

Resilience during the lockdown: insignificance of perceived social support

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ABSTRACT

Pre-pandemic studies had established that human resilience is mainly based on the social feedback that enables the formation of one's perceived social support (PSS). In the Malaysian context, the enforcement of the movement control order (MCO) amidst the pandemic altered the social interaction pattern. The shift had involved more dependence on online communication (i.e., social media). Therefore, the way PSS plays its role in predicting resilience could have been affected. Due to the reason mentioned above and the reports that Malaysians tend to increase their levels of spirituality during the MCO, we hypothesized that the sense of being empowered fully mediates the contribution of PSS on resilience while moderated by the levels of spirituality. Four hundred and five adults who reside in Malaysia during the MCO 2 were recruited to respond to scales of PSS, spirituality, empowerment, and resilience through the online survey. Our results suggested that the sense of empowerment significantly and fully mediated the relationship between PSS and resilience among individuals with low and moderate levels of spirituality. Scope, limitations, implications, and suggestions were also discussed at the end of this paper.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has devastated every nation, and almost every government has enforced different regulations in managing the pandemic within their country. Our study is conducted in Malaysia, where partial lockdown movement control order (MCO) had been enforced for six weeks since the 18th of March, 2020, continued by less-stringent versions of the lockdown in several states [1]. The lockdown was further enforced in June 2021 due to the steep increase of new cases and death tolls. Like countries across the globe, such situations elevate social distress [2] especially in the Malaysian context, because most Malaysians received their knowledge regarding the pandemic from ambiguous sources [3]. In line with that, Kamaludin *et al.* [4]–[6] reported concerning anxiety levels among young adults and university students in Malaysia during the MCO enforcement, and social support was a popular coping mechanism amongst them. The nature of seeking social support to enhance resilience can be different from the pre-pandemic time; one of the global implications of the MCO or any form of lockdown was the reliance on online communication. Some studies in the Malaysian context during the MCO periods suggested that the limited social movement led individuals to rely on social media as the primary source of

social feedback and social comparison [7] where individuals who managed to develop a better sense of mattering through online social interaction can accept themselves better [8] and eventually develop a better sense of happiness [9]. The looking glass theory explained the reliance on social feedback in forming self-evaluation and resilience a few decades ago [10]. It can be implied in either pre-pandemic or pandemic populations. For instance, in pre-pandemic studies, it was advocated that positive social feedback, in the form of perceived social support (PSS), was the robust significant predictor of resilience in stressful environments such as terminal illness [11] mental health issues [12] raising children with special needs [13] intensive care unit atmosphere [14] foster care [15] and post-war life [16]. On the other hand, other factors were also reported to be significant predictors of high resilience among the non-distressed population, such as higher self-efficacy [17] higher mattering [18] lower trait perfectionism [19] and can even be improved through gamification strategy [20]. While the pandemic and the MCO could be considered as distressful situations [2], [4] our review of the empirical studies in the Malaysian context between 2020 and 2021 led us to hypothesize that the formation of resilience can be fully explained by the sense of empowerment: the sense that we are more capable in controlling our own life [21].

We have three reasons to justify our first hypothesis. First, since the pre-pandemic time, the sense of empowerment has been reported as one of the predictors of resilience. Hartling [22] proposed that resilience can be strengthened through engagement in relationships that enhance one's sense of empowerment. In line with that, Amodeo *et al.* [23] also suggested that resilience among individuals experiencing a certain degree of stress would be predicted by identity affirmation, self-acceptance, and the group serving as social support. Our second reason was that the physical distance limitation in the MCO has driven individuals to rely on social feedback through online communication [2] and social media, where people tend to get more desirable feedback [24] because others can only see them from their preferred angle [25]. As a result, this brings us to our third reason: the premise that social feedback is the ultimate robust predictor of resilience [15] did not seem to hold the truth in the Malaysian locked-down population. Studies in this population suggested that social feedback could not fully explain the relationship between the sense of mattering and satisfaction with life [9], [26] work stress [27] work efficacy [28] nor do self-acceptance [8]. In other words, one should feel that they matter enough to evaluate themselves positively and feel empowered before developing any sense of resilience. Additionally, we also proposed that spirituality might play a role in developing resilience among our population. First of all, most Malaysian citizens had indicated that they were attached to an organized belief system (religion) [29]. This data is consistent with the self-reports obtained from the majority of our participants during the data collection. Moreover, the positive link between spirituality and resilience have been reported in past studies [30]–[35]. In stressful environments, such as post-war nations, spirituality was reported to be one of the significant elements of resilience and posttraumatic growth [16]; in challenging life events and hardships, spirituality was reported to be the significant factor of resilience [36]–[38].

Furthermore, apart from predicting resilience, spirituality was also reported to be a significant predictor of the preconditions of PSS, such as emotional intelligence [39] and the sense of social connectedness [40]–[42]. In the context of the pandemic, spirituality was reported to be utilized as a coping mechanism by individuals who experienced insecurities, such as financial, social and existential [43]. In other words, the aforementioned study indicated that spirituality might be revived by the perceived severe insecurity; the alteration in the spirituality levels might interact with the PSS in developing the sense of being empowered. It is important to know that spirituality represents a different concept from religiosity, especially in the Malaysian context [39]. In our context, we define religiosity as extrinsic behaviour that is shown by individuals to conform with the perceived religious societies [44], [45] and spirituality as the intrinsic motivation to live and understand life through their religious beliefs [44]. Nevertheless, in the context of pandemic and lockdown, many worshipping houses were not allowed to operate, therefore most people who resorted to religion and belief system tend to have their intrinsic spirituality increased, rather than their extrinsic religiosity. Thus, we hypothesize that the sense of empowerment will explain the association between PSS and resilience under the condition of moderate to high spirituality. Figure 1 illustrates our hypothetical model.

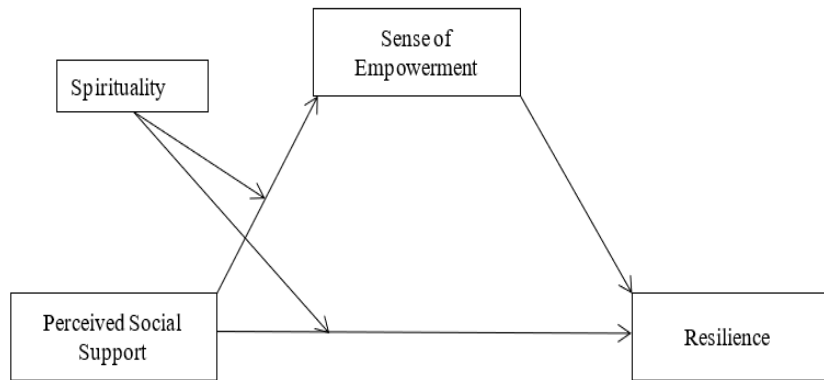


Figure 1. Hypothetical model of moderated mediation

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Participants

Based on the table of Krejcie and Morgan [46] a population larger than 100,000 should be represented by at least 384 samples. Therefore, we recruited 405 participants to represent the urban population during the second MCO in Malaysia. Only participants who: i) age between 18 to 65 years old; ii) identify themselves as belonging to the Asian culture; iii) and reside in Kuala Lumpur or Selangor were included in the final sample. The participants ($M_{age}=25.44$, $SD_{age}=7.22$) were recruited through cluster random sampling method on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, LinkedIn, and WeChat, in which the participants had clicked the link that allowed them access to the survey items. All participants provided their consent by clicking 'yes' in the informed consent form, which has stated that they will be giving their responses to our scales with the financial compensation of five Malaysian Ringgit in the form of e-Wallet credit. The participants were given the option to revoke their participation at any time during the study in the case that they find the experience discomforting.

2.2. Materials

Items asking for the participants' basic demographic information such as age, gender, and nationality were included. PSS was measured using the 12-item multidimensional scale of perceived social support (MSPSS) [47] and has demonstrated good internal reliability with its Cronbach's $\alpha=.88$. Spirituality was assessed using the 6-item intrinsic spirituality scale (ISS) [48] which has shown its excellent internal reliability, with its Cronbach's $\alpha=.96$. A self-developed scale (which items were adopted from previous studies) was also utilized to measure the sense of empowerment. It is a self-reported measure consisting of 38 items, rated via a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). A pilot study on 100 participants indicated that its internal reliability was excellent, with its Cronbach's $\alpha=.96$. The 6-item brief resilience scale (BRS) [49] was also used to assess resilience and has shown excellent internal reliability with its Cronbach's $\alpha=.91$.

3. RESULTS

We analyzed the data with bias-free bootstrap analysis with 5,000 samplings and 95% confidence interval in process macro model 8 for moderated mediation. As shown in Table 1, PSS does not significantly predict resilience when controlling for the sense of empowerment. It is indicated that PSS is no longer a significant predictor of resilience when the sense of empowerment is controlled for in any spiritual condition.

Table 1. Conditional direct effect of PSS on resilience

Spirituality levels	Effects	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
25.96 (Low)	.009	.014	.660	.510	-.019	.037
39.47 (Moderate)	-.011	.012	-.859	.391	-.035	.014
52.98 (High)	-.031	.016	-1.89	.059	-.062	.001

Table 2 shows that mediation of sense of empowerment occurred among participants with low and moderate levels of spirituality. Based on the results, our hypothesis was supported; moderated mediation has occurred. In other words, individuals with low and moderate spirituality tend to feel more empowered when

they believe they are socially supported. In turn, the empowered perception leads them to develop greater resilience. On the other hand, individuals with high levels of spirituality did not experience the same phenomenon; the sense of empowerment did not significantly mediate the link between their PSS and resilience.

Table 2. Conditional indirect effect of PSS on resilience

Spirituality levels	Effects	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
25.96 (Low)	.049	.017	.010*	.075*
39.47 (Moderate)	.022	.008	.006*	.038*
52.98 (High)	-.006	.011	-.028	.018

*Significant, the range between BootLLCI and BootULCI does not contain zero

4. DISCUSSION

Consistent with our hypothesis, the results showed that the sense of empowerment fully mediated the relationship between PSS and resilience among individuals with low and moderate spiritual levels. Our findings are not in line with some previous studies, which reported that PSS was the direct psychological resource during stressful situations [14], [15], [50]. This difference can be explained by the exclusion of spirituality and empowerment in their studies. Before we controlled for both variables, resilience was significantly predicted by PSS. It is important to remember that we took spirituality and empowerment into account because of the enforcement of total lockdown in the place where our participants lived during the data collection. During the lockdown, most individuals relied on social media and other online social interactions to develop PSS [2], [26] as opposed to the pre-pandemic studies. Our result calls for future research focusing on populations with certain conditions in the pandemic context, such as individuals suffering from a terminal illness, mental health condition, or having family members with special needs. Before the pandemic, PSS was considered the robust predictor of resilience among this population [11]–[13]. As PSS was considered a robust predictor of resilience among these populations before the pandemic, future research may add further insight into the pandemic context [11]–[13]. Studies before the pandemic also suggested that elevated resilience was associated with higher self-efficacy [17] higher mattering [18] lower trait perfectionism [19] and being trained through gamification [20]. Therefore, the inclusion of such variables is suggested for future studies to overcome our limitations.

Furthermore, it is interesting to see that neither sense of empowerment nor PSS predicted the resilience among individuals with high levels of spirituality. It indicates that high spirituality alone was enough to predict elevated resilience. This finding is supported by the study of Ng and Prihadi [39] which has shown that individuals with higher spirituality tend to develop high emotional intelligence, as well as a sense of social connectedness [40]–[42] that neutralize the need of PSS and sense of empowerment to maintain their emotional stability. Adding on to the proposition by past studies in studying the significance of spirituality in developing resilience [30]–[35] future research may benefit from examining the possible effects of MCO in diminishing the prediction power of low to moderate spirituality in predicting resilience.

A further limitation of this study that comes naturally with its cross-sectional nature is the validity of its findings over time. We collected the data only at one point in time; therefore, the consistency of our result interpreted from the same pool of participants during the different stages of MCO in Malaysia is still uncertain. Thus, longitudinal or comparative studies are called for to fill this gap. Qualitative studies are also strongly suggested to provide deeper insight into the phenomenon.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our findings showed that the pandemic had altered the pattern of social interaction among most of the population. It further changes follow this alteration in how individuals evaluate themselves. The differences between our findings and the pre-pandemic studies invite replication or enhancement of previous studies to provide further knowledge in navigating life in the new normal lifestyle.

Limited by the MCO situation, our findings suggested that PSS should no longer be considered a sole contributor to resilience at the theoretical level. It has to elevate one's feeling of being in control of their own life before one shows resilient behavior. Additionally, we added to the body of knowledge that spirituality would only predict resilience when possessed at higher levels. Thus, improving one's sense of empowerment and spirituality might work more significantly in improving their resilience, instead of merely showing social support.

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