

Family Functioning, Family Social Support, and Life Satisfaction among School Adolescents in the Federal Land Development Authority (Felda) Area in Johor, Malaysia

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Abstract

Adolescents' satisfaction with life can be influenced by various factors, including family environment factors. This study aimed to ascertain the relationship between family functioning and social support on adolescents' life satisfaction in Johor, Malaysia. A total of 575 school adolescents from FELDA areas in Johor participated in this study. The data was collected via self-administered questionnaires, which consisted of the Satisfaction with Life Scale, the Family Assessment Device, and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support. Correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS version 25. The results showed a significant positive connection between family functioning and family support on life satisfaction. Further analyses showed that family social support significantly predicted life satisfaction. In conclusion, this study highlights the critical role of family functioning and social support in determining adolescents' life satisfaction, with family social support emerging as the sole significant predictor. These findings emphasize the importance of a supportive family environment in enhancing the well-being of adolescents in FELDA areas in Johor.

Keywords: Happiness, Family Environment, Ecological Systems, Teenagers, Malaysia.

Introduction

Life satisfaction refers to a person's overall evaluation of their life (Diener et al., 1985). It is a subjective measure, where individuals assess their own lives and make judgments about how satisfied they are (Pavot & Diener, 1993). Life satisfaction involves a sense of contentment, which is a general state of happiness and satisfaction with life (Veenhoven, 1996). It also includes feelings of fulfilment, where individuals believe they are achieving their goals and

living in alignment with their values (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Existing studies have shown that life satisfaction is particularly important for adolescents from a few perspectives (Proctor et al., 2009). For example, high levels of life satisfaction are associated with lower rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues (Gilman & Huebner, 2006). Adolescents who feel content and fulfilled with their lives generally experience fewer symptoms of mental health problems (Suldo & Huebner, 2004). When young people perceive their lives as positive and rewarding, they are less likely to develop negative thought patterns and emotional distress that lead to conditions like depression and anxiety (Antaramian et al., 2008).

Yet, an increasingly pressing concern affecting adolescents' life satisfaction is the growing academic pressure they experience (Deb et al., 2015). The competitive nature of college admissions has created an environment where adolescents feel immense stress to perform well academically (Putwain, 2007). This pressure often leads to long hours of studying, lack of sleep, and heightened anxiety, negatively affecting their mental health and overall well-being (Leung et al., 2010). The fear of failure and the constant pursuit of excellence can diminish their enjoyment of learning and hinder their ability to develop other important life skills (Yeh, 2010). Furthermore, the stress from academic pressure can strain relationships with family and peers, as adolescents may have less time for social activities and relaxation (Verhoeven et al., 2014).

Existing studies have shown that socio-ecological contexts such as family functioning and family social support plays an important role in determining life satisfaction in adolescents. Family functioning, which encompasses communication patterns, emotional connections, and the capacity to manage stress and adapt to change, plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences and well-being of adolescents (Gavazzi et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2017; Kouros et al., 2018). Well-functioning families might provide a stable and nurturing setting that supports development and happiness among adolescents (Taylor et al., 2012). Yet, dysfunctional family environments, characterized by poor communication, lack of emotional support, and conflict, can significantly contribute to heightened stress levels in adolescents. These environments often lead to emotional difficulties such as anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation, as well as behavioural problems like aggression, defiance, or withdrawal (Baiocco et al., 2018; Cumsille et al., 2021). Such stressors negatively affect adolescents' overall life satisfaction, as they struggle to cope with the challenges posed by an unstable family dynamic. Over time, the inability to experience security, consistency, and positive familial interactions can further deteriorate their mental well-being and sense of fulfilment (Zimmermann et al., 2017; Stavropoulos et al., 2020).

Family social support, which includes emotional, informational, and practical assistance, plays a fundamental role in determining adolescents' well-being (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). Emotional support offers a sense of security and love, helping adolescents feel understood and valued, while informational support provides guidance in decision-making and problem-solving during critical developmental periods. Practical assistance, such as help with daily tasks, ensures that adolescents' needs are met, reducing stress and enhancing their ability to cope with challenges (Chu et al., 2010; Merz et al., 2018; Shek & Zhu, 2019). Research consistently shows that strong family support systems are associated with better mental health outcomes, greater life satisfaction, and higher self-esteem in adolescents (Gault-Sherman, 2012; Shek, 2018). Adolescents who receive consistent support

from their families are more likely to develop resilience, which buffers against stress and reduces the likelihood of emotional and behavioural problems (Merrilees et al., 2018). Thus, family support is not only protective but also fosters positive developmental outcomes, contributing to both short-term well-being and long-term success (Piko & Szemán, 2018).

Meanwhile, inadequate social support can result in adolescents feeling isolated and disconnected from others, leading to a sense of emotional loneliness. Without sufficient emotional or practical support from family, friends, or peers, adolescents may struggle to manage daily stressors and challenges, which can cause them to feel overwhelmed and unable to cope effectively. This lack of support exacerbates feelings of helplessness, increasing the risk of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues (Averdijk et al., 2017; Piko & Pinczés, 2018). Over time, the absence of a reliable social support system may erode their self-esteem and resilience, further complicating their ability to navigate difficulties and maintain emotional well-being (Szkody & McKinney, 2019; van Harmelen et al., 2020). Ultimately, the absence of strong social networks during adolescence can have long-term consequences, potentially contributing to maladaptive coping behaviours and poorer overall life satisfaction (Medeiros et al., 2021).

Despite the recognized importance of family functioning and social support in shaping adolescents' well-being, the interactions between these two factors in determining life satisfaction remain underexplored, particularly within the Malaysian context. Limited research has examined how family dynamics, such as communication, conflict resolution, and emotional bonding, work in tandem with social support systems to influence adolescents' mental health and overall life satisfaction (Cheah et al., 2019; Yeoh et al., 2021). This gap in the literature is concerning, as it hinders the development of culturally specific interventions that could better address the unique familial and social challenges faced by Malaysian adolescents (Yusof & Hashim, 2018). Without a deeper understanding of how these interactions operate within the local context, efforts to design targeted mental health programs or family-based interventions may fall short in addressing the real needs of this population (Ramli & Jaafar, 2020). Consequently, the lack of knowledge poses a significant barrier to creating evidence-based approaches that could improve life satisfaction and well-being outcomes for adolescents in Malaysia.

Present Study

The study aimed to identify the relationship between family functioning, family social support and life satisfaction among school adolescents at FELDA in Johor, Malaysia. Furthermore, we also examined the unique predictors of life satisfaction among the adolescents. Based on previous studies, we assumed that both family functioning and family social supports would positively correlate and predicted life satisfaction in school adolescents.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

A total of 575 school adolescents (53% female) aged between 13 and 16 years old participated in this study. The participants were randomly selected from 3 schools in Segamat district of Johor. Prior to the data collection, permissions were granted from the Ministry of Education Malaysia, the Johor State of Education, and the selected schools. Consent was given by the

participants and their teachers, who acted as loco parentis. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination, the sample size was deemed sufficient.

Measures

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) was used to assess adolescents' subjective well-being and insight into their overall life satisfaction. The 5-item measure were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Some examples of the items are "*in most way my life is close to my ideal*" and "*so far, I have gotten the important things I want in life*". Higher scores represented higher levels of life satisfaction.

The Malaysian version of the McMaster Family Assessment Device–General Functioning Subscale (Cong et al., 2022) was used to assess family functioning. The measure includes 12 items with responses on a 4-point Likert scale, which ranges from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Some examples of the items are, "*we are able to make decisions about how to solve problems*" and "*we confide in each other*". Higher scores indicated higher levels of family functioning.

The Malaysian version of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Ng et al., 2010) were used to measure the perceived support provided to adolescents by their family. The 12-item instrument assesses perceived social support from three sources: family, friends, and significant others. For this study, only four items of family subscale were measured using 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Examples of the items are, "*My family really tries to help me*" and "*I can talk about my problems with my family*". Higher scores depicted higher levels of family support.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed by using the IBM SPSS version 25 (IBM Corp., 2017). We conducted descriptive analyses to determine the frequency and percentage on the levels of each variable, as well as the mean and standard deviation. Pearson's correlation analysis was run to examine the relationships between all variables, and a multiple regression analysis was used to examine the unique predictors of life satisfaction.

Results

Levels of life satisfaction, family functioning, and family social support

The results provided in Table 1 clarifies the levels of life satisfaction, family functioning, and family social support of the participants. The examination of life satisfaction indicated a significantly high average score of 16.07 (SD = 5.17), with a considerable 84.5% of participants falling within the high category. The research presents intricate findings while analysing family functioning and family social support. The average score for family functioning was 39.34 (SD = 8.05), and the majority of 86.8% of respondents reported high levels. Meanwhile, the family social support resulted in a mean score of 23.59 (SD = 5.67), with 92.3% of the participants also ranking it as high.

Table 1

Level of study variables

Variables	n (%)	Mean	SD.
Life Satisfaction		16.07	5.17
Low	89 (15.5)		
High	486 (84.5)		
Family Functioning		39.34	8.05
Low	76 (13.2)		
High	499 (86.8)		
Family Social Support		23.59	5.67
Low	44 (7.7)		
High	531 (92.3)		

Relationships between family functioning, family social support and life satisfaction

Table 2 depicts a positive significant relationship between family functioning and life satisfaction ($r = 0.405$, $p < 0.001$). This indicated that adolescents' life satisfaction could increase when the family functioned well. Furthermore, the results also showed a significant positive relationship between family social support and life satisfaction ($r = 0.493$, $p < 0.001$). It indicated that as family social support increased, life satisfaction also increased.

Table 2

Correlation Analyses Between Family Functioning, Family Social Support And Life Satisfaction

Variables	Life Satisfaction	
	r	P
Family Functioning	0.405	0.001
Family Social Support	0.493	0.001

The unique predictors of life satisfaction

Table 3 presents the results of multiple regression analyses in predicting the participants' life satisfaction. It showed that only family social support significantly and positively related to life satisfaction. The overall model fit was moderate, explaining approximately 24.3% of the variance in life satisfaction was predicted by the selected variables. This finding also underscores the importance of family social support in enhancing life satisfaction.

Table 3

Regression analyses of family functioning and family social supports as predictors of life satisfaction

Variables	Life Satisfaction		
	B	β	P
Family Functioning	0.008	0.005	0.896
Family Social Support	0.488	0.493	0.000

R² = 0.243
F = 92.004

Note: * $p < 0.001$, β = Standardized Coefficient Beta

Discussion

A positive correlation with life satisfaction suggests that family functioning plays a meaningful role. Families that function well create an environment that fosters emotional support, stability, and a sense of belonging, which can significantly influence an adolescent's sense of life satisfaction. Adolescents are in a critical developmental phase, and the quality of their home environment often acts as a foundation for their emotional and psychological well-being. In line with these findings, research in recent years has consistently emphasized the importance of family dynamics in shaping life satisfaction among adolescents. For instance, Zullig et al. (2015) found that strong family relationships are predictive of higher life satisfaction in youth. Similarly, a study by Proctor et al. (2017) affirmed the link between healthy family relationships and positive well-being outcomes among adolescents, suggesting that emotional closeness and familial support provide the social capital needed for resilience in young people. Additionally, Özdemir and Özdemir (2020) underscored that a positive family environment, characterized by warmth, understanding, and problem-solving skills, is crucial in promoting life satisfaction. Conversely, families with poor communication, unresolved conflicts, or emotional neglect tend to foster environments that lower life satisfaction in adolescents. This finding was also echoed by Bernardi et al. (2021), who argue that stable and supportive family structures contribute to enhanced psychological well-being and satisfaction with life.

Furthermore, the significant positive relationship found in this study strengthens the existing evidence that family support is pivotal in shaping life satisfaction, especially during adolescence when individuals are highly sensitive to their social environments. Family social support is a fundamental factor in the well-being of adolescents, particularly in times of stress, transition, and personal development. This relationship is grounded in the idea that strong social ties within the family provide a sense of security, belonging, and emotional sustenance, which in turn increases overall life satisfaction (Rosenberg, 2019).

Studies over recent years have repeatedly demonstrated the important role of family in shaping an individual's subjective well-being. For instance, Mojtabavi et al. (2017) found that family social support significantly influences life satisfaction and mental health outcomes, particularly among adolescents who experience stressful events or transitions. Similarly, Salami (2015) emphasized that adolescents who receive consistent emotional and instrumental support from their families tend to report higher life satisfaction. This is because family support not only provides practical help but also reinforces an adolescent's self-esteem and confidence, which are crucial for overall well-being. Moreover, Kwan and Chiu (2016) argue that family support enhances psychological resilience, helping adolescents better cope with challenges such as academic pressures or peer issues. This increased resilience fosters a more positive outlook on life, thus improving life satisfaction. They also noted that adolescents who perceive their families as highly supportive are better equipped to form healthy relationships outside the family, further contributing to their sense of happiness and satisfaction. Teixeira et al. (2020) supported these findings by showing that family social support can act as a buffer against life stressors, mitigating the negative impact of challenges and promoting greater well-being. Family members often provide guidance, emotional validation, and a secure space for adolescents to express their concerns, which directly translates into higher life satisfaction.

While this study has addressed the research gap, certain limitations should be acknowledged and considered in future research. Firstly, this study applied cross-sectional design, thus did not provide information on causal effect. It is yet to be confirmed whether improved family functioning could contribute to higher levels of life satisfaction or vice versa. It is recommended for future study to confirm the relations by applying longitudinal study. Another limitation is that this study was carried out in the southern part of Malaysia, which the findings cannot be generalized to adolescents from other geographic locations or cultural settings. Future research should consider the involvement of more heterogeneous samples from different regions and cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion

This study highlights the crucial role of family functioning and support in shaping adolescents' life satisfaction. A positive family environment, characterized by emotional support, stability, and effective communication, provides adolescents with the security and resilience needed to navigate life's challenges. Existing literature consistently affirms the significant impact of family relationships on well-being, reinforcing that adolescents with strong family support systems report higher levels of life satisfaction. As this study confirms, family social support is essential, offering not only emotional sustenance but also a foundation for healthy development and positive life outcomes during adolescence. These findings emphasize the need for continued focus on fostering supportive family environments to enhance the overall well-being of young people.

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