

# Mattering, social support, resilience and sense of empowerment during the pandemic

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## Article Info

### Article history:

Received Sep 25, 2021

Revised Jan 4, 2022

Accepted Feb 25, 2022

### Keywords:

Empowerment

Lock down

Mattering

Perceived social support

Resilience

## ABSTRACT

The sense of empowerment had always been reported as contingent upon resilience, the sense of financial security, and perceived social support (PSS). In the context of the Malaysian urban population, the outbreak shifted social dynamics through the enforcement of movement control order (MCO), a partial-to-full lockdown policy enforced by the government to curb the virus. Studies in the local context suggested that the implementation of MCO led to a sense of uncertainty towards social support and financial security among the population, as well as the decline of resilience and the sense of mattering. This sparked a question, whether the significance of PSS, resilience, mattering, and income levels are still significant in predicting the sense of empowerment among our population. Through open social media pages, 405 adults between 18 and 62 years of age ( $M=25.44$ ) living in urban areas of Malaysia to respond to the scales of empowerment, resilience, PSS, and mattering with some financial compensation in the form of e-wallet credits. Our findings suggested that PSS was no longer a significant predictor of empowerment after controlling for resilience, mattering, and income, which was opposed to other predictors in the equation that were still significant even after controlling for each other. Further relationships among the variables, implications and suggestions are discussed.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of the present study, we aim to investigate the sense of empowerment among urban area Malaysians during the first break of the COVID-19 pandemic. While this population could not be identified as marginalised, they have been exposed to a prolonged locked-down life. In order to curb the pandemic, some policies have been issued by the government of Malaysia; most of them were rooted in keeping physical distance among people, such as online working from home, online studying from home, temporary closing of public facilities, and interstate travel bans [1]. Because the enforcement of these policies was extended, many individuals had experienced social discomfort and financial hardships [2]. Studies on the locked-down or quarantined population amidst the COVID-19 outbreak had also reported the deterioration of mental health [3], [4] increased gender-based violence based on continued confinement with their abuser [5], financial loss [6] and stigmatisation that might end up as post-traumatic stress [7].

Studies on individuals who must conduct their works remotely from their respective homes indicated that their physical and mental health were significantly contingent on their psychological empowerment [8]. Moreover, a positive relationship was reported between workers' psychological empowerment and work-life balance [9]. Supporting the aforementioned findings, a systematic review on 55 studies published between year of 2015 and 2017 suggested that working adults who perceived that their leaders empowered them showed positive attitudes and improved performances [10]. Nevertheless, individuals who must work or study from home experienced less psychological empowerment than those who were not due to the presence of fear, anxiety, workload, and financial insecurity [11].

As the developing sense of empowerment is vital among locked-down adults, we investigated several constructs that have been reported as the major contributors of empowerment in past studies. These factors were simultaneously analysed without any hierarchy because of the circumstantial uniqueness of the studied population. Firstly, they are not extremely marginalised as refugees, war victims, or deeply suffered in poverty. Secondly, they are not isolated from their usual social environment, where they might have perceived being supported. Thirdly, most of them reported the perception of job or financial uncertainty [11]. Out of several significant empowerment factors, we opted to include perceived social support (PSS), resilience, and mattering as our predictors of empowerment. Levels of income were also included to see how this variable played predicting role of empowerment under such circumstances.

A meta-analysis by Burke and colleagues on studies between 2016 and 2017 [3] discovered that most studies suggested that perception of being supported is more significant in predicting the sense of empowerment than the presence of actual support; furthermore, most of the studies they analysed also indicated that individuals tend to feel more empowered when they believe they received peer supports, instead of any support given by authorities or organisations. This finding holds an important implication to our current study; being locked down for more than six weeks might have reduced their perception of being supported by their peers due to their physical absence [4]. However, working from home might not totally diminish the organisational PSS, because PSS from family members also contributed significantly to psychological empowerment [12], and it mediates the link between the presence of support and working engagement in workplaces [13].

Being locked down has increased their inclination towards social media [4], and it was evident that PSS from social media significantly predicted a sense of being empowered by improving the sense of control and power [14]. Therefore, while some studies might have reported the decline of psychological empowerment as the effect of remote working during the pandemic [11], other studies denied that by stating that it would not occur when the PSS is present [15]. The findings mentioned above led us to hypothesise that PSS is a significant predictor of perceived empowerment in our studied population because their inclination towards social media did not deprive them of retrieving PSS. Moreover, previous studies had shown solid evidence of its significance.

Defined as the ability to bounce from adversity and traumatic events [16], resilience is included in our study for several reasons. Firstly, because the pandemic-related lockdown could be considered as adversity that might predict post-traumatic stress disorder when it is over [7]. Accordingly, several recent studies supported the claim; Some studies [14], [17], [18], reported that individuals who were trained to be resilient developed significantly higher feeling of being empowered than individuals who were merely informed that they were empowered or trained in other skills, such as spiritual development. With that confirmed, several studies advocated that the causal relationship between resilience and empowerment have been documented even among individuals diagnosed with depression and anxiety [19], distressed pregnant women [20]. The link between resilience and empowerment has been established by various studies, especially in community psychology studies; Lloret *et al.* [21] systematically reviewed 490 studies published from 2019 to 2020 and reported that community training on resilience had empowered parents to increase the prevention of substance abuse in the family. Similarly, a meta-analysis of 419 studies has shown consistent reporting of the significant link between empowerment and resilience among poor rural farmers communities [22].

Nevertheless, some other studies argued that the relationship between resilience and empowerment has a different direction in certain cases. Caldwell *et al.* [23] argued that family empowerment significantly predicted resilience among family members of relatives with intellectual and developmental disabilities, while a quasi-experimental study by Assarpour *et al.* [24] showed that the improvement of resilience levels among mothers of premature infants was an effect of psychological empowerment training.

Despite the conflicting evidence of the relationship direction, we include resilience as a predictor to test our second hypothesis that PSS would no longer be a significant predictor of empowerment when controlling for resilience. This decision was made based on various studies, which reported that controlling for resilience led to the insignificance of PSS in predicting mental well-being [25], and post-traumatic growth [26], [27]

Our following hypothesis is that the strength and significance of resilience would be decreased when we control for mattering. The definition of this variable is twofold, firstly on interpersonal mattering, which refers to the sense that we matter to significant/meaningful others. Secondly, on societal mattering, it refers to the sense that we matter to society [28]. The concept of mattering and empowerment is intertwined in community psychology [29]. The general idea of mattering is to perceive that one is being valued by others, and community psychology, the sense that one had their values improved, is the idea of empowerment [30].

Mattering also builds individuals' agency which improved individuals' efficacy in negotiating structural constraints and opportunities, with resulting consequences for the individual's empowerment and ultimately on development outcomes [31]; thereby, it is safe to hypothesise that mattering predicts the sense of empowerment, as it was reported to be a robust predictor of the efficacy among Malaysian locked down adults on working online from home [26]. Still, in the context of locked down working adults, mattering was also reported to predict empowerment elements such as the control of leaving or staying on the job [32].

Accordingly, Speer, Peterson, Armstead, and Allen [27] reported that the sense of societal mattering within an organisation fully mediated the relationship between participation and empowerment; in other words, without the feeling that they matter to the organisation, individuals with high organisational participation would not perceive that they are empowered. Evidence was reported by Lardier [33], who mentioned that societal mattering predicted the sense of empowerment among American Black and Hispanic youth, partially mediated by ethnic identity.

The studies mentioned above justified our hypothesis that controlling for mattering would likely reduce the coefficient and even significance of PSS and resilience. In other words, we hypothesised that resilient individuals would not feel empowered, although they believe that the people around them were socially supportive as long as they did not believe that they matter.

Representing financial strength or buying power, income plays an important role in developing the perception of being empowered. For instance, to some degree, populations with lower income tend to develop a lower perception of being empowered; Parks *et al.* [34] reported that the poor population in Tanzania and Mexico did not perceive that they were empowered despite their understanding that their government were supporting them through the digital-empowerment initiative. In the same light, Figueroa *et al.* [35] reported that when compared to their higher-income counterparts, parents with low income required more intense empowerment programs in order to develop their belief that they were empowered in preventing childhood obesity. A positive sense of empowerment and higher motivation was also reported among Turkish farmers with higher financial success, while all the farmers believed that they were empowered by successful dry farming systems [36].

Moreover, financial empowerment efforts were given by the authorities based on the statistic of how much individuals made per year; in the Malaysian context, the government and non-governmental organisations (NGO) focused their financial empowerment effort on the B40 group, the 40% of the population with the lowest financial input apart from those with physical disabilities [37]. This situation could be based on the perspective that individuals with lower income had expressed the highest need for empowerment, although it was reported that the M40 group (the 40% middle-class population) are facing a severe potential of a financial downturn due to the COVID-19 outbreak [38] and the overspending during the pandemic occurred at all financial layers of the society [39].

Studies among financially challenged communities often include financial support as their primary factor of empowerment; for instance, a study among ladies in Ghana reported that their sense of empowerment is negatively correlated with the debt they have [40], another study in Tigray, Ethiopia, reported that financially supporting women with micro and small business to empower them [41]. Similarly, another study by Nangooba [42] reported that the broadcasting of financial support news improved the sense of empowerment among the women community members of Wakiso District, Uganda.

Based on the study as mentioned earlier, we hypothesised that the level of income, or the perceived financial control could be one of the most significant and powerful predictors of empowerment among locked-down adults in Malaysia, as financial uncertainty was reported to be one of the sources of their discomfort [6].

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

A survey method was conducted to collect data from 405 Malaysian urban working adults (245 women and 160 men) aged between 18 and 62 ( $M=25.44$ ,  $SD=7.22$ ). The recruitment process was carried out through social media, and only 403 were included because some others were excluded due to their demographic conditions. After consent was granted, participants were directed to a google form consisted of demographic-related questions and scales. Each of them was compensated with five Malaysian ringgit (RM 5) worth of e-wallet coupons upon the completion of questionnaire.

## 2.2. Scales

Ethical clearance for this study has been issued by the ethic review board of the Department of Psychology of a private university in Malaysia (ERB: E202011-S003). As mentioned, a pilot study had been conducted in order to measure the reliability of each scale. Basic demographic information such as age, gender, nationality, and occupation were included. Perceived empowerment was measured by the total score on a self-designed bilingual Asian empowerment scale (AES); the internal reliability is  $\alpha=.78$ . Perceived Social Support was assessed with multidimensional scale of perceived social support (MSPSS) [43], the internal reliability is  $\alpha=.92$  resilience was assessed with the Brief Resilience Scale [44], with  $\alpha=.91$  internal reliability. Mattering was measured using the general mattering scale (GMS) [45], with the internal reliability of the scale of  $\alpha=.89$ . The income information was obtained through the demographic questionnaire on their total household monthly net income.

## 2.3. Preliminary screening

Out of the 405 data collected, merely 403 data were used for data analysis to examine the predictive relationship of PSS, Resilience, mattering, and income on empowerment. Two datasets were omitted due to the incomplete-filled questionnaires.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Assumption tests

Each participant's score obtained from scales and demographic questionnaires were included for data analyses. Multiple Linear Regression of Statistical package for the social science (SPSS) 26 was utilised to determine the predictive role of our predictors on the empowerment level among locked down adults in Malaysia. Several assumption tests of multiple linear regression were conducted to ensure the appropriateness of carrying out the statistical test.

The assumption of normality was met; the histogram of the residuals showed a normal distribution as displayed in a bell-shaped curve which indicated the data collected was drawn from a normally distributed population. This could be further verified by the normal P-P plot graph, which showed that the data plots were presented as close as the line of best fit. Moreover, the scatterplots of the variables depicted linear relationships, implying that the assumption of linearity was also satisfied. The assumption of homoscedasticity was met, given that the scatterplot showed a uniform spreading of the data without cone-shaped patterns, demonstrating that the standardised residuals of the data points at each level of predictor had equal variance. Besides, multicollinearity assumption was met as variance inflation factors (VIF), and tolerance ( $=1/VIF$ ) of all predictors in the current study were below values of 10 and 0.2, respectively.

### 3.2. Hypothesis testing

Multiple regression analysis was performed to test the above hypothesis. The designed nature of the study fits into all assumptions of the selected inferential test. The results are shown in Tables of 1 and 2. As can be seen in Table 1, the results indicated that the model of PSS, Resilience, mattering, and income significantly predicted empowerment,  $R^2=.28$ ,  $F(4, 398)=38.32$ ,  $p<.001$ , with 27.8% of the variance in empowerment being explained by the predictors of the current study. This implies that the overall regression model of PSS, resilience, mattering, and income significantly predicted empowerment, compared to using a mean model without predictors. Simply put, the regression model was a robust and significant predictive model of our outcome variable.

In this section, it is explained the results of research and at the same time is given the comprehensive discussion. Results can be presented in figures, graphs, tables and others that make the reader understand easily [14], [15]. The discussion can be made in several sub-sections.

Table 1. Analysis of variance (ANOVA)

	df	F	Sig.
Regression	4	38.32	.000
Residual	398		
Total	402		

Table 2 portrays the individual contribution of each predictor. All predictors significantly predicted empowerment levels among locked-down adults except for PSS. When other predictors were being controlled, resilience and mattering positively predicted empowerment, respectively,  $b=1.40$ , 95% CI [1.04,

1.75],  $t(398)=7.72$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $b=1.41$ , 95% CI [1.06, 1.77],  $t(398)=7.85$ ,  $p<.001$ . Furthermore, income was also a significant, yet negative predictor of empowerment,  $b=0.90$ , 95% CI [-1.67, 0.12],  $t(398)=2.27$ ,  $p=.024$ . The insignificance of PSS as a predictor of empowerment, when controlling for resilience, mattering, and income was confirmed by the results of current study,  $b=0.30$ , 95% CI [-0.07, 0.13],  $t(398)=0.59$ ,  $p=.553$ .

Table 2. Coefficients

	Unstandardised coefficients		t	Sig.	95 % Confidence intervals for B	
	B	Std. error			Lower bound	Upper bound
Constant	62.34	4.65	13.40	.000	53.20	71.49
PSS	0.03	0.05	0.59	.553	-0.07	0.13
Resilience	1.40	0.18	7.72	.000	1.04	1.75
Mattering	1.41	0.18	7.85	.000	1.06	1.77
Income	-0.90	0.39	-2.27	.024	-1.67	-0.12

### 3.3. Discussion

Our findings suggested that after controlling for each other, PSS was no longer considered as a significant predictor of empowerment among locked-down Malaysian urban adults. The rest of the predictors were still considered significant, nevertheless, after controlling for each other, mattering was considered the strongest positive predictor of empowerment ( $b=1.40$ ), followed tightly by ( $b=1.41$ ). Income was considered a significant predictor of empowerment, but the coefficient was negative ( $b=0.9$ ).

In the past, studies on financial empowerment tend to be conducted on population with financial challenges [34]-[36] and some of them established the negative link between poverty and the sense of empowerment [40]-[42] by stating that when individuals perceived that they were financially challenged, they would likely to feel less empowered. On the contrary, our results suggested when the financial input of our participants was higher by 1 point, their sense of empowerment would be reduced by 0.9 points. The only explanation we could offer regarding this anomaly is that because our participants mostly belonged to the M40 group, or the middleclass group.

This group has the potential of experiencing significant financial downturn during the pandemic [38] while they also know that they were not being prioritized as a group that require financial empowerment by the authority. As mentioned previously, the authorities tend to prioritize the lower-class group in delivering any form empowerment initiative. The fact that the middleclass had also experienced overspending during the lockdown [39] might have reduced the sense of being empowered even further among individuals with higher income yet still categorized as the middleclass.

Regarding PSS, our finding also contradicts most of the previous studies; it is understandable because most studies on the link between PSS and empowerment during the pandemic [11], [15] did not control for other variables such as mattering and resilience.

Our findings regarding to the significance of resilience and mattering help to explain the insignificance of PSS in predicting empowerment. It is most likely that variables such as mattering and resilience fully mediated the contribution of PSS on the sense of empowerment. In other words, individuals who perceived that they were supported would not feel empowered until they believe that they matter or able to bounce back after adversity.

We realize that this study is not without limitation. First of all, we realized that our participants might not represent the whole spectrum of urban adults in Malaysia because the data collection was conducted through social media; a truth that set the difference between the urban middleclass and urban lower class, who might struggle to find access to information and financial empowerment. Our population might have been only limited to the population of Malaysian urban adults westernized educated industrialized rich democratic (WEIRD). The next limitation of our study is that we did not capture the actual struggle of our participants in their locked-down life; we did not collect the data on their perceived difficulties in getting connected to their significant others, doing their online work, any access to mental health support. Moreover, we did neither capture urban adults who had to work onset due to the essentiality of the business they work for. This group of people might have their own challenges, such as the anxiety of catching the virus from the workplace or transport, and the unavailability of the onset social supports from their colleagues who had to work online from home.

Based on the aforementioned limitation, it is suggested for future research to consider collecting data from larger range of population, such as the B40 and the T20 (the top 20% of the financial wealth pyramid), as well as those who had to expose themselves to higher risk of virus infection by working onset. Roles of other variables, such as the sense of financial control, or financial intelligence. The latter might be important because individuals with stronger financial intelligence might feel more empowered even when compared to those with higher income but tend to overspent. The inclusion of social dynamic variables, such

as social media usage, online socialization activities, as well as socially-developed variables such as societal mattering, self-esteem, and self-comparison would enrich the knowledge regarding the empowerment during the pandemic era.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The study confirmed that PSS was no longer a significant predictor of empowerment after controlling for resilience, mattering, and income, which was opposed to other predictors in the equation that were still significant even after controlling for each other. It is expected that our finding can be implied in developing or designing more effective empowerment initiative. First of all, our finding indicated that while raising awareness of certain hardships might improve the PSS of those who struggle, it will not be enough to increase their sense of being empowered. The second implication is that it could be important for the authority to allocate some of their effort to empower the M40 group of the population, because our finding indicated that the more income they have the less they perceive that they were empowered.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is funded by the Research and Development Center, UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Grant no. B-062 2020.





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