

What makes locked-down students happy: The sense of mattering and subjective well-being

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ABSTRACT

Subjective well-being (SWB) of university students who had to study off-campus due to the pandemic was investigated in this current study. Studies had reported that one of the most robust factors of SWB is the sense of mattering. While the sense of mattering is built upon social feedback, being locked down limited their source of social feedback to they can only develop their interpersonal mattering through their significant others whom they shared the dwelling place and their societal mattering through the 'society' they found in the social media. We purposively selected 82 participants to respond to our scales of mattering types and SWB. Among our inclusion criteria was to have a limited number of living partners (0-3) to make sure that their mattering was predominantly built from the social media feedback. The result of the multiple regression analysis suggested that despite their interpersonal mattering having a weaker contribution to their SWB, it was still a significant predictor of SWB when controlling for societal mattering. Thus, both types of mattering are still considered salient and robust predictors of SWB. Further limitations and suggestions are discussed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This current study aims to investigate whether our happiness is more contingent on our perception that we matter to society or our significant others. Firstly, it is important to understand happiness refers to subjective well-being (SWB), which is defined as a self-evaluation of own life [1], as opposed to objective well-being, which refers to the tangible indicators such as material resources and social attributes [2]. The concept of SWB includes many domains such as life satisfaction [3] and quality in life [4]. SWB includes perceptions of psychological well-being, physical health, and social relationships [5]. Studies have revealed that SWB is an important factor of happy marriage [6], meaningful social relationships [7], and good performance at work [8]. Additionally, SWB is a culture-sensitive concept, because of the discrepancy between western and eastern cultures' concepts of happiness [9]; in the individual culture, happiness tends to be attributed to the positive feeling related to individual or peer's causes, while in the collectivist culture, related to the cause of more general society [10].

There are three distinguished aspects of SWB, evaluative wellbeing (or life satisfaction), hedonic wellbeing (feelings of anger, sadness, happiness, stress, and pain), and eudemonic wellbeing (sense of acceptance, mindfulness, purpose in life) respectively [11]. Recent studies in the context of Malaysia, where this study was conducted, reported that life satisfaction is predicted by the sense of interpersonal mattering, partially mediated by state self-esteem [12], and perceived social inclusion [13]. The latter studies reported

partial mediation of other variables, which suggested that interpersonal mattering is a robust predictor of the eudemonic wellbeing aspect of SWB. It can be explained because interpersonal mattering, the sense that we matter to our significant others [14] can be extended to the sense that we matter to people we know in person, including relatives and friends in social media that often offer social supports that led people to feel that their lives are satisfying [15], [16].

On the other hand, societal mattering defined as the sense that we matter to the general society [17], was reported to be significantly related to the hedonic aspect of SWB. For instance, the extreme sadness that leads to suicide ideation among adults in Australia, Malaysia, and Indonesia is reported to be predicted by low societal mattering [18]–[20]. Similarly, studies on Malaysian, American, and Turkish university students advocated that the feelings of happiness were significantly predicted by societal mattering [21]–[23]. The link between societal mattering and the hedonic aspect of SWB can be explained by the sociometer theory [24], which advocated that our perception of how the society treated us predicts the way we evaluate ourselves. Thus, our feelings are the reflection of our perception of how society treated us.

The eudemonic aspect of SWB has been reported to be predicted by societal mattering. A study by Kam and Prihadi [25] stated that there is a strong and significant positive relationship between societal mattering and unconditional self-acceptance among Malaysian young adults. Furthermore, research by Jong-un and Nam-Hee [26] reported that societal mattering significantly predicted mindfulness among Korean adults. Additionally, a study on the other element of eudemonic SWB stated that societal mattering positively predicted the sense of meaning in life, whereby individuals can only find their life meaningful when they believe they matter to their society in general [27]. Studies discussed in this paragraph suggested that societal mattering plays a significant role in developing the eudemonic part of SWB. It is supported by the theory of meaning in life [28], which explained that eudemonic SWB focuses: i) Connection to a long-term concept of self; ii) Emotional richness; and iii) Realization of deep personal values; which means that eudemonic SWB is experienced at the very personal level, although it was built upon the societal sense of mattering.

Our studied population is the university students in Malaysia who had to study off-campus (online) due to the pandemic-related lockdown. Being locked down and studying off-campus had exposed students to different social circumstances from when they were studying on campus [29], because they had limited access to their social environment and developed higher reliance on social media [30], [31]. Furthermore, because as mentioned in the sociometer theory [24], individuals assess themselves based on the social feedback they retrieve, the lockdown situation drove our population to rely heavily on the feedback from social media to evaluate themselves [32], [33].

Nevertheless, while social feedback from familiar figures in the social media, such as friends, might work the same way in predicting mattering [34], feedback from social media society might work differently from the ‘in-person’ society, because they were solely based on the content that the students posted in their respective pages [35]. Because most of the social media posts are altered and designed to gain desirable feedback [36], [37] there should be a positive shift in the way students develop their sense of societal mattering, which eventually alters their development of SWB. Apart from that, the increase in social media reliance might also increase the possibility of being exposed to negative feedback such as undesired judgment [37], verbal aggression [38] or cancel culture [39], [40] and the impact of negative self-evaluation from social media is significantly stronger due to the access, intensity, and repetition [41]. Furthermore, such social feedback tends to push the societal mattering level down [42] and brings negative effects to their SWB. Based on the aforementioned studies in the previous sections, this current study attempted to seek further understanding of whether the SWB of the locked-down students is more contingent on the sense of interpersonal or societal mattering.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The sample size was calculated through G*Power analysis with the criterion of $f^2=0.15$, α error probability=0.05, power=0.80, and the sample size of 68 was suggested. However, 82 university students between 18 and 33 years of age ($M=21.05$, $SD=2.48$) were purposively sampled from a private university in Malaysia. Included in the inclusion criteria are that they must be from the program that was not allowed to study on-campus due to no necessities of lab or facilities using, active users of social media and that they live with the minimum number (0-3) of people at their respective living space at the time the data was collected.

College Mattering Inventory [43] was used to measure participants’ interpersonal mattering. The questionnaire consists of 29 items, phrased as a statement. Examples of items include “I often feel my instructor(s) care more about other things than me as a student” and “There are people at the college that sincerely appreciate my involvement as a student”. The written instruction directed participants to indicate how much the statement applied to them in their college experience. Responses were recorded on a 5-point

Likert scale, with 1 (Not at all) and 5 (Very much), and a higher total score on College Mattering Inventory indicated higher interpersonal mattering.

Societal Mattering Scale [42] was used to measure participants' societal mattering. The questionnaire consists of 9 items, phrased as a statement. Examples of items include "The people in my university value me as a person" and "I feel I help meet the needs of my university". The written instruction directed participants to indicate how much the statement applied to them in their college experience. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 (Strongly disagree) and 5 (Strongly agree), and a higher total score on Societal Mattering Scale indicated higher societal mattering. No item was reverse scored on this scale.

BBC subjective well-being scale [5] was used to measure participants' subjective well-being. The questionnaire consists of 24 items, phrased as questions. Examples of items include "Are you happy with your friendships and personal relationships?" and "Are you able to ask someone for help with a problem?" The written instruction directed participants to how happy they feel generally in most parts of their life. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 (Not at all) and 5 (Extremely), and a higher total score on BBC-SWB indicated higher subjective well-being. All scales were composed on the Google Form to be responded to by the participants after they signed the informed consent and responded to our demographic items.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Data collation and descriptive statistics

The standard residuals were analyzed, which showed the data did not contain any outliers (Std. Residual Min=-3.25, Std. Residual Max=2.18). The assumption of collinearity was tested, and the assumption was met (Interpersonal mattering, Tolerance=.51, VIF=1.95; Societal mattering, Tolerance=.51, VIF=1.95). Moreover, the assumption of independent errors was met for current data (Durbin-Watson value=2.13). Assumption of homogeneity of variance and linearity was also tested, the scatterplot of standardized predicted values showed the assumption was met. The data has also met the assumption of non-zero variances (interpersonal mattering, Variance=152.98; societal mattering, variance=50.14; subjective well-being, variance=264.42). The normality test of both predictors, interpersonal mattering (Shapiro-Wilk (82)=.99, p=.765), societal mattering (Shapiro-Wilk (82)=.99, p=.595) are normally distributed but the outcome variable, subjective well-being was not normally distributed (Shapiro-Wilk (82)=.97, p=.030).

3.2. The main data analyses

Hierarchical multiple linear regression was conducted with SPSS and interpersonal mattering was tested first as Model 1. The result shows that the model of interpersonal mattering significantly predicts SWB, $F(1, 80)=40.07$, $p<.001$. Interpersonal mattering explained 33.4% of the variance in SWB, $R^2=.33$. Interpersonal mattering is also a significant predictor of SWB, $b=0.76$, 95% CI [0.52, 1.00], $t(80)=6.33$, $p<.001$.

In Model 2, the overall model of interpersonal mattering and societal mattering is significantly predicted one's SWB, $F(2, 79)=30.09$, $p<.001$, explaining 43.2% of the variance in SWB, $R^2=.43$. The inclusion of societal mattering in the model significantly increased the variance explained, $R^2_{\text{change}}=.10$, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 79)=13.73$, $p<.001$. Table 1 summarizes the final result of this study.

Table 1. Summary of the results

	B	t	Sig.	95% CI		sr
				Lower bound	Upper bound	
Interpersonal mattering	.357	2.298	.024	.048	.667	.195
Societal mattering	1.007	3.706	.000	.466	1.548	.314

Interpersonal mattering significantly predicted SWB when controlling for societal mattering, $b=0.36$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.67], $t(79)=2.30$, $p=.024$, $sr=.20$. Societal mattering also significantly predicted SWB when controlling for interpersonal mattering, $b=1.01$, 95% CI [0.47, 1.55], $t(79)=3.71$, $p<.001$, $sr=.31$. Both interpersonal and societal mattering significantly predicted SWB, hence hypothesis 1 and 2 are supported. The semi-partial correlation coefficient of societal mattering was higher than interpersonal mattering which means that societal mattering was a better predictor of SWB and hypothesis 3 was also supported.

3.3. Discussion

Our findings indicated that societal mattering is a stronger predictor of SWB among locked-down university students than interpersonal mattering. In other words, our participants tend to be happier when they feel they matter to the general society than their significant others. First of all, as all of our participants are of Asian collectivistic culture, our finding supported the statement of a previous study [10], that collectivistic culture tend to attribute happiness as a collective process derived from the society; one will be happier when they matter to the society than to themselves or their peers.

Nevertheless, a more detailed explanation can be given through the fact that our participants were locked-down with very limited in-person contact. Furthermore, their sense of mattering tends to be derived from the feedback from the virtual society of the social media [32], [33]. Therefore, they tend to develop a stronger sense of societal mattering than interpersonal. Because their societal mattering was a stronger predictor, it is safe to assume that the scores of their SWB were dominated by the score of life satisfaction (evaluative wellbeing) and eudemonic wellbeing.

This finding is consistent with the other studies among locked-down Malaysian on hedonic SWB, such as happiness [23], where societal mattering was considered a robust significant predictor. Furthermore, our finding also shed more light on a previous study in Malaysian and Indonesian context [20] that utilized the regress of the scores of eudemonic factors like depression and suicide ideation to general mattering scale; we can offer a further explanation that the increment in life satisfaction in their studies was due to the increment of the societal aspects of mattering. Similarly, this finding is also consistent with the finding of Kam and Prihadi [25] on the eudemonic SWB construct of unconditional self-acceptance. Results of the studies on evaluative SWB, such as life satisfaction in Malaysian locked-down population, such as the previous studies [12], [13] were also consistent with our findings, that interpersonal mattering was a significant predictor.

3.4. Implication

Another interesting thing from our finding is that when we control for the societal mattering, the interpersonal mattering still significantly predicted SWB. Thus, the happiness of our participants relied on both types of mattering; they need to feel they matter to society, and they need to feel they matter to the people they know. Because both interpersonal and societal mattering is important to develop the entirety of a person [42], contextually SWB, it is expected that our findings develop the further understanding that it is significant to make others feel they matter, both to their significant others and to the society, to increase other psychological constructs related to SWB, such as satisfaction at work, happiness at school, unconditional self-acceptance, and better relationships.

3.5. Limitation and suggestion

We realized that we did not analyze the aspects of SWB separately to see which one of them was affected each of the mattering constructs. Therefore, it is suggested for future research to do so. Another limitation of this study is that we did not include any other intervening variables that have been evident as the significant factors of SWB, such as perceived social support, resilience, psychological wellbeing, or contextually social media usage. Fact that the prevalence of both types of mattering was relatively low ($R^2=.33$ for interpersonal and $R^2=.43$ for societal), we realized that there could have been other variables that explained their effects; thus, it is also suggested for future studies to hypothesize some mediation models to obtain deeper understanding.

4. CONCLUSION

The study has achieved its aim and researchers are content to obtain the knowledge that both types of mattering were significant predictors for SWB and that societal mattering was stronger and more significant. While it is interesting to know the further implication of being locked down and higher reliance on social media. The researchers do not wish that this condition should be prolonged or repeated in the future.

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