etc., to make the taste stronger.

Respondent	Statement
R2	<i>"It will cause addiction if added with cough medicine, etc."</i>
R3	<i>"when this kratom herb is mixed with contaminated substances such as mosquito repellent, cough medicine, alcohol, and various other substances to get a dreamy taste. The more contaminated material is added, the more kick it is."</i>
R5	<i>"Kratom users normally mix the kratom leaf water with other things, such as cough medicine. Cough medicine has antihistamines, and one of the effects of antihistamines is drowsiness (mild sedation)."</i>
R6	<i>"Cakoroi is the name given by the locals to the mixture of the kratom water with mosquito repellent, cough medicine, or coke in order to increase the level of imagination and stimulation."</i>
R8	<i>"If the government legalizes it as a supplement to medicine, it will be easy to abuse like cough medicine."</i>
R9	<i>"if you look at those who are always addicted to kratom, it is excessive use."</i>

3.2 Economic Aspects

3.2.1 Generate income

Participants believe that kratom leaves and products can create income for the locals.

Respondent	Statement
R1	<i>"Kratom is recognized as a medicine or supplement in other countries." "Therefore, there is a demand for it."</i>
R3	<i>"kratom easy to grow. It can be one of the opportunities for the economy."</i>
R11	<i>"The demand for kratom is not only from Malaysia. Other neighboring countries also have very high demand."</i>

3.2.2 Easy to plan and short harvest time

The short harvest period allows farmers to get an immediate income. Therefore, the harvest period is often linked to economic aspects. The fertile soil and Malaysia's location close to the equator are the main factors for kratom cultivation, especially in the Northern part of Malaysia. This statement is supported by the respondent, and the respondent's description has been collected and recorded as below:

Respondent	Statement
R2	<i>"Mostly on the north side. Kratom grows along riversides and thickets of forests. "</i>
R6	<i>"This kratom leaf is also easy to live with. It doesn't require meticulous care and does not incur high costs for the care process, so that's where the big profit is."</i>
R10	<i>"The kratom tree can grow in a year."</i>
R11	<i>"Kratom is a plant that is easy to live and grow"</i>

3.2.3 'Black Market' and smuggling is rampant

There are many cases of smuggling kratom leaves or trees abroad, and selling kratom products, including kratom water on the black market. Although this behavior is illegal, many people still do it for money. According to the participants, kratom can generate income for the farmers as long as there is demand for it. Respondent 9 also added that the selling price of kratom water in the northern Malaysia is around 1 US dollar to 2.3 US dollar for 200 millimetre. She is further added it that the seller can earn up to 200 to 430 dollar daily. Furthermore, respondent 3 also said that there are several criminal case related to selling kratom products in Malaysia.

In addition, there are also respondents who think that legalizing the processing and sale of kratom can reduce cases of black market and smuggling:

"The government can collect taxes to avoid the "black market"

Illegal activities such as the illegal smuggling of kratom leaves at the Malaysia-Thailand border have an impact on various parties. According to Schaper (2020), although black market activity has decreased, cases in some specific areas still do not show a change in terms of numbers. This includes the sale of kratom which not only occurs in the northern states but also in the states of Selangor and Kuala Lumpur.

4. Conclusions

This study aims to examine the perceptions of stakeholders towards the acceptance of kratom cultivation in Malaysia. Two domains: social and economic issues were investigated in this study.

The findings of the study show that both farmers and society have negative expectations of kratom in a social context. Both parties agree that the health of kratom users will be affected, such as a lack of appetite, bad breath, and addiction. This statement was also supported by experts from government agencies, representatives from industry, and farmers. According to the respondents, the health of kratom users will be threatened because excessive use of kratom will cause addiction. In addition, there has been no treatment or conservation centre that can treat kratom users in Malaysia. In terms of the economic aspect, all stakeholders agreed to legalize the cultivation of kratom and kratom products, which are expected to generate income for the country and individuals. Besides that, legalizing kratom is expected to create job opportunities, multiply the existing types of commercial crops and generate sustainable profits compared to destructive plantation industries. After studying the issues related to kratom, most of the scientific studies are related to social issues and there are some studies that discuss the chemicals in kratom leaves or trees. There are some recommendations to policymakers and relevant stakeholders for further action. It is suggested to further investigate the Trans-Theoretical Model (TTM), which is an integrative and biopsychosocial model, to conceptualise the behaviour change process (to help individuals' willingness to act on new behaviors). Furthermore, further research or analysis on the acceptance of kratom in society using a quantitative study is also suggested to academics and policymakers.

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