

## Well-Being in Malaysia: A Social and Psychological Perspective between Demographic Indicators

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### ABSTRACT

Well-being is a complex phenomenon that may be determined by a variety of circumstances including demographic indicators. Yet relatively few research has explored the notion of social and psychological well-being among the Malaysian population. The primary aim of this study is to develop a Malaysian-specific index assessing social well-being (SWB), psychological well-being (PWB), and negative emotional symptoms (NES) between varying demographic factors. The study is a cross-sectional design including 382 participants from various ages, genders, ethnicities, number of dependents, family incomes, and educational levels. The results suggested that demographics of gender, education, and income significantly differed for social well-being. While for psychological well-being, mean differences between age and educational level were found. Lastly, negative emotional symptoms indicated differences between age, educational level, and income. To conclude, the findings of this study may be valuable for practical implications to private and government entities in alleviating discrepancies between demographic groups among Malaysians' well-being.

**Keywords:** Malaysian demographics, negative emotional symptoms, psychological well-being index, social well-being index

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### INTRODUCTION

Psychological well-being (PWB) has been defined as a complex concept consisting of happiness, mental health, and life satisfaction (Dhanabhakya & Sarath, 2023), while social well-being (SWB) focusses on the relationship with others and feelings of safety (Dunaeva, 2018). Despite

existing studies in Malaysia, significant gaps remain in understanding demographic impacts on well-being (Awang et al., 2022; Isa & Ahmad, 2022). Additionally, the Malaysian Well-being Index (MyWI) being used to measure economic and social indicators among the citizens lack several significant elements such as PWB. This suggests the need to further investigate the psychological and social well-being dimensions among Malaysian demographics.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological and social well-being are interconnected and essential for personal growth and social integration. Social well-being (SWB) refers to community belonging, social relationships, and access to local facilities (Aked et al., 2008). Housing and neighbourhood environment significantly impact well-being (Rolfe et al., 2020), along with the disparity between living costs and income. A supportive environment and strong social bonds further enhance well-being. In Malaysia, SWB including housing, healthcare, and education, is linked to demographics (Isa & Ahmad, 2022). However, urban poor Malaysians face limited healthcare access (Wahab et al., 2020). Psychological well-being (PWB) is based on eudaimonic perspective that consists of six dimensions including self-acceptance, personal growth, autonomy, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and purpose in life (Ryff, 1989). Spirituality and religiosity also contribute to individuals' PWB (Ryff, 2021). From a hedonic view, life satisfaction is related to fulfillment and flourishing (Kalonias et al., 2022). Past studies emphasised the significant association between sociodemographic variables and PWB (Cobb-Clark & Kettlewell, 2021). In Canada, Varin et al. (2024) concluded that older individuals and marital status is linked to greater PWB, while mood disorders and stress reduces it. Additionally, life satisfaction levels correlate with higher income and younger age during the pandemic in Germany (Geprägs et al., 2022), while those between 38 to 46 years old and perceived poor health in Peru reduces it (Durand-Sanchez et al., 2023). In Malaysia, life satisfaction and well-being declines with age, particularly women over 75 years (Park & Joshanloo, 2021). Nonetheless, further research is required to identify the diverse factors influencing PWB among Malaysians.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants and Materials

This study was a cross-sectional study that recruited individuals aged 20 years old and above through the snowball sampling technique. There was a total of 382 ( $n = 229$  females) participants who completed the survey. The participants were Malaysians from diverse socio-demographic backgrounds including age, race, educational level, household income, and location. The questionnaire implemented for this study was developed with seven

experts from the related field through two focus group discussions based on existing scales and past literature. The survey consisted of 81 items on SWB (13 dimensions), PWB (3 dimensions), and NES (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Cronbach's alpha indicated high internal consistency for the overall social ( $\alpha = 0.915$ ) and psychological well-being ( $\alpha = 0.785$ ), with most of the dimensions ranging from 0.7 to 0.9. The DASS subscales and the overall negative emotional symptoms also suggested high reliability ranging between 0.81 to 0.94.

## RESULTS

### Demographics

Overall, there are slightly more females than males in this study, mostly aged 45 to 49 years old. The majority of the respondents are Malay, married, and obtained a Bachelor's degree. Among the major cities, Johor Bahru received the most responses. Additionally, most of the sample had no dependants, earned between RM7,000 and RM10,969 monthly, and live in their own homes.

### Descriptive Analysis and Mean Comparison

The Shapiro-Wilk test showed non-normal distribution ( $p < 0.05$ ) for all dimensions, which is common in questionnaire data and no outliers were detected. SWB rating was highest for "cleanliness" ( $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ). PWB presented high mean scores including spirituality ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ), personal growth ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ), and life satisfaction ( $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ), while the overall NES were low ( $M = 2.30$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ). Mann Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis were conducted to determine the mean rank differences in well-being across demographics. SWB was higher among females ( $z = -3.02$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ), Masters and PhD holders [ $H(7, n = 382) = 16.26$ ,  $p = 0.023$ ], and the highest income group [ $H(10, n = 382) = 21.49$ ,  $p = 0.018$ ]. PWB was significant among 30 to 44 year olds [ $H(9, n = 382) = 20.65$ ,  $p = 0.014$ ] and postgraduates [ $H(7, n = 382) = 30.88$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ]. Lastly, NES were significant among 60 and 65 year olds [ $H(9, n = 382) = 45.21$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ], low educational level [ $H(7, n = 382) = 15.23$ ,  $p = 0.033$ ], and low household income [ $H(10, n = 382) = 27.18$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ].

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to develop a social and psychological well-being index for Malaysians and explore its links with demographic indicators. Although the study was conducted in the post-pandemic phase, results showed no decline in well-being aligning with Geprägs et al. (2022), who found no difference in quality of life due to the pandemic circumstances. However, this may be due to the sample's high education and high income backgrounds.

Our findings indicated higher SWB among females, higher educational levels, and higher household income. This aligns with studies in Kenya (Thuku, 2022), Australia (Povey et al., 2016), and Malaysia (Isa & Ahmad, 2022). Our findings may suggest that respondents with higher educational attainment are more knowledgeable about the importance of social factors such as the healthcare system and transportation. Higher income and education contribute to better access to housing, healthcare, and social connections (Livingston et al., 2022).

Furthermore, our results presented significant differences in PWB among middle-aged group individuals and those with higher education. As income increases with age, life satisfaction tends to improve (Bartram, 2021), while older individuals often experience lower PWB (Pourebrahim & Rasouli, 2019). In Nigeria, younger, educated teachers reported lower well-being (Okeke et al., 2024). Compared to our results, this may suggest that younger individuals are still developing their coping strategies. Accordingly, NES were higher among the older individuals, those with lower education, and lower income. In contrast to our findings, a Canadian study found no significance between educational attainment and household income on PWB (Varin et al., 2024).

## CONCLUSION

Our findings may contribute to the development of the well-being literature in Malaysia, particularly with regard to the importance of SWB and PWB. Our assessment of demographic characteristics in relation to well-being provides new insights indicating how education and income are essential elements in promoting SWB and PWB. Therefore, these data may be valuable for policymakers seeking to conduct interventions aimed at improving the SWB and PWB of the Malaysian population as a whole, as well as particular target groups.

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