

# The Relationship Between Social Adaptability, Psychological Distress, and Parental Attitude on Life Satisfaction among Malaysian Young Adults

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## Abstract

Life satisfaction is important because it promotes overall well-being, fostering a sense of purpose and happiness, which can lead to healthier, more fulfilling lives. This study thus aimed at examining the relationship between social adaptability, psychological distress and parental attitude on life satisfaction among the Malaysian young adults. Adopting quantitative method with a set of questionnaires that involved 400 public and private Malaysian university students. The results shows that the respondents have a high social adaptability, moderate psychological distress and both responsive and demanding parental attitude with high life satisfaction. Meanwhile, there was a positive significant correlation between social adaptability and parental attitude with life satisfaction, and a negative correlation between psychological distress with life satisfaction. Social adaptability shows the strongest predictor to life satisfaction among the respondents. This study suggests that by increased life satisfaction, cultivating social adaptability can help foster stronger connections and resilience in the face of change, while addressing psychological distress through therapy or self-care can improve overall well-being. Additionally, developing a positive parental attitude by being empathetic, supportive, and open-minded can strengthen family bonds and contribute to a happier and more fulfilling life.

**Keywords:** Social Adaptability, Psychological Distress, Parental Attitude, Life Satisfaction, Young Adults

## Introduction

Life satisfaction, a critical component of subjective well-being, is particularly important among young adults as they undergo significant transitions and challenges, such as pursuing higher education, entering the workforce, and establishing romantic relationships (Willroth

et al., 2021). During this stage of life, the ability to adapt and maintain a positive outlook on life can greatly influence young adults' psychological and emotional well-being, which, in turn, has long-lasting effects on their mental health, physical health, and overall quality of life (Zhang et al., 2020). High levels of life satisfaction in young adulthood have been associated with better academic performance, enhanced career success, and more satisfying interpersonal relationships (Rode et al., 2021). Furthermore, life satisfaction during this period can serve as a protective factor against the development of mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety (Cavioni et al., 2021).

However, young adults may face several issues that can negatively impact their life satisfaction. The increasing prevalence of mental health disorders among this age group, such as anxiety and depression, can impede their ability to experience satisfaction and contentment in their lives (Twenge et al., 2019). Additionally, the economic uncertainties and financial strains that many young adults face, such as student loan debt and underemployment, can further exacerbate feelings of dissatisfaction and stress (Hou et al., 2021). As a result, identifying and addressing these issues becomes paramount for promoting life satisfaction and overall well-being among young adults.

To enhance life satisfaction among young adults, interventions and support systems targeting these specific issues need to be implemented. For instance, providing access to mental health resources and services on college campuses can help identify and address mental health concerns, ultimately contributing to increased life satisfaction (Reetz et al., 2021). Additionally, implementing programs and policies to alleviate financial burdens and facilitate career development can help young adults successfully navigate the challenges of early adulthood and attain greater life satisfaction (Benson et al., 2022).

The importance of life satisfaction among young adults cannot be overstated, as it directly impacts their psychological and emotional well-being during a critical stage of life. Addressing the issues that influence life satisfaction, such as mental health and financial strain, is essential for fostering well-being among this age group. By implementing targeted interventions and support systems, society can help young adults navigate the challenges they face, ultimately contributing to enhanced life satisfaction and overall well-being.

Life satisfaction among young adults can be influenced by various factors, including social adaptation, psychological distress, and parental attitudes. Understanding the interplay between these factors can provide insights into the well-being of young adults and inform strategies to promote a higher quality of life. The interrelationship between these factors plays a crucial role in determining life satisfaction among young adults. By addressing these factors and fostering a supportive environment, it is possible to enhance the well-being of young adults and promote a more satisfying and fulfilling life. Thus, this study sought to examine the relationship between social adaptation, psychological distress, and parental attitudes on life satisfaction among Malaysian young adults.

## **Internal and External Factors of Life Satisfaction among Young Adults**

### ***Social Adaptability***

Social adaptation is a significant factor affecting life satisfaction, as it reflects the ability of young adults to effectively navigate the social environment and build meaningful

relationships with others. A strong sense of social adaptation enables young adults to form connections, develop a support network, and feel a sense of belonging in their community. In contrast, poor social adaptation may lead to isolation, loneliness, and lower life satisfaction, as individuals struggle to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships.

Social adaptability, the ability to adjust and effectively interact in various social situations, has been found to be positively related to life satisfaction (Alonso et al., 2021). Individuals with high social adaptability are more capable of building and maintaining meaningful relationships, effectively coping with social challenges, and navigating diverse social environments (Alegre et al., 2020). Research conducted by Helliwell et al (2022) demonstrated that individuals with greater social adaptability reported higher levels of life satisfaction, as they were better equipped to handle interpersonal conflicts and establish supportive social networks. Consequently, these individuals experience enhanced well-being and overall improved quality of life, as social connections and the ability to adapt to different situations are essential aspects of human flourishing (Ryff, 2019).

In addition to its direct impact on life satisfaction, social adaptability can also indirectly influence well-being by fostering a sense of belonging, social support, and self-esteem (Swami et al., 2021). When individuals possess strong social adaptability skills, they are more likely to create and maintain positive relationships, which, in turn, contribute to increased life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Holt-Lunstad., 2021). Interventions aimed at enhancing social adaptability, such as social skills training, assertiveness training, and communication skills development, have been shown to improve life satisfaction and overall well-being (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2021). These findings highlight the importance of cultivating social adaptability in order to promote life satisfaction and foster an individual's overall sense of well-being.

### ***Psychological Distress***

Psychological distress can have a substantial impact on life satisfaction among young adults. Experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, or depression can negatively affect an individual's outlook on life and their overall well-being. Moreover, psychological distress can exacerbate difficulties in social adaptation, further reducing life satisfaction. By addressing and managing psychological distress, young adults can improve their mental health and, in turn, enhance their life satisfaction.

Psychological distress and life satisfaction share a complex and inverse relationship, as individuals experiencing greater levels of psychological distress typically report lower levels of life satisfaction (Satici et al., 2021). Psychological distress, encompassing symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and stress, can impact an individual's mental, emotional, and social well-being, subsequently affecting their overall satisfaction with life (Cheng et al., 2020). In a recent study conducted by Zhang et al (2020), it was found that increased psychological distress was associated with lower levels of life satisfaction, as well as decreased daily functioning and reduced quality of life. These findings highlight the crucial role that mental health plays in an individual's ability to experience satisfaction and contentment in their life, emphasizing the importance of addressing and managing psychological distress.

Conversely, higher levels of life satisfaction contribute to better psychological well-being, as they are associated with increased happiness, resilience, and overall improved mental health (Kansky & Diener, 2021). Individuals experiencing greater life satisfaction tend to be more capable of coping with psychological distress and show greater resilience when faced with adversity (Mancini et al., 2021). Furthermore, interventions aimed at enhancing life satisfaction, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness-based practices, and positive psychology interventions, have been shown to alleviate psychological distress and improve overall mental health (Ivtzan et al., 2021). This suggests that fostering life satisfaction and addressing psychological distress are interconnected objectives, and working towards achieving both can lead to better well-being and life experiences.

### ***Parental Attitude***

Parental attitudes and their influence on young adults cannot be underestimated. A supportive and nurturing parental environment can foster resilience, self-esteem, and positive mental health, all of which contribute to higher life satisfaction. On the other hand, overly critical or controlling parental attitudes may lead to increased psychological distress and difficulty with social adaptation, ultimately resulting in lower life satisfaction for young adults. A healthy parent-child relationship can serve as a protective factor, helping young adults navigate challenges and maintain a higher sense of life satisfaction.

Parental attitudes can have a significant impact on an individual's life satisfaction, as they play a crucial role in shaping a child's emotional, social, and psychological development (Bornstein, 2002). Supportive and nurturing parental attitudes, such as expressing warmth, encouragement, and understanding, have been found to be positively associated with higher levels of life satisfaction in children and adolescents (Proctor et al., 2009). On the contrary, harsh or overly critical parenting can lead to lower levels of life satisfaction and increased likelihood of experiencing psychological distress, such as anxiety and depression (Kim et al., 2022). Research conducted by Sun and Shek (2010) revealed that adolescents who perceived their parents as supportive and caring reported higher levels of life satisfaction, while those who experienced negative parenting behaviors, such as rejection and hostility, reported lower levels of satisfaction.

In addition, parental attitudes can influence life satisfaction indirectly through their impact on an individual's coping skills and resilience (Eisenberg et al., 2018). When parents model adaptive coping strategies and provide a secure and nurturing environment, their children are more likely to develop effective coping mechanisms and exhibit greater resilience in the face of adversity (Gutman et al., 2021). This, in turn, can contribute to higher levels of life satisfaction, as resilient individuals are better equipped to navigate challenges and maintain a positive outlook on life (Ong et al., 2020). Furthermore, interventions aimed at improving parental attitudes and fostering positive parent-child relationships have been shown to enhance life satisfaction and overall well-being in children and adolescents (Cohen et al., 2023). These findings underscore the importance of supportive and nurturing parenting in promoting life satisfaction and well-being throughout an individual's life.

## **Method**

### **Population and sample selection**

The targeted population for this current study were public and private universities in Klang Valley. Klang valley public universities undergraduate students from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Malaya (UM), UCSI University and Taylor's University were the samples of the current study. Those students from various races and regardless of their years of study as well as programmes were considered eligible to participate in this study. The sample size in the current study was 400 respondents from the total number of Malaysian undergraduate students in all four universities of 58,952.

Table 1

*Description of student's background*

Variables	n(%)	Mean	Sd.	Min.	Max
Age (years)		22.59	2.28	19	27
21 and below	135 (33.8)				
22 - 24	181 (45.3)				
25 and above	84 (21.0)				
Gender					
Male	199 (49.8)				
Female	201 (50.2)				
University					
UPM	118 (29.5)				
UM	108 (27.0)				
UCSI	96 (24.0)				
Taylor's University	78 (19.5)				
Race					
Malay	131 (32.8)				
Chinese	131 (32.8)				
Indian	95 (23.8)				
Others	43 (10.8)				
Year of study		2.91	1.09	1	4
1	64 (16.0)				
2	66 (16.5)				
3	111 (27.8)				
4	159 (39.8)				
Current CGPA					
Below 3.00	196 (49.0)				
3.00 – 3.49	91 (22.8)				
3.5 and above	113 (28.2)				

Note: Sd. = Standard deviation, Min. = Minimum, Max. = Maximum

**Data Collection****Measures**

*Social Adaptability.* Social adaptability was measured by using the Social Adaptation Self-evaluation Scale (SASS) by Bosc et al (1997) which examine the subjects of work and leisure, familial and non-family relationship, intellectual interests, job satisfaction, and the respondent's impression of his own power over his environment, among other topics. The SASS measurement has 21 items which rated using 4-point Likert scale with 0 (Never) to 3 (Very good or very actively). Example of items are; "Do you try to form relationships with others", "How in general do you rate your relationships with other people", "How often do you find it difficult to express your opinions to people". The reliability was  $\alpha = .78$ .

*Psychological Distress.* Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) by Kessler (2001) was used to gauge emotional distress. The K10 scale consists of 10 items, each with a 5-point likert-scale, describing different emotional states. Each item is graded on a scale of 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time). Example of items are; "During the last 30 days, about how often did you feel tired out for no good reason", "During the last 30 days, about how often did you feel nervous.", "During the last 30 days, about how often did you feel so nervous that nothing could calm you down". The reliability was  $\alpha = 0.84$ .

*Parental Attitude.* Parenting Dimension Questionnaire (PDQ) is a parenting style measurement by Gafoor and Kurukkan (2014) with 32 items about parenting practices with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Two dimensions of parental attitude were measured; (i) responsiveness/involvement, item examples, "Listens to my ideas and opinions", "Gives me freedom to select the subject for study", "Takes care of my food preferences", and (ii) parental control/demandingness sub-scale, "Tries to frame my likes and dislikes", "Exerts firm control on me", "Punishes me when I do not meet expectations". The reliability was  $\alpha = 0.92$ .

*Life satisfaction.* The Life Scale (SWL) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985) was used to measure life satisfaction. Consisted of 5 items, rated on 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Example of items; "In most ways my life is close to my ideal", "The conditions of my life are excellent", "I am satisfied with my life". The reliability was 0.89.

**Results and Discussion**

From Table 2, Approximately 14% (n = 56) of the students demonstrated low social adaptability, whereas 43.5% (n = 174) exhibited moderate adaptability. Notably, 42.5% (n = 170) of the students displayed high social adaptability. This indicates that a majority of respondents possess moderate to high social adaptability. This is in line with the study by Zhang et al (2022), which suggests university students typically have strong communication skills, deal effectively with interpersonal conflicts, and adapt well to novel environments and roles. Considering the survey's respondents were mainly in their final year of university, their primary concern is likely the transition into the workforce or the next stage of their lives, emphasizing the need for effective social adaptability to pursue future career opportunities.

Results for psychological distress shows that about 29.8% of students had well psychological distress level, while 26.5% had a mild psychological distress level followed by 35.5%



moderately psychological distress and 8.3% that had severe psychological distress. This showed that students have moderate psychological distress. Shehadeh et al. (2020) report that students were able to pinpoint anxiety-related sources that are connected to their academic requirements and assignments. According to the previous research on environmental stress, most students reported experiencing moderate to high levels of stress as a result of environmental factors (Yikealo et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, the findings regarding parental responsiveness indicated that approximately 48.0% of the participants reported low levels of parental responsiveness, while 52.0% perceived their parents as highly responsive. Regarding parental demandingness, the results revealed that approximately 54.5% of the respondents experienced high levels of parental demandingness, whereas 45.5% experienced low levels. The majority of the participants reported high levels of both parental responsiveness and demandingness, which aligns with the authoritative parenting style. Authoritative parenting is characterized by parents who combine strictness with affection, encouraging open communication with their children and providing explanations for their rules (Hickman et al., 2000; Love & Thomas, 2014). It also involves displaying love, adaptability, and reasonable acceptance towards their children (Baumrind, 1966; Buri, 1991).

The findings regarding life satisfaction indicated that a significant proportion of the students (68.5%) experienced a high level of satisfaction with their lives, while approximately 28.6% reported low levels of satisfaction. A small percentage of respondents (4.7%) expressed a neutral level of satisfaction.

Table 2

*Level of sleep quality, cognitive workload, loneliness, and internet addiction.*

Level	n	%	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<u>Social Adaptability</u>			18.84	4.22	8	26
Low (7 - 13)	56	14.0				
Moderate (14 - 20)	174	43.5				
High (21 - 28)	170	42.5				
			26.76	8.71	14	47
<u>Psychological Distress</u>						
Well (10 - 19)	36	29.8				
Mild (20 - 24)	61	26.5				
Moderate (25 – 29)	5	35.5				
Severe (30 – 50)	33	8.3				
<u>Parental Attitude</u>			20.03	4.84		
<u>Parental Responsiveness</u>			18.57	4.53	8	28
Low (6 - 18)	192	48.0				
High (19 - 30)	208	52.0				
			21.48	5.15	10	33

*Parental Demandingness*

Low (7 – 21)	182	45.5
High (22 – 35)	218	54.5

22.41      6.05      7      32

Life Satisfaction

Low (5 - 19)	107	26.8
Neutral (20)	19	4.7
High (21 - 35)	274	68.5

According to the data presented in Table 3, there was a significant correlation between social adaptability and life satisfaction ( $r = 0.680$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This positive correlation indicates that as social adaptability increases, so does life satisfaction. Previous research by Zhou and Lin (2016) supports these findings, suggesting that individuals with higher levels of social support and adaptability are better equipped to adjust to new social environments, leading to greater life satisfaction. Similarly, Overdale and Gardner (2012) demonstrated a positive relationship between coping adaptability and performance, showing that individuals who are more adaptable can effectively utilize their psychological resources to adapt to new situations.

Furthermore, the results revealed a significant negative relationship between psychological distress and life satisfaction ( $r = -0.632$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This indicates that higher levels of psychological distress are associated with lower life satisfaction. Similar findings were reported by Abbas and Shah (2017), who identified a weak negative correlation between stress and life satisfaction. Bataineh (2013) also examined the academic pressures faced by college students and found stressors such as overwhelming academic workload, insufficient study time, high family expectations, and low motivation levels. Fear of failure was identified as a significant contributor to stress. There were no apparent differences in performance among students with different specializations.

Additionally, a significant relationship between parental attitude and life satisfaction was observed ( $r = 0.436$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The study's findings indicate that individuals who perceive their parents as accepting, supportive, and tolerant tend to have higher life satisfaction (Isik et al., 2021). Lu et al., (2022) suggest that parental support for physical activity in secondary school students conveys a positive attitude towards health, life, and physical activity, inspiring children to develop positive habits and enhance their personal growth.

Table 3

*The relationship between social adaptability, psychological distress, and parental attitude on life satisfaction.*

Variable	Life Satisfaction	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Social Adaptability	.680***	.000
Psychological Distress	-.632***	.000
Parental Attitude	.436***	.016

Note: \*\*\* Level of significant is at  $p < 0.001$



The findings presented in Table 4 revealed that the overall model was statistically significant, explaining 58.00% ( $R^2 = 0.582$ ) of the variance in life satisfaction scores. The model had a significant F-value of 12.05 ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating its validity. Among the variables examined, social adaptability emerged as the strongest predictor of life satisfaction, with a significant F-value of 12.05 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and an adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.53. The Beta Coefficients further supported the importance of social adaptability ( $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) as the primary variable influencing life satisfaction, followed by psychological distress ( $\beta = -0.32$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and parental attitude ( $\beta = 0.27$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

These results imply that, specifically among public and private university students in Klang Valley, Malaysia, social adaptability plays a critical role as the most influential predictor among the variables examined. Higher levels of social adaptability are associated with increased life satisfaction among these students. This study builds upon previous research that has also demonstrated a significant relationship between adaptability and life satisfaction (Martin et al., 2013), highlighting the reinforcing effect of social support on this association (Zhou & Lin, 2016).

Table 4

*Multiple regression in determining the main indicators of Life Satisfaction among the University students*

Variable	Life Satisfaction			
	B	SE.B	Beta, $\beta$	$p$
Social Adaptability	.86	.28	.47	.000
Psychological Distress	-.49	.27	-.32	.04
Parental Attitude	.56	.28	.27	.05
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	.58			
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	.53			
<b>F</b>	12.05			

#### **The significance of social adaptability on life satisfaction among the university students**

The current study found out the social adaptability plays a crucial role in life satisfaction among university students. This is true as it directly influences their ability to navigate diverse social environments, build and maintain meaningful relationships, and effectively cope with the various challenges they may encounter during their academic journey (Alegre et al., 2020). University life often requires students to interact with people from different backgrounds, manage group projects, and participate in extracurricular activities. Students with higher social adaptability are better equipped to handle these situations and form connections that contribute to their overall well-being and life satisfaction (Helliwell et al., 2022).

A strong sense of social adaptability can also facilitate a sense of belonging and social support among university students, which are essential factors in promoting life satisfaction (Swami et al., 2021). Supportive relationships with peers, faculty, and staff can provide students with the encouragement and resources they need to succeed academically and personally.

Furthermore, social adaptability can indirectly enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy, as students who are more socially adept are likely to experience positive feedback and validation from their social interactions (Zhang et al., 2022).

Moreover, social adaptability can help university students cope with stress and navigate difficult situations more effectively. Students who possess strong social adaptability skills are better equipped to manage interpersonal conflicts, seek assistance when needed, and establish supportive networks that can help them overcome challenges (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2023). This ability to adapt and cope with stress contributes to increased life satisfaction and overall psychological well-being.

One effective way for university students to improve their life satisfaction is by actively participating in extracurricular activities and campus clubs. A study by Rubin, Evans, and Wilkinson (2021) found that involvement in such activities not only fosters a sense of belonging but also provides students with opportunities to develop new skills, make friends, and expand their social networks. Universities can help facilitate this by offering a diverse range of clubs and activities, providing resources and support for student-run organizations, and promoting a culture of engagement and inclusivity on campus.

Universities can also support student life satisfaction by prioritizing mental health services and resources. A study by King et al (2022) found that access to mental health services, such as counseling and stress management workshops, is positively correlated with increased life satisfaction among university students. By investing in these services and raising awareness about their availability, universities can create an environment that is supportive of students' mental well-being, which ultimately contributes to higher life satisfaction.

Lastly, academic factors play a significant role in university students' life satisfaction. A study by Richardson, Abraham, and Bond (2012) suggests that providing students with clear expectations, constructive feedback, and opportunities for academic growth can lead to increased life satisfaction. Universities can help facilitate this by ensuring that their teaching staff is well-trained in effective teaching methods, fostering a supportive learning environment, and providing resources such as tutoring and academic advising to help students succeed academically. By addressing these factors, universities can create a positive atmosphere that enables students to thrive, leading to higher levels of life satisfaction.

### **The impact and implications of life satisfaction**

The impact of life satisfaction on young adults is a subject of growing interest among researchers, given the increasing awareness of mental health and overall well-being. One study by Helliwell et al (2022) reveals that higher life satisfaction can lead to better physical health, academic success, and positive social relationships among young adults. The study highlights the importance of fostering a supportive environment, both at home and in educational institutions, in order to promote life satisfaction and well-being.

Life satisfaction also plays a crucial role in shaping the career choices and future aspirations of young adults. A recent study by Diener and Tay (2012) indicates that individuals with higher life satisfaction tend to pursue careers that align with their personal values and passions, leading to increased job satisfaction and engagement. This, in turn, can contribute to a more

fulfilling and successful professional life, as well as positively impact the overall economy through higher productivity and innovation.

Conversely, lower levels of life satisfaction can have negative consequences on young adults' mental health. A study by Twenge et al (2019) establishes a strong link between low life satisfaction and an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. This research underscores the importance of early intervention and support for young adults experiencing dissatisfaction in order to prevent the development of more severe mental health problems.

Finally, the implications of life satisfaction among young adults extend beyond individual well-being and also affect societal dynamics. A research article by Smith & Konik (2022) demonstrates that communities with higher levels of life satisfaction among young adults tend to exhibit stronger social cohesion, trust, and civic engagement. This suggests that promoting life satisfaction in this demographic can contribute to building stronger, more resilient communities that are better equipped to face challenges and work together towards common goals.

### **Conclusion**

In order to promote life satisfaction and overall well-being among young adults, it is important for parents, educational institutions, and communities to work together in creating supportive environments that enable personal growth and development. By addressing the factors that influence life satisfaction, it can help young adults achieve greater social adaptability, build stronger communities, and improve their quality of life.

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