

Social support and psychological wellbeing among urbanites during the pandemic: mattering and life satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

The change of social interaction pattern amidst the implementation of social distancing policies during the pandemic had altered the way individuals evaluated themselves and their social environment, including the way they develop perceived social support (PSS) that would lead to another change in the way they develop their satisfaction with life (SWL). This might have affected the development of their psychological wellbeing (PWB), which is highly contingent upon psychosocial constructs. Another variable that might alter the formation of PWB is the sense that we matter to others (Mattering), which was also altered by the limitation of in-person interactions. We purposively recruited 403 Malaysian urban adults affected by the social distancing policies by having to study or work from home, to respond to our survey in order to test the hypothesis that the SWL would fully mediate the association between PSS and PWB among individuals with higher levels of mattering. The results of the bootstrap analysis with 5,000 samples and 95% confident interval supported our hypothesis, with a caveat that the mediation of SWL also occurred among individuals with moderate levels of mattering. PSS was still a significant predictor of PWB when controlling for mattering and SWL, which indicated that the mediation of SWL was only partially occurred.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social distancing policy amidst the COVID-19 outbreak brought few notable changes among the affected individuals, such as eating habits, physical activities, sleep quality, and the pattern of social [1], [2]. The belief that we are socially supported is contingent upon two of the aforementioned elements, namely the pattern of social interaction as well as the physical activities [3], [4]. Furthermore, the two aforementioned elements, as well as the perceived social support (PSS) was known as significant predictors of psychological well-being (PWB) [5], [6]; thus, while many studies suggested that the pandemic was the major predictor of psychological wellness issues, it is likely that the implementation of the social distancing policy was another risk factor because its power to alter the pattern of social interaction.

Contextually, satisfaction with life (SWL) was reported to be contingent upon PSS [7]–[10], and the development of SWL among Malaysian urbanites was reported to be different during the movement control order (MCO), an implementation of the social distancing policy amidst the outbreak of COVID-19 [11]. The alteration of SWL as a construct that is predicted by PSS led us to a hypothesis that the development of PWB

might have experienced some disruption during the MCO in Malaysia due to the change of social pattern that altered the PSS.

Nevertheless, the direct link between PSS and PWB was also reported in studies before the pandemic [12], [13]. In the same light, it was also suggested that higher levels of PSS predict lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression [14], which are considered factors of poor PWB. Moreover, it was suggested that having physical, in-person social interaction strengthens the relationship between PSS and PWB [15].

Contextually, individuals with greater SWL tend to also report better PWB [10]; The relationship between SWL and negative indicators of PWB were antagonistic, where individuals with higher SWL tend to have lower scores in some indicators of PWB, such as depression, anxiety, loneliness [16]. Zhang *et al.* [17] suggested that during the social distancing enforcement amidst the COVID19 outbreak, lower SWL had predicted lower PWB in the form of greater distress. Similarly, Li *et al.* [18] advocated that people who were dissatisfied with life tend to have poorer PWB.

There is another factor that was reported to be altered by the change of social interaction patterns, especially the inclination towards digital communication and social media, which is the sense of mattering [19]. Apart from that, Flett and Heisel [20] also proposed that during this atypical time, mattering was negatively affected due to the restrictions on in-person social interaction. Individuals with lower levels of mattering tend to report higher levels of anxiety and depression before the outbreak [21] and during the outbreak [22]. Flett *et al.* [23] and Rashid *et al.* [24] also reported that lower levels of mattering predicted greater suicidal tendencies among university and college students. Illustrating the significance of mattering in PWB, it was also reported that it is a significant protective factor against suicide ideation [24], [25]. Thus, it is important to include the sense of mattering in any study related to the development of PWB in this particular context.

The aforementioned studies led us to hypothesize that during the enforcement of social distancing in Malaysia in the form of MCO, the altered perception that people were socially supported would have altered the way they were satisfied with their lives, which eventually determine whether they were psychologically well. Especially among individuals who believed that they matter much to others. In other words, this current study was conducted to test the hypothesis that SWL fully mediates the link between PSS and PWB in the condition of high mattering levels.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Participants

Four hundred and three Malaysian urban adults (243 women and 160 men) between 18 and 62 years of age ($M=25.44$, $SD=7.22$) were purposely recruited to participate in this current study. The inclusion criteria to participate in this current study are that they have to be 18 years old and above, living in the urban area of Western Malaysia, and complying with the social distancing enforcement. They should neither be front liners, such as medical workers and professionals nor working in essential business or studies, where they could go to their respective workplaces or campuses. These criteria were introduced to maximize the effect of their higher inclination towards digital communication and social media for social interactions. While snowballing was encouraged to the participants who fit the criteria, it was conducted with caution.

2.2. Scales

The ethics review board of the Department of Psychology of HELP University, Subang 2, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia had given the ethical clearance of the data collection (ERB: E202011-S003). Before the actual data collection, a pilot study had been conducted to gauge the internal reliability of each scale. Basic demographic information such as age, gender, nationality, and occupation were included.

The multidimensional scale of perceived social support (MSPSS) [26] was utilized to measure the PSS, the scale's internal reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) was $\alpha=.92$. This twelve items scale was chosen because it examines relationships with family, friends, and a significant other by looking into three aspects namely social popularity, respect, and items with direct relations to PSS. These aspects are considered relevant in social interactions through social media or digital communication, especially during the enforcement of social distancing protocol amidst the outbreak of the virus [27].

The mediator variable of SWL was measured by utilizing the satisfaction with life scale (SWLS) [28], whose Cronbach's Alpha was $\alpha=.94$ based on our pilot study. The items in this scale emphasize the feelings towards oneself and one's life, and the Cronbach value from our pilot study was $\alpha=.88$. Our rationale to utilize this scale is because first, this scale has been used in many studies in a similar context (Malaysian population during the pandemic), such as the ones by and Prihadi *et al.* [11]. Second, this scale measures constructs ranging from satisfaction with one physical appearance, relationship with others, general efficacy, and self-perception, which can be considered broad enough to measure one's overall satisfaction with their life in any given situation.

The general mattering scale (GMS) [29], with the internal reliability of the scale of $\alpha=.89$, was utilized to gauge the levels of the moderator variable of mattering among our participants. The scale is considered as a gold standard to measure general mattering due to the range its items measured did not separate interpersonal mattering (mattering towards significant others) and societal mattering (mattering to general society).

Lastly, Ryff's scale of psychological well-being (SPWB) by Ryff [30] was utilized to measure the outcome variable, PWB. The scale measured all the aspects of PWB, such as autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. In this current study, however, we did not analyze each aspect individually because it was not the objective of the study. Before the actual data collection, a pilot study was conducted to gauge each scale's internal reliability, and it indicated that the internal reliability of this scale was $\alpha=.94$.

2.3. Procedures

The recruitment was conducted through our social media pages, where the inclusion criteria were stated. Participants who perceived that they fit the criteria and were interested to participate clicked a link that brought them to the informed consent form, where they can tick the box to indicate their consent before continuing to the demographic items and the main scales. Each participant was compensated with RM5 (five Malaysian Ringgit) worth of e-wallet vouchers upon the completion of the survey. There were more than 450 participants who decided to participate in this study, nevertheless, 47 of them were excluded due to the violation of the inclusion criteria such as not studying online from home or being a frontliners in hospitals.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

Based on the hour hypothesis, we utilized PROCESS Macro model 59, where mattering was projected to moderate paths a, b, and c. The summary of the results is illustrated in Figure 1. In Figure 1, it can be seen that the link between PSS and SWL was significant, but not significantly moderated by Mattering. The link between PSS and PWB was significantly moderated by mattering, whereas PSS only significantly predicted PWB ($b=.53$, $p<.001$) at low levels of mattering. Furthermore, SWL was not a significant predictor of PWB and therefore does not interact with mattering its prediction. The hypothesis testing for the conditional indirect results (moderated mediation) is depicted in Table 1.

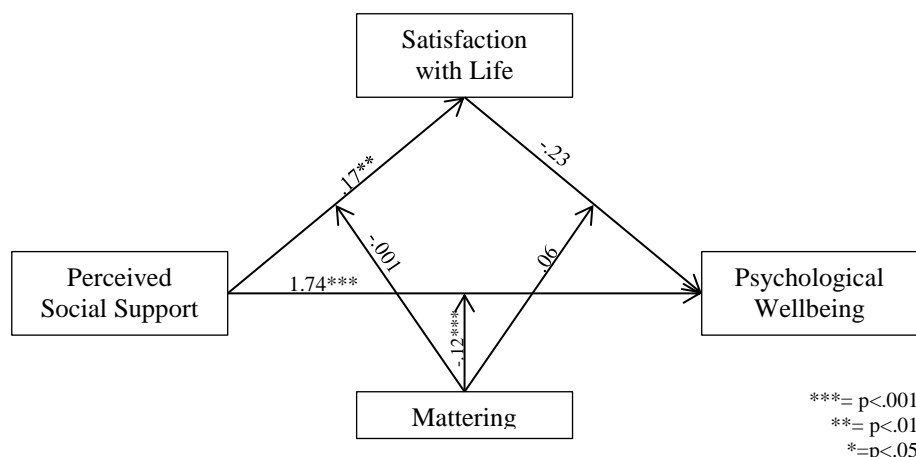


Figure 1. Moderated mediation results with PROCESS Macro Model 59

In bootstrapping analysis, significance of the indirect effects is indicated by the range between upper and lower levels of bootstrap confidence interval (Boot LLCI and BootULCI) that does not include zero. Because when the indirect effect was zero, it indicates the 'zero indirect effect', which also means that the mediation did not occur in at least 1 out of 5,000 bootstrap samples. Table 1 depicts that the effect of PSS on PWB can be significantly explained by SWL only at the moderate and higher levels of mattering, where the range between the lower and upper limit of confident interval did not contain the score zero. In other words,

it individuals who do not consider themselves matter to others would not feel that they are psychologically well when they feel the lack of social support; their feeling whether their life is satisfying would not be taken into account in the process. On the other hand, when they feel they matter enough to others, the sense that they are supported would lead them to believe that their life was satisfying, and therefore they would feel psychologically well.

Table 1. Conditional indirect effects

Mattering levels	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
10 (low)	.07	.05	-.03	.17
14 (moderate)	.10	.04	.03*	.19*
16 (high)	.12	.05	.03*	.24*

*Significant, as the range between Boot LLCI and Boot ULCI does not contain zero

3.2. Discussions

Our initial hypothesis that the mediating effect of SWL only occurs at high levels of mattering was not supported, as it also occurred at the moderate level of mattering, and the mediation was only partial because of the direct link between PSS and PWB was still significant after controlling for SWL and mattering. There are two important statistical findings to highlight; first, it was the insignificance of path b, and second, the insignificance of mattering in predicting PWB. In other words, among individuals with low levels of mattering, the interaction between their mattering and PSS did not predict any change in their SWL, yet directly altered their PWB. On the other hand, among individuals with moderate to high levels of mattering, when they believe they were socially supported, they would be more satisfied with their lives and therefore develop the belief that they were psychologically well.

Our results are consistent with the work of Oh *et al.* [7] and Pocnet *et al.* [8], who suggested that the direct link between PS and SWL is positively significant; greater PSS led to easier times in coping with stressors/negative affectivity and tend to look on the bright side of life, which improves SWL. In another study, PSS was found to positively linked SWL, where subjects with greater PSS were found to experience less stress and have better interpersonal relationships, and reported higher SWL [9]. However, our results indicated that mattering did not significantly predict SWL and it is inconsistent with the previous studies in the same context of Malaysian urbanites amidst the outbreak [31]. It can be explained by the fact that in the Malaysian context, the prolonged social distancing enforcement had increased the levels of anxiety and depression [22], among individuals with lower levels of mattering; which lowered the impact of mattering on their SWL. Regarding the relationship between PSS and PWB, it was suggested that a higher level of PSS predicted lower psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, and stress [14], which translates to better PWB [12], [13].

3.2.1. Limitations and suggestions

This current study is limited because we did not take into account some important variables such as how savvy our participants in using the digital device to support their social interaction with each other or the frequency of in-person communication they have with their significant others during the outbreak. Another limitation of this current study was that we did not measure any possible mental wellness problem, such as depression or anxiety, which might have played important role in determining the SWL and PWB among our participants. Therefore, while it is not expected that the pandemic to be prolonged, it is suggested that future studies in a similar context include the aforementioned variables. A further suggestion was to conduct longitudinal studies to see the upturn and downturn of variables such as mattering, PWB, and SWL along with the enforcement and the relaxation of the social distancing policy.

3.2.2. Implications

The results of this study suggested that problems on PWB could be avoided by developing higher levels of mattering among urbanites, which would improve the levels of SWL in general. It is therefore suggested that urbanites individuals improve each other's mattering levels by not marginalizing each other through derogatory messages, memes, or other forms of cyber-victimization. Socially including others in social circles or group can be one of the suggested ways to improve one's sense of mattering that might elevate their SWL and eventually protect them from any risk of disturbance on their PWB.

4. CONCLUSION

In sum, our results indicated that the link between PSS and PWB could have been stronger with the presence of in-person communication, which might have predicted higher levels of SWL that explained the higher levels of PWB. Nevertheless, the absence of in-person communication and the higher reliance on

social media had altered the condition; the mediation of SWL could only take place among individuals with moderate to high levels of mattering, and the mediation was only partial. Our study had achieved its objectives, and it is highly expected that in the new normal, individuals would find a way to gain back their PSS and mattering through the new mode of social interaction, to facilitate their SWL and PWB.

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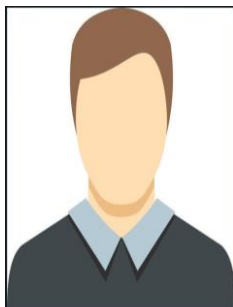
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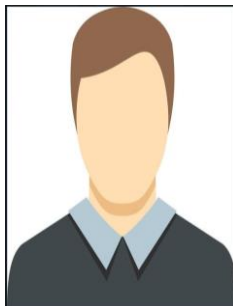
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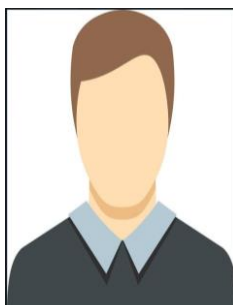
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