

Interpersonal mattering and students' friendship quality as predictors of subjective wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Subjective wellbeing (SWB) refers to one's subjective assessment of happiness. Studies reported that happiness or SWB is predicted by friendship quality. However, others reported that SWB is strongly predicted by the sense that we matter to others (interpersonal mattering). This non-experimental correlational study aimed to test the hypothesis whether interpersonal mattering is a better predictor of SWB than friendship quality. One-hundred-and-nineteen emerging adults were recruited through convenience-purposive sampling with inclusion criteria includes Malaysian within 18 to 25 years of age. The sample size was gotten through G*Power calculator with .15 effect size, .95 Power, and .05 alpha level. The participants were asked to fill up the mcgill friendship questionnaire-friend's functions (MFQFF), mattering to others questionnaire (MTOQ), and subjective happiness scale (SHS). We tested the hypotheses that while both friendship quality and interpersonal mattering predict SWB, the latter was the strongest predictor. Results of the multiple regression analyses showed that individuals who feels they matter to others might have higher SWB.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Subjective wellbeing (SWB) is seen as an ultimate goal in a human's life that consists of the affective part (i.e. satisfaction in the emotional state) and the cognitive part (i.e. satisfaction in life in general and specific domains) [1]. What constitutes SWB? There is no definite answer for this question as SWB is a universal term [2]. However, according to Lyubomirsky and Lepper [3] SWB can be defined as an individual's subjective assessment of whether they are a happy or an unhappy person. In other words, one's hedonic well-being is a source of one's subjective well-being [4]. Studies suggested that friends contribute to enjoyment and pleasure [5] while interpersonal mattering leads to positive feelings such as feeling important to a significant other, feeling supported [6] and feeling worthy [7], [8]. Thus, in this study, friendship quality and interpersonal mattering will be specifically assessed as predictors of SWB.

As popularized by the television sitcom Friends, friends are a significant group of people among the population of emerging adulthood [9] as they spend most of their time with their friends [10], [11] as compared to their family. Friends are also people who provide social support, understanding, approval, and

social skills to one another [12]. The correlation between friends and SWB has been widely discussed and it is found that friendship is an essential and robust predictor of SWB [9], [13]–[15].

There are several aspects of friendship that might affect one's SWB, such as friendship quantity, friendship quality, and friendship experiences (e.g., closeness, interactions) [15]. A good friendship is a friendship of high quality [16] and high-quality friendship influences one's global self-worth, competency, and psychosocial adjustment [17]. Friendship quality is defined as the interdependence bond between two people that may involve positive and negative qualities in the provisions such as companionship, help, intimacy, reliable alliance, self-validation, and emotional security [18]. According to the definition, friendship refers to a qualitative interpersonal relationship [19].

How does friendship increase one's SWB? Research suggested that friends satisfy one's basic psychological need for relatedness [4], [19], [20] and self-determination theory (SDT) posits that the degree to which basic needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met affects one's SWB [21]. Furthermore, the need for relatedness describes the social connectedness with others [22]. When one experiences a higher quality of friendship, it provides greater satisfaction to the need for relatedness, which in turn affects one's SWB [4]. In other words, higher friendship quality relationships crave close connectivity to experience the need of being connected to others [19]. A friend who actively provides understanding and care drives one's SWB to function [20] as they feel connected and intimate to one another. Experiences from the positive features vary depending on the hierarchy of friendship where people reported greater SWB interacting with their best friends due to stronger intimacy and attachment [23] as compared to casual friends. Hence, when one experiences higher friendship quality, it satisfies one's need for relatedness and leads to greater SWB.

Mattering is defined as the perception of being a significant part of the world [24]. According to Flett [25] the feeling of being important, valued, and seen positively by others develop one's mental health. There are two forms of mattering: societal and interpersonal. Interpersonal mattering will be discussed as relationship-oriented predictors will be more focusing on in this study. Interpersonal mattering is defined as the tendency to evaluate the self as a significant individual to other people [26]. Interpersonal mattering consists of awareness (the extent people know we exist), importance (the extent people are concerned about us), and reliance (the extent to which people rely on us) [24].

Interpersonal mattering is positively linked to one's subjective well-being through one's self-concept [27]–[29] and one's self-esteem in a relationship [30]. When individuals believe that they matter to others, they will succeed in their lives [31] as they are more resilient, highly engaged, and feel protected [7]. Besides that, a study found that stronger feelings of mattering positively correlate with self-esteem and well-being and negatively correlate with depression and anxiety. Social comparison theory [32] explains the link between interpersonal mattering and SWB. When one constantly compares oneself to another, their self-esteem faces temporary fluctuation, which is known as state self-esteem [33].

Individuals tend to compare the attention they received from their significant other with the attention the specific person gives to other friends or activities [15]. One tends to alter their perception towards themselves as the fluctuation in state self-esteem influences their perception of the relationship with others [30]. When one perceives themselves as important to the significant other, their state self-esteem fluctuates higher which then leads to greater SWB.

On the other hand, when the importance value does not align with the expectation, it triggers the reaction of envy, which might lead to negative well-being [34]. This is because they place a high emotional value in that relationship which can easily affect their emotional state [35]. They are also highly focused on evaluative feedback and hoping to be the outstanding one among others to receive acceptance and feel valuable [15], [25]. Therefore, constantly comparing oneself to another drives one's state self-esteem to fluctuate, which in turn influences well-being.

Moreover, interpersonal mattering denotes a sense of belonging and relatedness. At the age of emerging adulthood, they meet people from diverse countries and cultures. It is important to develop a sense of belonging among them as it is an ambiguous stage between adolescence and adult [36], [37]. According to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development [38], emerging adulthood is the stage of intimacy versus isolation. Therefore, when one feels that they matter to others, they develop belongingness, relatedness, and form intimate relationships, which enhances overall well-being. This is because they feel important when being recognized and engaged in interactions with the significant other leads to greater SWB [7]. Their individual psychological needs have been satisfied; thus, SWB will be enhanced. When an individual feels that they are being valued and recognized, they tend to feel that they have fit into the community. If individuals fail to form intimate relationships with others, isolation develops which affects one's well-being in the long term [38].

Past research has shown how friendship quality and interpersonal mattering predicts SWB respectively. For example, a study among Malaysian university students reported that mattering is a robust

predictor for SWB with two partial mediator variables, perceived social support and optimism [6]. A study among adolescents in the United States reported that the frequency of friendship interactions is positively associated with SWB [20]. There is also research that studied how mattering mediates the relationship between friendship and SWB [15], [29]. However, to date, the comparison on whether interpersonal mattering or friendship quality is a better predictor for SWB is scarce. Thus, I will address this gap by comparing interpersonal mattering and friendship quality so that individuals acknowledged the better predictor. Moreover, past studies above focused on adolescents or undergraduates, and this study will be focusing on emerging adults. Friends are significant during emerging adulthood for identity formation [11], it is important to find out whether friendship quality or interpersonal mattering further affect their SWB.

The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in the year 2020 has reduced social interactions and physical contact with friends which increased the feeling of loneliness [39], where the latest past study by Flett and colleagues [7] did not have this consideration. According to the study by Foo and Prihadi [6] in the context of COVID-19, the results reported that mattering is a robust predictor for SWB. The former statement reported an increase in loneliness during COVID-19, thus if one increases the feeling of interpersonal mattering, the feeling of loneliness decreases, which shows that interpersonal mattering predicts greater SWB. The different contexts might lead to inconsistent results; therefore, the current study is addressing this gap.

If the results of the current study found that interpersonal mattering will be a better predictor of SWB, the public shall be encouraged to develop or increase the sense of mattering to promote and enhance greater SWB. In line with the COVID-19 context, interpersonal mattering will serve as an important predictor of SWB as it decreases one's sense of loneliness. It will be beneficial for the emerging adult population because the lack of social interactions due to pandemics will increase their sense of loneliness.

The current study aims to find out whether interpersonal mattering will be a better predictor of SWB than friendship quality. The research question for this study is: Will interpersonal mattering be a better predictor of SWB than friendship quality? Accordingly, the hypotheses of this study are: i) hypothesis 1 (H1), friendship quality will predict SWB; ii) hypothesis 2 (H2), interpersonal mattering will predict SWB; and iii) hypothesis 3 (H3), interpersonal mattering will be a better predictor of SWB than friendship quality.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research design of this study was a non-experimental correlational design with two predictors and one outcome variable. The predictors used were friendship quality and interpersonal mattering with the continuous scale of measurement. To measure friendship quality, participants were given the mcgill friendship questionnaire-friend's functions (MFQ-FF) [18] questionnaire to fill up. The average score on MFQ-FF whereby a higher average score indicated better friendship quality. For the interpersonal mattering predictor, the mattering to others questionnaire (MTOQ) [26] was given to the participants to assess. The average score on MTOQ whereby a higher average score indicated greater interpersonal mattering. The outcome variable in this study was SWB and to measure SWB, participants were given the subjective happiness scale (SHS) [3] to fill up. The average score on SHS whereby a higher average score indicated greater SWB.

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were drawn from the public through the non-probability sampling method by recruiting participants through a social media platform, Instagram. As the pandemic was still in a serious state, recruiting participants through social media platforms would be more convenient and feasible. Several one hundred and seven participants that were determined by G*Power were needed for this study with .15 effect size, .95 Power, and .05 alpha level.

The inclusion criteria of this study were participants have to be Malaysian within 18 to 25 years of age, with the ethnicity of either Chinese, Malay or Indian. This study had received 122 responses that comprised 36 men and 83 women but three responses were excluded from the study as they did not fulfill the eligibility criteria. Thus, 119 participants were recruited for this study. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 24 years ($M=20.89$, $SD=0.96$), where 56.6% of the participants were aged 21. All participants were Malaysians with an ethnic background of Chinese ($n=116$), Malay ($n=2$), and Indian ($n=1$).

2.2. Materials

In this study, an informed consent form was used to receive an acknowledgment from participants. A demographic form was used to collect basic data of participants such as age, gender, nationality, and ethnicity. A statement to ask participants to think of a friend while filling up the questionnaires was shown so that all the responses were based on that particular friend to obtain more consistent results.

MFQ-FF, this questionnaire was used to measure the predictor friendship quality. It consisted of 30 items such as “__ helps me when I need it” and “__ makes me laugh”, answered on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 8 (always). The blank space was to let participants imagine their friend's name while filling up. The overall internal consistency was relatively good, Cronbach's $\alpha=.84$ to $.90$ [18].

MTOQ, this questionnaire was used to assess the predictor interpersonal mattering which consisted of 11 items such as “I feel special to my friend” and “I matter to my friend”, answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not much) to 5 (a lot). Cronbach's α for this scale was $.95$ [26]. Consider as strong internal consistency.

SHS, this scale was used to measure SWB and consisted of 4 items. Questions such as “In general, I consider myself __” was answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not a very happy person) to 7 (a very happy person) and “Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself __” was answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (less happy) to 7 (happier). Item 4, “Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?” was reverse scored. The internal consistency for the scale was Cronbach's $\alpha=.86$ [3].

2.3. Procedures

In the Google Form, participants were first shown an informed consent form to obtain their acknowledgment in the study. Next, they were asked to fill up the demographic form. Before proceeding to the questionnaires of the study, participants were shown with a statement that states that the participant was required to think of a friend while filling up the questionnaires. Next, participants were required to fill up the MFQ-FF, MTOQ, and SHS respectively. Finally, participants were thanked for their participation and they may quit the Google Form. The entire study did not take longer than 30 minutes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The average scores for MFQ-FF, MTOQ, and SHS were calculated across every participant to respond. For the SHS scale, item 4 was reverse scored. Participants' scores on MFQ-FF and MTOQ were associated with the scores on SHS. The response data was collated by using Microsoft Excel and international business machines statistical product and service solutions (IBM SPSS) statistics version 26. The raw data was first being calculated through Microsoft Excel, then transferred to SPSS for further analysis.

3.1. Preliminary analysis

The descriptive statistics stated that friendship quality ($M=6.15$, $SD=1.86$) and interpersonal mattering ($M=3.84$, $SD=.72$) predicted SWB. Participants who scored greater mean scores in the tests above indicated greater SWB. The assumptions test of homoscedasticity and linearity, normality, multicollinearity, independence of errors, and outliers were tested. It was important to examine these assumptions test before running the inferential tests because the assumptions tests served as a baseline to whether the results of the inferential tests would be trustworthy, valid, and reliable.

The assumption of homoscedasticity and linearity was met as the residuals were evenly distributed across the straight line. Shapiro-Wilk test was more suitable to use to run the assumption of normality compared to Kolmogorov-Smirnov as the total number of participants was smaller [40]. However, the assumption of normality was not met, Shapiro-Wilk (119) $=.95$, $p<.001$. Hence, the results should be interpreted with caution. Besides that, the assumption of multicollinearity was met for all the predictors, where the variance inflation factors (VIF) score was less than 10, $VIF=1.29$, and tolerance value above $.2$, $Tolerance=.77$. For the assumption of independence of errors, it was met as the value was around 2, $Durbin-Watson=2.03$. Lastly, there were no significant outliers as all the Cook's distance values were below 1 [41].

3.2. Inferential statistics

This study aimed to investigate whether friendship quality would predict SWB ($H1$), interpersonal mattering would predict SWB ($H2$) and whether interpersonal mattering would be a better predictor of SWB than friendship quality ($H3$). Hierarchical multiple regression test was used to run and test these hypotheses. This test was used as the assumption of linearity was met, and the linear regression could be run as the required parameters were met.

Model 1 with friendship quality did not significantly predict SWB, explaining 0.8% of variance in SWB, $R^2=.01$, $F(1; 117)=1.00$, $p=.32$. Friendship quality did not significantly predicted SWB, $b=.06$; 95% CI $[-.05; .16]$, $t(117)=1.00$, $p=.32$ as shown in Table 1. Model 2 which contains friendship quality and interpersonal mattering significantly predicted SWB, explaining 21.3% of the variance in SWB, $R^2=.21$, F

(2; 116)=15.74, $p<.001$ as presented Table 1. The inclusion of interpersonal mattering into the model significantly increased 20.5% of variance explained in SWB, $R^2\text{-change}=.21$, $F\text{-change}$ (1; 116) =30.24, $p<.001$ as shown in Table 1.

Friendship quality did not significantly predicted SWB after controlling for interpersonal mattering, $b=-.09$, 95% CI [-.20; .02], t (116) =-1.64, $p=.104$, $sr=-.14$ as shown in Table 1. This indicated that by increasing one unit of friendship quality, the outcome decreased by .09 units. Interpersonal mattering significantly predicted SWB after controlling for friendship quality, $b=.79$, 95% CI [.51; 1.08], t (116) =5.50, $p<.001$, $sr=.45$ as shown in Table 1. This indicated that by increasing one unit of interpersonal mattering, the outcome increased by .79 units.

The value of semi-partial correlation for interpersonal mattering was larger than friendship quality, which indicated that interpersonal mattering had a greater magnitude. The regression equation in this study was $SWB=2.22-.09(\text{Friendship quality})+.79(\text{Interpersonal mattering})$. Therefore, H2 which stated that interpersonal mattering would predict SWB, and H3 which stated that interpersonal mattering would be a better predictor of SWB than friendship quality was supported. However, H1 which stated that friendship quality would predict SWB was not supported.

Table 1. Coefficients table

	Model	Unstandardized B	Standardized coefficients beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	4.358		12.406	.000
	Friendship_quality	.055	.092	.997	.321
2	(Constant)	2.217		4.432	.000
	Friendship_quality	-.091	-.153	-1.638	.104
	Interpersonal mattering	.792	.515	5.499	.000**

a. Dependent variable: SWB

* $p<.05$. ** $p<.001$

3.3. Discussions

The present study aimed to discover whether interpersonal mattering would be a better predictor of SWB than friendship quality. The hypotheses of the study were friendship quality would predict SWB (H1), interpersonal mattering would predict SWB (H2) and interpersonal mattering would be a better predictor of SWB than friendship quality (H3). After interpreting the results, H2 and H3 were supported, but H1 was not supported.

The results of the findings were consistent with the past research by Flett and colleagues [7] which stated that developing a sense of mattering would predict SWB. They emphasized the importance of the sense of belonging that would enhance the sense of mattering, which then predicted SWB. According to the research by Sim and Prihadi [30] when one's sense of mattering was altered, it influenced SWB, which was consistent with the findings of the current study. It was found that when one felt that they matter to another, it elevated their state self-esteem, which increased their overall SWB as well.

Furthermore, the findings from the study by Taniguchi [29] also supported the hypothesis of the current study that interpersonal mattering is positively associated with SWB. As interpersonal mattering highly focused on one's self-evaluation or self-concept, it played a more significant role in affecting one's SWB compared to friendship quality. This was because interpersonal mattering was a preceding factor of SWB than friendship quality [30].

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the research found that individuals craved to have a physical connection with people rather than virtual connections [39] which elevated their feeling of loneliness. Friendship is lacking a deeper connection as individuals were not able to feel connected due to lockdown periods, which interpersonal mattering could have taken place in influencing one's SWB during the pandemic. Interpersonal mattering was found to be negatively correlated with depression and anxiety [42] while loneliness was highly associated with depression as future mental health problems [43]. Thus, in line with the COVID-19 situation, interpersonal mattering was a more significant predictor in increasing one's SWB and decreasing the feeling of loneliness. Therefore, supporting the findings on interpersonal mattering would predict SWB (H2) and interpersonal mattering would be a better predictor of SWB than friendship quality (H3).

However, the hypothesis friendship quality would predict SWB (H1) was not supported by the findings of the current study. Most of the studies have reported a significant correlation between friendship quality and SWB [10], [12]. In the studies mentioned, the authors have included mediator and moderator variables which could have explained the link between friendship quality and SWB. While in the current study, no mediator was included to examine the correlation. Therefore, the findings of the current study could be interpreted that friendship quality was not critically the main source of SWB [20], where it could be

incorporated with other variables, such as personality. Personality was also found to be one of the strongest predictors of SWB, in which characteristics such as agreeableness and extraversion were highly related to friendship [14], [44].

Moreover, in the article by Demir and colleagues [14], friendship was not an important predictor of SWB for individuals who were in a romantic relationship. Individuals might perceive their siblings, parents, or romantic partner as their best friends, which could have been difficult in interpreting the results [14], [23]. Therefore, the findings of the current study were not consistent with other past studies as there might be other explanatory variables that could have linked the correlation between friendship quality and SWB, and friends might not be the most important source of SWB among emerging adulthood.

3.4. Theoretical and practical implications

The findings of the study could contribute to future studies as this study was conducted in the COVID-19 context where participants were recruited under the lockdown period in Malaysia. As the results found that interpersonal mattering would be a better predictor of SWB than friendship quality, which also supported past studies that stated interpersonal mattering was a preceding factor and robust predictor of SWB. It extended in looking into the COVID-19 context which further supported interpersonal mattering as a significant predictor of SWB [6].

This study could be practically implied to the education line to promote the sense of mattering. The management team of the school or university could hold a campaign promoting the importance of increasing one's sense of mattering to develop a greater sense of belongingness and relatedness. This was because there were students who came from different cultures, when they increased their sense of interpersonal mattering, they could enhance their relationships with others, felt belonging to the group, and most importantly promote their overall well-being.

Furthermore, it would also be important for the public to acknowledge the importance of developing a sense of mattering, especially under the context of COVID-19. Social media would be a great platform to promote this by creating hashtags such as #YouMatter and could encourage the public to post up pictures with their significant ones and attach the hashtag to spread awareness. The extended lockdown periods have limited the chances of having physical activities and maintaining a close relationship with others. Therefore, it would be a great chance for the public to catch up with their significant other through virtual meetings as well.

3.5. Limitations and future recommendations

There were several limitations of this study that has to be addressed. Firstly, in the Google Form that was presented to the participants to fill up, the statement regarding asking participants to think of a friend while filling up the questionnaires could be unclear and unspecific. This was because several friendships could be taken into consideration, such as same-sex friends, opposite-sex friends, best friends, close friends, and casual friends [23]. The instruction was not specific in stating which type of friendship the current study was examining. Therefore, future studies could be more specific in investigating which type of friendship to obtain more consistent results.

Secondly, the current study was conducted among Malaysian emerging adults which the results could not generalize to a bigger population. This was because Malaysia is a collectivistic country where people would be more focused on harmonious interpersonal relationships, interdependence, and helpfulness [23], [45]. As Malaysians were taught and encouraged to practice these values since childhood, they would be more highly dependent on people's evaluation of them. Therefore, this study could not be generalized to countries that practiced individualistic cultures such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Future studies could investigate whether interpersonal mattering would also be a better predictor of SWB than friendship quality in individualistic countries.

Future studies could also look into younger children, working adults, and elderlies on whether interpersonal mattering would also be a significant predictor of SWB. This was because human needs might change throughout their life span, which working adults could consider on families and elderlies could prioritize on health than interpersonal relationships [23], [44]. Therefore, it would be important to examine other age groups as well.

Moreover, as the current study used a convenience sampling method to recruit participants, the number of men and women, and the number of Chinese ethnics, Malay ethnics and Indian ethnics participants were not equally numbered. Women respondents were more than men and Chinese ethnicity hold up a big ratio of the total number of participants. This would have affected the results of the study because women were found to be seeking more intimate friendships than men [23]. Therefore, future studies could recruit participants in a more equal ratio so that gender and ethnicity would not be affecting the results in a great manner.

4. CONCLUSION

To sum up, this study was to examine whether interpersonal mattering would be a better predictor of SWB than friendship quality. The findings of the study had interpreted that interpersonal mattering would be a better predictor of SWB than friendship quality. SWB could be influenced by different factors, and this study could further support that interpersonal mattering would be a significant predictor of SWB. Further studies could investigate the causal relationship of the two variables to infer better findings and discussion on this area.

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