# Psychological Wellbeing Among Undergraduates Of Higher Learning Institutions In Malaysia

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**Abstract**:

Psychological wellbeing is an important aspect of a student's life that has been garnering a lot of attention lately. Under the recent Covid-19 pandemic condition and the mandatory quarantine, depression, anxiety, stress and other psychological illness have been reported to have escalated among adults and children alike. Malaysian National Institute of Health in their National Morbidity & Health survey report 2019 stated that 2.3% of population is found to be displaying symptoms of depression and a whopping number of 424,000 children were also found to be the same. This study was undertaken to generate a profile that represents indicators of optimal functioning among students of higher learning institutions using the PERMA model with its five elements: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. A sample of 308 students from private and public higher learning institutions in Malaysia were selected using a simple random sampling technique.  Data was collected online using google form and analysed using SPSS. Findings indicated that Malaysian undergraduates were operating at a sub-optimal functioning level and experiencing depression. There is a need for our higher learning institutions to have good intervention strategies in place to improve students' psychological well-being.

## Introduction

Psychological well-being among students of higher learning institutions have been receiving a lot of attention from the academic community, researchers and scholars recently. Although it is often referred to as being happy, satisfied, socially connected and functioning at an optimal level, in actual reality it is all about experiencing both the positive and negative emotions equally (Huppert,2009). Undergraduates are often under stress due to independent living, heavy academic burden and pressure to obtain good grades apart from securing a job upon graduation. Manap et al. (2019) in their study of 91 Malaysian undergraduates revealed that the students experienced varying degrees of depression at the higher learning institutions; 19.8 % experienced moderate level, 14.3% mild ;8.8% severe and 2.2.% extremely severe levels. Being confined to their hostel rooms or homes without much social contact during the recent quarantine made these levels worse. Studies conducted in Spain and Italy the two European counties that were most effected by the pandemic reported worsening of negative emotional conditions such as boredom, irritability and loneliness among children (Orgiles et al., 2020). Negative emotions such as depression does not only impact physical well-being, it is also leads to suicidal thoughts and behaviours (Islam et al., 2018). The Malaysian Reserve (2020) reported that Befrienders Malaysia received about 4,142 calls between March 18 and May 16 during the Movement Control Order period, where over a third of the calls on Covid-19 were suicidal in nature.  As the future of the nation is much dependent on our younger generation especially undergraduates, it is crucial to detect and provide early deterrence of mental health problems among university students. This paper aims to explore the

psychological well-being of undergraduates in higher learning Institutions in Malaysia using positive psychological model (PERMA) and its association with depression level.

## Literature Review

In recent years positive psychology is preferred in studies related to mental well-being instead of the traditional psychology as it looks into healthy traits of the mind (Woolston, 2020). With an increasing prevalence of stress, anxiety and depression, experts are looking into what people can do to help themselves to 'flourish'. One such expert is Seligman (2011) who introduced the PERMA model of flourishing which is constituted of five domains related to psychological wellbeing: 1) positive emotions (P), 2) engagement (E), 3) relationships (R), 4) meaning (M) and 5) accomplishment (A).

## Depression

Depression is a common and serious mood disorder among individuals that is also known as major depressive disorder. Individuals suffering from depression often experience prolonged feelings of sadness and hopelessness and loss of interest in once enjoyed activities (Truschel ,2020). Seligman (2019) describes individuals with depression as being in pain: "suffering a lot of sadness, crying a lot, very passive, with no zest, major loss of pleasure and interest, and they were usually functioning very poorly, if at all, at work and home" (Seligman, 2019, p. 7). The American Psychologist Association (2013) explains that individuals can only be clinically diagnosed as having depression when they display excessive crying, feeling of hopelessness, lethargic, insomnia or hypersomnia, appetite issue, feelings of worthlessness or suicidal ideation for at least 2 weeks. In Malaysian educational context, Kotera &Ting (2019), discovered that students between the ages of 18 to 24 years were found to have depression due to the overwhelming responsibilities that they have to shoulder; hence, leading to the feeling of incompetence, financial struggles, and difficulty of class tasks. Students of higher learning institutions who reported feeling depressed also noticed decline in their overall academic performance (Suleiman et al., 2017).

## Positive Emotion (P)

Positive emotions such as peace, gratitude, satisfaction, pleasure, inspiration, hope, curiosity, compassion, contentment, empathy, joy and love are the building blocks of well-being (Seligman, 2011; Webster, 2014). In the application of this model in an educational context, Noble and McGrath (2008) discussed how schools help students experience positive feelings such as: (a) belonging to their school; (b) safety from bullying and violence; (c) satisfaction and pride through experiencing and celebrating success; (d) excitement and enjoyment by participating in fun activities or special games; and (e) optimism about their success and/or school. McFerran, (2010) indicated that experiencing positive emotions on a regular basis in educational settings is considered important for well-being of learners. Positive emotions are found to improve learner's attention span, creative and adaptable ideas, and supplement self-concept to be more agreeable with others (D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi ;2015). Positive emotions are known to help minimize depressive symptoms (Santos et al., 2013; Gander, Proyer & Ruch 2016). Therefore; H1: Positive emotion negatively influences the depression level among undergraduates in Malaysia

## Engagement (E)

Seligman (2011) explained that engagement is about being deeply involved with something in life such as work, personal interest, or hobby. It is a connection between an individual and their circumstances which imparts meaning, greater performance and positive feelings (Ayse, 2018 ;D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2015). Engagement is defined by flow or intense psychological engagement that requires immense concentration, commitment, and focus. Csikszentmihalyi ,2014; Butler & Kern, 2016). In terms of educational context, engagement refers to the degree of confidence; vigour or force that leads to a great effort; dedication and absorption in an individual's academic work (Kotera & Ting ,2019). It was also pointed out that when students engage with their strengths, they are more likely to experience well-being (Noble& McGrath, 2008; Seligman, 2005). Engagement is also found to have a of positive effect on depression although for a shorter period (Gander, Proyer & Ruch ,2016). Therefore,

H2: Engagement positively influences the depression level among undergraduates in Malaysia

**Relationship (R)**

Relationships refer to the ability of an individual to build and maintain positive relationships with others (Seligman, 2011). According to Butler & Kern (2016) humans are "social beings" and healthy connections form the nature of their well-being. Therefore, individuals who have meaningful, healthy and positive relationships with others around them are more content compared to those who do not. Social relationships have positive effects on an individual's well-being (Ayşe ,2018; D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi 2015). In educational settings, positive relationships with peers and teachers help students to experience support, acceptance, connectedness and motivate students to achieve higher attainments (Noble & McGrath, 2008). Apart from that, positive relationships are also the capability to adjust to different cultural groups and have a sense of oneness with others (Lino & Hashim, 2019). Personal relationships are also among factors that helps to reduce depression Varma (2017). Therefore,

H3: Relationship positively influences the depression level among undergraduates in Malaysia

**Meaning (M)**

Meaning is about using strengths to fulfil goals which are perceived to be important beyond one's personal needs (Kun, Balogh & Krasz, 2017). A meaningful path involves a sense of purpose and reasons why people do what they do (D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi ,2015). Individuals often seek meaning through religion, voluntary work or even self-discovery processes and were found to enjoy a better physical health, higher satisfaction, and contentment in life (Ayşe, 2018; Khaw & Kern ,2014). In educational contexts, Noble and McGrath (2008) claim, "pupils have a sense of 'meaning' when what they do has impact on others beyond themselves. They have a sense of 'purpose' when they pursue worthwhile goals" (p. 122). Meaning of life does influence depression. Many studies have shown that meaning in life has a strong negative correlation with depression (Bas, Hamarta & Koksal, 2014). Interestingly a study on Mexican students using the self-reported scales of Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), indicated that the participants experienced an increase in

depression or depressive emotions after they searched for the meaning in life (Vela et al., 2016). Therefore,

H4: Meaning negatively influences the depression level among undergraduates in Malaysia

**Achievement (A)**

Achievement involves utilizing one's talent and efforts towards a definite and fixed goal (Seligman, 2011). This pathway is pursued for its own sake, even when it brings no positive emotion, no meaning, and nothing in the way of positive relationships (Seligman 2011, p. 18). To achieve well-being, individuals must be able to look back at their lives with a sense of accomplishment and proclaim that they did it, and did it well (Kun, Balogh & Krasz, 2017). In educational contexts, achievements contribute to students' self-confidence and self-esteem (Noble & McGrath,2008). In studies exploring the factors that influences depression, Achievement(A) and (P) Positive Relationships have proved to increase subjective well-being as well as alleviating depression (Gander, Proyer & Ruch 2016). Therefore,

H5: Achievement positively influences the depression level among undergraduates in Malaysia

**Methods and procedures**

Quantitative method was adopted to measure and evaluate psychological and depression levels among undergraduates in Malaysia. A simple random sampling technique was employed and 308 sample sizes were determined in this study. The sample was obtained by using tabulation Krejcie and Morgan (1970), with 1.3 million undergraduate populations in 2019 (Statistics of Malaysia Education, 2019). In total, 308 questionnaires were selected after rejecting missing data more than 30%. All the questionnaires were measured through well-established instruments from the past studies, Butler and Kern (2016) for PERMA model and depression construct. Questionnaire was created using the Google form and distributed via social media channel like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and what's application. SPSS statistical package was used to analyse the dataset.

**Results and finding**

The majority of the respondents for this study was from the age group 18 to 21 years (66.2 percent), followed by 23 to 27 years (32.1 percent) and above 27 (1.6 percent). Females were the highest group of respondents (61 percent) with males coming next (39 percent). On the ethnicity of the respondents, Indians have the high representation (30 percent), followed by Chinese (29 percent), Malays by 28 percent, Natives of Sabah (5 percent), Natives of Sarawak (5 percent) and others (3 percent). The highest number of respondents were from private higher learning institutions in Malaysia (60 percent), followed by public universities (27 percent), colleges (10 percent) and technical institutions (3 percent). Most of the respondents were from the Faculty of Business Administrative (28.8 percent), Faculty of Education (27.5 percent), Faculty of Engineering (18.8 percent), Faculty of Information Technology (10.7 percent), Faculty of Social Science (6.8 percent), Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality (5.1 percent) and other faculties (2.2 percent). Respondents' profiling is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondents Profile

| No | Items | Frequency | Percentage |
|----|-------|-----------|------------|
| **1** | Age | | |
| | 18-22 years | 204 | 66.2 |
| | 23-37 years | 99 | 32.1 |
| | Above 27 years | 5 | 1.6 |
| **2** | Gender | | |
| | Female | 186 | 66.4 |
| | Male | 120 | 39 |
| | Not prefer to say | 2 | 0.6 |
| **3** | Ethnicity | | |
| | Indian | 92 | 30 |
| | Chinese | 89 | 29 |
| | Malays | 87 | 28 |
| | Sabah natives | 16 | 5 |
| | Sarawak natives | 15 | 5 |
| | Others | 9 | 3 |
| **4** | Education Institutions | | |
| | Private universities | 184 | 59 |
| | Public universities | 80 | 27 |
| | Technical & vocational institutions | 10 | 3 |
| | Colleges | 30 | 10 |
| | International branch universities | 6 | 2 |
| **5** | Faculty | | |
| | Business & Management | 89 | 28.8 |
| | Education | | |
| | Engineering | 85 | 27.5 |
| | Information Technology | 56 | 18.8 |
| | Social Science | 31 | 10.7 |
| | Tourism & hospitality | | |
| | Others | 21 | 6.8 |
| | | 16 | 5.1 |
| | | 8 | 3.2 |

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis

| Constructs | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Reliability test (Cronbach alpha) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Depression** | 4.8182 | 1.37317 | 0.878 |
| **Positive Emotion** | 4.7938 | 1.10969 | 0.850 |
| **Engagement** | 5.0660 | 1.15163 | 0.645 |
| **Relationship** | 5.1677 | 1.16793 | 0.663 |
| **Meaning** | 5.1558 | 1.31185 | 0.860 |
| **Achievement** | 3.4799 | 1.27749 | 0.804 |

Out of 315 datasets collected, only 308 data sets were reliable for analysis with 7 questionnaires (0.22 percent) had missing data, errors or were deemed incomplete. Table 2 represents mean value ranged from 3.4799 to 5.16 and standard deviation from 1.10 to1.37. Internal consistency and reliability of each sub-scale ranges from good to acceptable levels. Referring to Butler & Kern's (2016) interpretive table of PERMA profiling, mean scores between 5 to 6.4 (5.1 to 6.5 for negative emotion) indicates sub-optimal functioning and anything lower is deemed as languishing. Findings suggest that Malaysian undergraduates are operating at a below-average functioning level.

Table 3: Pearson's Correlation Analysis

| Constructs | Depression |
|---|---|
| **Positive Emotion** | -.399 |
| **Engagement** | -.235 |
| **Relationship** | -.218 |
| **Meaning** | -.375 |
| **Achievement** | -.200 |

Pearson's correlation analysis shows a negative relationship between the PERMA constructs and Depression (refer to Table 3). It is similar to the findings of Gander, Proyer & Ruch (2016) that reported negative correlation between PERMA constructs and the depression level. As the psychological well-being improves, negative emotions such as depression decreases.

Multiple regression linear analysis was performed to analysis the relationship between PERMA model constructs and depression among undergraduates' students in Malaysia. Based on the analysis finding, the first hypothesis relationship between positive emotion and depression have a significance effects with negative relationship (p=0.00, β=-0.432), therefore H1 was accepted. The second hypothesis tested between the engagement construct and depression, the result indicates positive relationship but insignificance (p=0.547, β=0.053), therefore H2 was rejected. The similar result was found for the third hypothesis, there was a positive relationship between the relationship construct and depression but insignificant (p=0.399 β=0.065). The fourth hypothesis has negative relationship and significant between the meaning construct and the depression. Therefore, H3 was rejected and H4

was accepted. The last hypothesis indicate a positive relationship between the achievement construct and depression but insignificant (p=0.093, β=0.129), therefore H5 was rejected. In conclusion, 3 hypotheses were rejected and 2 hypotheses were accepted.

Table 4: Multiple Regressions Linear Analysis

**Model Summary[b]**

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate | Durbin-Watson |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | .440[a] | .194 | .180 | 1.24321 | 1.649 |

**Coefficients[a]**

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | T | Sig. | 95.0% Confidence Interval for B | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| (Constant) | 5.769 | .379 | | 15.237 | .000 | 5.024 | 6.514 |
| PositiveEmotion | -.432 | .101 | -.349 | -4.293 | .000 | -.631 | -.234 |
| Engagement | .053 | .087 | .044 | .602 | .547 | -.119 | .225 |
| Relationship | .065 | .077 | .056 | .845 | .399 | -.087 | .218 |
| Meaning | -.281 | .081 | -.269 | -3.460 | .001 | -.441 | -.121 |
| Achievement | .129 | .076 | .120 | 1.683 | .093 | -.022 | .279 |

a. Dependent Variable: Depression

## Discussion

Many of the previous studies have shown the impact of students' wellbeing due to depression while, the current study strives to prove that depression worsens under the recent pandemic and quarantine situations. Results of this study show that Malaysian undergraduates experience depression and their daily functioning level is below optimum as shown through the PERMA model. This is aligned with past studies of Kotera &Ting (2019) and Suleiman et al (2017).

Based on the findings obtained, there is a significant inverse relationship between positive emotions and depression. An increase by one unit in the positive emotion decreases depression by 0.432 units. This is the most achievable significant influencing variable as tested by many researchers. This is obvious as depression is usually accompanied by negative emotions and the presence of positive emotion will displace the negativity which has the potential to prevail and turn into depression. Meaning also shows a

positive influence on depression. Inferring this, the Malaysian community is collectivist in nature; therefore, individuals in this community already have a general meaning in life or a sense of being part of something bigger which is to be an integral part of the community. Religion is also a part of having meaning in life where most of the individuals in the Malaysian community have beliefs and religion. Thus, the sense of obeying a deity gives meaning in life.

Engagement, Relationship and Achievement constructs were shown to have insignificant influence on depression where p≥0.05. This reflects Malaysian undergraduates have a different understanding of what engagement, relationship and achievement signify compare to Western studies. Engagement within the Malaysian community coincides more to hard work and responsibility rather than enjoyment and passion for work. Thus, it weakens the understanding of engagement as a coping mechanism for depression. Besides that, the aspect relationship

not influencing depression could be due to the likelihood of staying with their family and the forced set of family rules; values that the undergraduates have to follow without fail. Thus, having to abide by these expectations that are pre-set by families could be a contributing factor to developing depression. Additionally, the reason achievement does not affect depression could be due to respondents relating achievement to getting a stable job, having a car, or achieving something big in life. It could also mean that Malaysian undergraduates have a different perception of achievement in life or the way they achieve their goals.

### Conclusion

This study shows that Positive Emotion and Meaning have significant positive effects on depression level among undergraduates. This is an undeniable proof that positive psychology can lower depression among undergraduates in Malaysia. As such higher learning institutions should look into intervention strategies to improve positive emotions among undergraduates. Programmes that encourage undergraduates to be aware of their emotions, ways to manage them and help others must be introduced (Zaid et al., 2020). Awareness on the importance of mental well-being must be communicated and an environment where students can talk and seek help without being stigmatized must be created (Zaid et al., 2020). Counsellors, mentors and lecturers should help undergraduates to set realistic expectations of themselves and their grades (Norazmi et al., 2019). A better support system is needed in Malaysian Higher learning Institutions to address this issue (Norazmi et al., 2020). Therefore, this warrants for further research on effective intervention strategies at Higher learning institutions that will improve the overall psychological well-being of undergraduates.

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