

Autonomy, Fear of Missing Out, Social Support, and Psychological Wellbeing Among Malaysian Students

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ABSTRACT

Psychological wellbeing plays an essential role in one's overall health. Previous studies have suggested that autonomy, fear of missing out, and social support are significant factors related to one's psychological wellbeing. However, studies on how these factors impact psychological wellbeing in Malaysia are scarce. We survey a cohort of 154 students in Malaysia (56 males, 98 females) aged between 18–24 to investigate how social support from family and friends, fear of missing out, and autonomy impact psychological wellbeing. Participants were recruited virtually and were given questionnaires via an online survey tool, Qualtrics. Results show that students who had higher social support and autonomy had better psychological wellbeing, whereas students who had higher fear of missing out had poorer psychological wellbeing. In the multiple regression analysis, autonomy, fear of missing out and social support were found to significantly predict psychological wellbeing, with fear of missing out emerging as the strongest predictor. All in all, the findings of this study indicate that having good relationships with friends and family, a higher degree of autonomy, and being satisfied with one's own experiences are important factors for one's psychological wellbeing.

Keywords: Autonomy, FoMO, Fear of missing out, Psychological wellbeing, Social support, University students.

INTRODUCTION

The Global Burden of Disease (2016) Collaborative Network states that at least one in four people suffer from a mental disorder at least once in their lifetime. Among the major common mental disorders, depression was found to be the most common mental illness, followed by bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and anxiety disorders. University students are perceived to be more susceptible to mental health issues and psychological distress as they are exposed to numerous stressors such as academic

stress, transition to university life, and financial pressure (Priesack and Alcock, 2015). A meta-analysis done by Ibrahim et al. (2013) revealed that university students showed higher symptoms of depression compared to the general population, with a prevalence of 30.6%. Furthermore, past studies revealed that first-year university students were more prone to experience anxiety (Stallman, 2010), had increased alcohol consumption, and drug abuse (Geisner et al., 2012). With the Covid-19 pandemic occurring around the world, the mental wellbeing of university students raises even more concerns. Thus, this warrants the need for and importance of research on psychological wellbeing among university students.

Low- and middle-income countries, including Malaysia, face the highest risk of mental health issues, accounting for 73% of global suicides (World Health Organization, 2024). According to the Malaysian Youth Mental Health Index (Institute for Youth Research Malaysia and United Children's Fund, 2024), one in ten Malaysian youths exhibited suicidal tendencies in 2023. In Malaysia, suicide remains a highly sensitive topic due to the influence of religious beliefs. As a multicultural nation, many religions, including Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism, regard suicide as a sinful act, which contributes to the stigma surrounding the issue (Bahar et al., 2015). This highlights the critical need for research on psychological wellbeing, particularly among university students in Malaysia.

Over the past decade, research on psychological wellbeing has expanded significantly. Seligman's (2011) theory identifies five core elements of psychological wellbeing: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments, which are collectively known as the PERMA model. Each element uniquely contributes to wellbeing and plays a crucial role in fostering individuals' optimal functioning (Seligman, 2011).

Numerous studies have found that good psychological wellbeing has contributed to greater life satisfaction, improved physical health, increased life expectancy, higher self-esteem (Ryff and Singer, 2008; Klainin-Yobas et al., 2016; Xiang et al., 2019), and better academic performance (Norvilitis and Reid, 2012). The self-determination theory (SDT) by Ryan and Deci (2000) outlines how human motivation is one factor which contributes to one's vitality and psychological wellbeing. According to the SDT, there are three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs have to be fulfilled for optimal growth. Participants who reported higher satisfaction in these three areas had higher intrinsic motivation, which contribute to higher self-determination, resulting in higher life satisfaction and wellbeing (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The need for competence has been shown to be a strong predictor of wellbeing amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Cantarero et al., 2020), whereas the role of autonomy and relatedness are less understood amidst the pandemic. Therefore, this study focused on the autonomy and relatedness needs by examining the effect of autonomy, fear of missing out (FoMO), and social support on psychological wellbeing among Malaysian students.

AUTONOMY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

According to Ryan and Deci (2006), autonomy is defined as the "regulation of the self" and plays an essential role in wellbeing. Autonomy is one of the basic

psychological needs in the SDT and has been shown to be an important factor in one's life. Individuals with a greater sense of autonomy have been associated with higher wellbeing (Weinstein et al., 2011), creativity (Roth et al., 2007), and life satisfaction (Hofmann et al., 2014). Cordeiro et al. (2016) found that autonomy satisfaction (i.e., how much satisfaction one receives from being autonomous) predicted life satisfaction and vitality among students. Similarly, Paradnikė and Bandzevičienė (2015) found that one component of autonomy, authorship/self-congruence (i.e., how much individuals see themselves as the author of their behaviors), significantly predicted life satisfaction among university students. This result showed that when someone is able to take responsibility for their behavior, they will have a higher life satisfaction. Taken together, these findings suggested that autonomy is linked to one's wellbeing.

However, a majority of studies on autonomy and psychological wellbeing have been conducted in Western countries such as the United States and Europe with commonly individualistic cultures (Chirkov, 2008), and few studies have been conducted in collectivistic cultures. Parenting practices in collectivistic societies emphasize obedience and following directives from parents (Shwalb and Hossain, 2017). This may impede autonomy among individuals in collectivistic society.

Cross and Gore (2003) argue that people living in collectivistic cultures will have an inner conflict between the desire for autonomy and maintaining social harmony with others around them. In other words, individuals living in collectivistic societies are less likely to express freedom and autonomy as the collectivistic culture emphasizes on the maintenance of social harmony. Thus, this "inner tension" may lower wellbeing (Burroughs et al., 2002). Nevertheless, a recent study in Malaysia by Gan et al. (2020) suggested that children who receive lower autonomy support from parents experienced more difficulties in life such as peer and conduct problems. Chen et al. (2015) studied autonomy across different cultures and found that autonomy significantly contributed to the wellbeing of individuals from both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. However, autonomy was found to have a weaker predicting effect on wellbeing in collectivistic cultures compared to individualistic cultures (Church et al., 2013). All in all, these studies demonstrated the importance of studying the effect of autonomy on psychological wellbeing in collectivistic cultures.

FoMO AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

Przybylski et al. (2013, p. 1841) defined FoMO as "the pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent", characterized by "the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing". It was found that individuals were more likely to experience FoMO if their basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, relatedness, and competence) were not satisfied (Przybylski et al., 2013). Higher FoMO has been found to be related to higher level of depressive symptoms, physical symptoms such as headaches, chest pain and sore throat (Baker et al., 2016), stress, negative affect (Milyavskaya et al., 2018), loneliness, sleep disturbance and lower self-esteem (Barry and Wong, 2020).

Among university students, FoMO has also been seen to have links with social media usage (Alt, 2015). Przybylski et al. (2013) highlighted that individuals with a

high FoMO tend to use their phones more often to check social media sites while driving or in class. Furthermore, Hertz et al. (2015) found that FoMO invoked negative feelings among undergraduate students, causing anxiousness. Interestingly, some students used social media to evoke feelings of FoMO among other friends. Jordan et al. (2011) outlined that the information posted online about people's lifestyles is often skewed toward the positive end. This causes individuals to misperceive that others are having a more pleasurable and enjoyable life than they are. As a result of seeing others having a happier and more successful life, people with high levels of FoMO are more likely to feel distressed, anxious, and have lower self-esteem (Przybylski et al., 2013).

Contrary to these findings (Przybylski et al., 2013; Alt, 2015; Chai et al., 2019), recent studies have suggested that FoMO is beneficial to one's wellbeing. Higher levels of FoMO were found to be related to higher social media intensity which strengthens the social connections of an individual. The social supports obtained from these social interactions are then able to promote wellbeing positively (Chai et al., 2019; Roberts and David, 2019). Therefore, due to the contradictory outcomes of past studies, it is crucial to investigate the impact of FoMO on wellbeing.

SOCIAL SUPPORT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

According to Ryan and Deci (2006), relatedness is a basic psychological need essential for self-regulation and is defined as "the desire to feel connected to others". Relatedness could be satisfied by having social support from various dimensions such as family and friends. Perceived social support has been found to significantly predict life satisfaction, negative affect, and wellbeing (Ammar et al., 2013; Siedlecki et al., 2014). Specifically, studies have shown that friends and family were strong predictors of wellbeing (Gülaçtı, 2010; Ammar et al., 2013).

Moreover, young adults in Lambert et al. (2010) remarked that friends and family are major sources making their lives meaningful, with family being the strongest source of meaning. In the context of university students, one protective factor against depression is perceived social support (Santini et al., 2015), which could reduce academic stress (Renk and Smith, 2007), and it plays a big role in student happiness, academic achievements, and their ability to adapt to university life (Adyani et al., 2019).

Researchers also outline that culture plays an essential role in psychological wellbeing, whereby collectivistic cultures place a strong emphasis on community within the family (Ammar et al., 2013). Eskin (2013) remarks that people in a collectivistic society exhibit features such as the desire to maintain peace and harmony in the group and emphasize the needs and personal interests of the group. Thus, these findings suggest that one's wellbeing is very much shaped by social support.

Based on past studies (Weinstein et al., 2011; Ammar et al., 2013; Hertz et al., 2015; Santini et al., 2015), the evidence seems to suggest that autonomy, FoMO, and social support are linked to psychological wellbeing. However, there are several gaps in the existing literature. Studies involving the impact of FoMO, autonomy, and social support on psychological wellbeing among university students in Malaysia, which practices a collectivistic culture, are relatively low. Furthermore, FoMO is still a

relatively new construct (Wegmann et al., 2017), which warrants further research on how it can impact one's wellbeing. In addition, the impact of autonomy, FoMO and social support on psychological wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic is poorly understood. As the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted us greatly in terms of the prevalence of depression, stress, anxiety, and psychological distress (Wang et al., 2020), it is important to address the need for research on the predicting factors of psychological wellbeing. Therefore, this study aims to examine the predicting effects of autonomy, FoMO, friends and family support on psychological wellbeing among Malaysian students.

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

The minimum required sample size was estimated using a priori power via G*Power. With a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), a significance level of $\alpha = .05$, and a statistical power of .95, the analysis determined a minimum sample size of 129 participants is required. A total of 154 Malaysian university students aged between 18–24 years old ($M = 19.81$, $SD = 1.44$) were recruited online using survey method. The sample consisted of 98 (63.6%) females and 56 (36.4%) males. Participants were mostly Chinese ($n = 121$, 78.6%), followed by Malay ($n = 12$, 7.8%), Indian ($n = 16$, 10.4%) and others ($n = 5$, 3.2%).

MEASURES

INDEX OF AUTONOMOUS FUNCTIONING

Participants' autonomy was assessed using the Index of Autonomous Functioning (IAF) (Weinstein et al., 2012). The scale consists of a total of 15 questions with three subscales: Authorship/self-congruence, interest-taking, and susceptibility to control, with each subscale consisting of five questions. Participants reported how true each item is to them (e.g., "My decisions represent my most important values and feelings") on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (completely true). Items 2, 6, 7, 11 and 14 are to be reversed scored. Mean scores were used in data analysis where higher scores indicate higher degree of autonomy. Weinstein et al. (2012) reported that the Cronbach's alpha for the total IAF score across several studies were .81 - .83. In relation to the Big 5 traits, the scale demonstrated some level of divergent validity (Weinstein et al., 2012). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha value was .68.

THE FoMO SCALE

FoMO was measured via the 10-item FoMO scale (Przybylski et al., 2013). The scale measures the degree of FoMO one experiences (e.g., I fear others have more rewarding experiences than me) with a 5-point Likert-type scale. It ranged from 1 (Not at all true of me) to 5 (Extremely true of me). Mean scores were used in the analysis,

where higher scores indicate higher feelings of FoMO. The FoMO scale has been translated to other languages and has indicated good validity (Al-Menayes, 2016; Casale and Fioravanti, 2020) and good reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha .87 to .90) (Przybylski et al., 2013). The Cronbach's alpha for the FoMO scale in the current study was .85.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL SCALE OF PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988) was used to measure participants' perceived social support. The scale consists of 12 items and measures three subscales: friends, family, and significant others. Each subscale has four items with a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very strongly disagree) to 7 (Very strongly agree). Mean scores were used in the data analysis, where higher scores indicate higher perceived social support. A sample item is, "I get emotional help and support from I need from my family". The scale demonstrated sound psychometric properties and the Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was .88. Cronbach's alpha for friends and family subscale were .87 and .85 respectively (Zimet et al., 1988). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha for friends and family support were .91 and .85 respectively.

PERMA PROFILER

Psychological wellbeing was measured using the Perma Profiler by Butler and Kern (2016). The scale consists of 15 items measuring positive emotions, engagement, meaning, relationships and accomplishment (three items per subscale). A sample question measuring engagement is, "How often do you become absorbed in what you are doing?". In addition, eight "filler" items measuring negative emotion, health, overall happiness, and loneliness were also included. All items were measured using an 11-point scale with response anchors differing for different questions. Higher scores indicated higher wellbeing. Butler and Kern (2016) remark that the scale demonstrates evidence for content, divergent, and convergent validity. The Cronbach's alpha for the total scale ranged between .92-.95. Initial studies showed evidence of convergent and divergent validity. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was .92.

PROCEDURE

The Department of Psychology Ethics Committee approved this study (Approval code: 202010099). A poster and messages inviting participants to participate in the study were sent out via social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. The poster and message contained a link inviting participants to participate in this study via Qualtrics, an online survey tool. Participants were given an information sheet, followed by a consent form. Participants who consented completed the questionnaires, which consisted of a demographic form and four scales. After completing the study, participants were given an online debriefing statement.

DATA ANALYSIS

All data were analyzed using IBM SPSS v.27. Preliminary analysis included removing outliers and identifying missing data. As less than 5% of data contained missing cases, 10 missing cases were corrected with mean imputation (Pallant, 2016).

All variables were found to be normally distributed, as their skewness and kurtosis values fell within the acceptable range of -1 to 1. Therefore, parametric statistics is used in this study. Pearson's product-movement coefficient was used to determine the relationships between the study variables. Moreover, multiple regression analysis was used to determine the predicting effects of autonomy, social support, and FoMO on psychological wellbeing.

RESULTS

The relationships between autonomy, social support, FoMO and psychological wellbeing were examined using Pearson's Correlation analysis. Table 1 shows that there was a moderate negative correlation between FoMO and psychological wellbeing ($r = -.39, p < .001$). A moderate positive correlation was found between psychological wellbeing and autonomy ($r = .43, p < .001$), social support from friends ($r = .40, p < .001$) and social support from family ($r = .41, p < .001$). These findings showed that the higher autonomy and support from friends and family, the better the psychological wellbeing. Meanwhile, when one has higher FoMO, the poorer their psychological wellbeing.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and correlation between the study variables.

Variables	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Autonomy	3.44 (0.45)	-				
2. FoMO	2.44 (0.77)	-.24*	-			
3. Social Support (friends)	5.47 (1.20)	.44**	-.03	-		
4. Social Support (family)	4.99 (1.34)	.26*	-.20*	.24*	-	
5. Psychological Wellbeing	6.47 (1.44)	.43***	-.39***	.40***	.41***	-

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

A multiple regression analysis was used to measure the predicting effects of autonomy, FoMO and social support on psychological wellbeing (refer to Table 2). The analysis revealed that all independent variables significantly predicted psychological wellbeing, $R = .63$, $R^2 = .40$, $F(4, 149) = 24.30, p < .001$, explaining 40% variability in psychological wellbeing. From the coefficient table, autonomy ($\beta = .18, p = .015$), FoMO ($\beta = -.29, p < .001$), and social support from friends ($\beta = .25, p = .001$) and family ($\beta = .25, p < .001$) significantly predicted psychological wellbeing. This means that as autonomy and social support from friends and family increase, psychological wellbeing increases. Meanwhile, as FoMO increases, psychological

wellbeing decreases. It was also found that FoMO was the strongest predictor of psychological wellbeing.

Table 2

Multiple regression results for psychological wellbeing.

Variables	B	SE B	β	t	R	R ²	F
Regression model					0.63	0.40	24.30***
Autonomy	0.59	0.24	.18*	2.45			
FoMO	-0.54	0.13	-.29***	-4.33			
Social support from friends	0.30	0.09	.25**	3.51			
Social support from family	0.27	0.07	.25***	3.67			

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to investigate the predicting effects of autonomy, FoMO, and support from friends and family on psychological wellbeing among students in Malaysia. Our study found that autonomy, as well as support from friends and family, significantly and positively correlated with psychological wellbeing, while FoMO negatively correlated with psychological wellbeing. FoMO was found to be the strongest predictor of psychological wellbeing among Malaysian students.

The finding of the current study on the significant relationship between autonomy and psychological wellbeing is consistent with past findings (Paradnikė and Bandzevičienė, 2015; Cordeiro et al., 2016). Based on the SDT, autonomy is an important basic psychological need for promoting one's wellbeing (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Weinstein et al. (2011) indicated that autonomy is associated with wellbeing whereby individuals with a higher sense of autonomy will experience better wellbeing. Among university students, autonomy plays an important role in their lives as they are in the transitional period from adolescence to adulthood. They have a strong desire for freedom to make their own choices, to be in control of their own decisions, and to take initiative to act (Adriyati and Hatiningsih, 2019). Cross and Gore (2003) stated that people in collectivistic societies are less likely to express freedom and autonomy, which decreases wellbeing. Contrary to that, our study in Malaysia reveals that autonomy positively predicts wellbeing in a collectivistic society. Thus, when students' desires for autonomy are fulfilled, they are more likely to experience better psychological wellbeing.

The significant relationship found between FoMO and psychological wellbeing in this article is in line with previous studies (Milyavskaya et al., 2018; Hayran and Anik, 2021). Past studies have also found that higher FoMO was correlated with more depressive symptoms (Baker et al., 2016), greater levels of stress (Buglass et al., 2017), and higher levels of internet addiction (Burnell et al., 2019), which in turn could impact psychological wellbeing. A possible explanation for these findings is that social media and modern technology have changed the way we derive social connection and the way we interact with one another (Antonio, 2012). People

are constantly browsing through social media to stay updated with their friends' status so that they stay "connected" with what is happening around them. Furthermore, social media constantly reminds them about other experiences in which they are missing out, and this in turn could trigger feelings of anxiety and regret (Milyavskaya et al., 2018). As a result, one will experience FoMO, which then will impact their psychological wellbeing.

In addition, FoMO was found to be the strongest predictor of psychological wellbeing. As this study was conducted during a lockdown period amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia, a possible explanation for the strong effect of FoMO is that people engage more in social media to stay connected and maintain social relationships amidst the lockdown (Gioia et al., 2021). One may argue that lockdown brings about the absence of photos from social gatherings and parties on social media, which begs the question if people still experience FoMO. However, a study by Hayran and Anik (2021) on university students revealed that FoMO has not simply disappeared due to the absence of pictures of social gatherings and parties but has instead been "replaced" by missing out from online experiences such as online virtual meetups and Netflix parties. Thus, people are engaging more on social media to keep up with the abundance of online activities.

Our study also showed that perceived social support from family and peers significantly correlated with psychological wellbeing, which is consistent with past studies (Ammar et al., 2013; Siedlecki et al., 2014; Adyani et al., 2019). Awang et al. (2014) remarked that students who have high perceived social support are more confident and comfortable with the environment around them. As a result, social support from peers serves as a strong support for emotional and academic adjustments. Furthermore, students with good social support perceive the environment around them as friendly and supportive, which is beneficial to their wellbeing and happiness (Karademas, 2006). During the pandemic, social support was found to be a protective factor against depressive symptoms (Liu et al., 2021). In addition, past studies highlighted individuals from collectivistic countries reported higher levels of social support compared to individualistic countries (Goodwin and Plaza, 2000; Park et al., 2013) because Asians tend to view themselves as "connected" with others around them (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Thus, individuals with increased support from friends and family are more likely to experience better psychological wellbeing.

This study provides insight into the variables that affect psychological wellbeing among university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there are some limitations found in this study. Firstly, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic whereby the findings obtained from this study could be time sensitive. There could be other possible variables affecting wellbeing during a different period of time. Thus, future studies could examine the factors affecting psychological wellbeing in a post-pandemic period. Secondly, the sample recruited in this study are mainly people living in Malaysia. Although Malaysia practices a collectivistic culture, practices in vary due to differences in culture and upbringing. Future studies could conduct cross-cultural studies within Asian countries to examine the predicting effects of autonomy, FoMO and social support on psychological wellbeing. Lastly, social support among university students may vary depending on

their living arrangements. Students living with their parents may experience higher levels of family support. Future studies are encouraged to consider including this variable for a more comprehensive analysis.

Despite these limitations, this study offers significant implications for health policy makers and mental health experts. As FoMO was found to be the strongest predictor of psychological wellbeing, mental health experts could work toward sharing ideas on detoxing oneself from social media, such as taking periodic breaks from social media or taking time to disconnect from social media. Mental health experts could also incorporate social support as part of psychological interventions for mental health, as having good social support provides opportunities for people to share their feelings. In addition, educators and parents could implement strategies in promoting autonomy among university students as they are in the transition period to adulthood. By allowing them to take charge of their own learning and allowing them to take responsibility for their own actions, their wellbeing could be enhanced.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study investigated the predicting effects of autonomy, FoMO, and social support on psychological wellbeing among Malaysian students. Individuals with good social support from family and friends and a high autonomy are more likely to have better psychological wellbeing, while individuals with higher FoMO were found to experience lower psychological wellbeing. Thus, having a good sense of autonomy, a good social support system from friends and family, along with being satisfied with own's experience, are important to promoting good psychological wellbeing.

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