



## **Social Support, Resilience, and Happiness in Response to COVID-19**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals are having difficulties in coping with stress and enhancing their happiness due to the lack of proper social support. The phenomenon is highly alarming as the mental health issues of Malaysians begin to surface during the period of adversity. The study aims to investigate the mediating effect of resilience on the relationship between social support and happiness during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 104 Malaysian adults participated in the study through a convenience sampling method. They completed an online survey which measured levels of social support, resilience, and happiness. A Pearson correlation analysis showed that social support and resilience were positively associated with happiness. Besides that, resilience was evidenced as a partial mediator on the association between social support and happiness. The study concluded that individuals with a higher level of social support showed a higher level of resilience which eventually led to a higher level of happiness. In facing adversity, Malaysian adults with poor social support should improve their resiliency to boost their happiness.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, happiness, resilience, social support, Malaysia

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

As of the 18th March 2020, a movement control order (MCO) was announced and implemented on Malaysians because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Koya, 2020); this is indeed an adverse situation that Malaysians have had to face. It has been reported that the MCO may trigger issues of mental health in Malaysian because of being overly bored at home due to the lack of social stimulation and the absence of freedom to roam around (Karim, 2020). A local study revealed that 48% and 45% of respondents experienced varying degrees of anxiety and depression during the MCO (Azuddin, 2020). The statistics demonstrated how serious the mental health issue was for many Malaysians during the MCO. According to Sundarasan et al. (2020), the pandemic has a significant effect on one's anxiety level due to the practice of social distancing in reducing the rate of getting infected. Little is known on how to boost happiness among Malaysians in times of a pandemic.

During normal times, Malaysians' happiness has been associated with factors such as income, health, employment, and satisfaction with the household financial situation (Boo et al., 2016). In adversity, resilience is important as it determines how individuals adapt to the difficulties they face and cope with stress to successfully grow and enhance their mental well-being (Martin et al., 2019). In addition, the happiness of individuals carries a significant importance as well as it can be affected when faced with adversity. Happiness is frequently affiliated with the positive emotions of individuals (Goldman, 2016). It covers several distinct aspects, but most studies relate happiness to overall life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Graham, 2016; Phillips et al., 2017).

Over recent years, several studies have been carried out to investigate the relationship between social support and happiness. Tan et al. (2016) proposed that a higher level of happiness is promoted through an increase in the social support that individuals have received from their own surroundings. Besides that, Hsu and Chang (2015) stated that individuals who showed more engagement in social groups through working or volunteering experiences were found to be happy compared with their peers who did not do so. It is reported that a good social relationship with others, especially with family members, was necessary to achieve happiness (Kalka & Lockiewicz, 2018). Thus, it was proposed by Kalka and Lockiewicz (2018) that good social relation with others was a crucial factor for an individual to attain the state of happiness. The relational regulation theory states that perceived support is related to good mental health. This occurs as a result when providing social support to an individual helps to reduce stress where some individuals can reduce their negative thoughts and actions after sharing and getting support through social interactions (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). It can benefit the happiness of an individual when they can rely on their family and friends to provide social support to improve happiness. Hence, based on the theory stated, it shows that social support on individuals does influence the happiness of an individual. Therefore, it is hypothesised that a higher level of one's social support led to a higher level of one's happiness in this study.

There have been many investigations conducted in the field of positive psychology on the topics of resilience and happiness. Several studies have shown that resilience and happiness share a positive correlation to each other (Aboalshamat et al., 2018; Brailovskaia et al., 2019; Gomez et al., 2013). It can be observed that when the level of resilience in individuals is high, the level of

happiness of individuals will be high as well. In addition, resilience was found to be one of the most influencing factors which could either determine or predict the level of happiness of individuals (Cummins & Wooden, 2013; Smith & Hollinger-Smith, 2014). Several studies have shown that resilience acts as a mediator for several factors such that relate to happiness such as: positive affect, good mental health, life satisfaction and positive subjective well-being of individuals (Lü et al., 2014; Shi et al., 2015; Yildirim & Belem, 2019). It is reflected that resilience is closely related to the happiness of individuals and should be further investigated to gain a complete understanding of this relationship.

On the other hand, Jaques et al. (2015) stated that social support was found to be one of the most key factors that contribute to an individual's level of resilience as low social support was associated with mental health risks such as depression, anxiety and suicide ideation. According to Southwick et al. (2016), social support was significantly associated with resilience through psychological and behavioural mechanisms such as feelings of being understood, motivation to adopt healthy behaviours and usage of active coping strategies. Thompson et al. (2016) highlighted coping strategy as one of the most powerful factors that influenced one's level of resiliency as they found that individuals who were able to accept negative experiences as a part of growth experiences were more exposed to positive coping mechanisms such as problem-solving skills in their life. It has been assumed that a close relationship with others and a supportive environment have contributed to a positive emotion which is essential to deal with stress (Mo et al., 2014). Besides, Sippel et al. (2015) suggested that high social support improved one's sense of belongingness and solidarity, regulation of self-emotions and healthy coping behaviours which helped in turning an inconvenient situation into an unthreatening situation. According to Narayanan and Cheang (2016), the theory of resilience states that in the period in which individuals shift to the adult phase of their lives, they require more social support from their friends and family. This confers with the social resilience theory which states that individuals do rely on their friends and family for support to overcome adverse times. Therefore, it is hypothesised that a higher level of one's social support led to a higher level of one's resilience in this study.

By taking account of the importance of resilience in enhancing one's well-being in various aspects, the mediating role of resilience on the relationship between social support and happiness of an individual can be explained through this association. Resilience can be defined as the ability of an individual to rebound from negative life events such as the death of significant others, severe illness and several types of abuse and is still able to recover through a positive psychological state (Faircloth, 2017). According to Bernabe and Botia (2016), resilience is a dynamic process that might differ depending on the individual's life-changing circumstances and developmental stages which involve two main elements: to overcome and to rebuild. Thus, resilience was positively related to one's mental health and well-being as it is suggested that individuals with an elevated level of resilience tend to have a lower risk of developing mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety (Jaufalaily & Himam, 2017).

Dong et al. (2017) opined that resilience was found to be the mediator of the relationship between social support with posttraumatic growth, which referred to the level of changes in an individual's capacity to deal with adverse life events such as trauma, fear, and hardships. Thus, Yildirim (2019) suggested that resilience acts as a mediator on the level of happiness of an individual as it was

significantly correlated to social support and various mechanisms such as optimism, the purpose of life and active coping. For instance, colorectal cancer survivors with permanent intestinal ostomies that have received a higher level of social support through people from their surrounding tend to experience a greater level of resilience which in turn reflected a higher level of happiness (Dong et al., 2017). Besides, it was also found that resilience with social support, especially emotional support from significant others helps the firefighters to improve their work engagement through an increase in the level of positive affectivity (Bernabe & Botia, 2016). Therefore, the current study aims to further investigate the role of resilience as a mediator between the social support of individuals and their happiness during adversity such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

A total of 104 Malaysian adults (50.5% male and 49.5% female;  $M = 21.8$  years) participated in this study during the first phase of MCO period (18th March 2020 until 31st March 2020) via convenience sampling method. The participants were recruited through social media sites such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Participants were informed of the aim of the study and they were assured that their information and responses would be kept confidential. Before the participants began to fill out the Google Form survey, informed consent was obtained when they clicked to agree on the corresponding statements, before they began responding to the actual survey items.

The online questionnaire was separated into four sections that consists of: (1) demographic information, (2) social support, (3) resilience, and (4) happiness.

Social support was assessed using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988) which consists of 12 items that evaluate the social support of individuals in terms of family, friends, or significant others. The items were scored using a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 = "Very Strongly Disagree" to 7 = "Very Strongly Agree". The scale included statements such as "There is a special person who is around when I am in need" and "I can count on my friends when things go wrong." The Cronbach alpha for the MSPSS was .800 which shows a high internal reliability.

Resilience was evaluated using the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008) which consists of six items. The items were scored using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strong Agree". Items 2, 4, and 6 were reverse coded (e.g., "I have a hard time making it through stressful events"). The Cronbach alpha of .686 shows that the BRS has moderate internal reliability.

Happiness was measured using the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) that consists of four items in which item 4 is reverse coded while the others are not. The items were scored using a 7-point Likert-type scale with different response sets depending on the item. For example, "In general, I consider myself:" in which scoring 1 will indicate "not a very happy person" while 7 meant "a very happy person". Another example would be "Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself:" in which scoring 1 will indicate "not at all" while 7 would

indicate “a great deal”. The Cronbach alpha for the SHS was .766 which indicates high internal reliability.

### 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the Pearson correlation analysis showed that social support has a significant positive correlation with resilience ( $r(102) = .398, p < .01$ ) and happiness ( $r(102) = .614, p < .01$ ) (see Table 1). Hence, the results showed that the higher the level of social support, the higher the level of resilience and happiness of an individual. Also, resilience is positively correlated with happiness ( $r(102) = .535, p < .01$ ), suggesting that the higher the level of resilience, the higher the level of happiness of an individual.

**Table 1.** Pearson Correlation Analysis (N =104)

Variables	1	2	3
1. Social Support	1		
2. Resilience	.398**	1	
3. Happiness	.614**	.535**	1

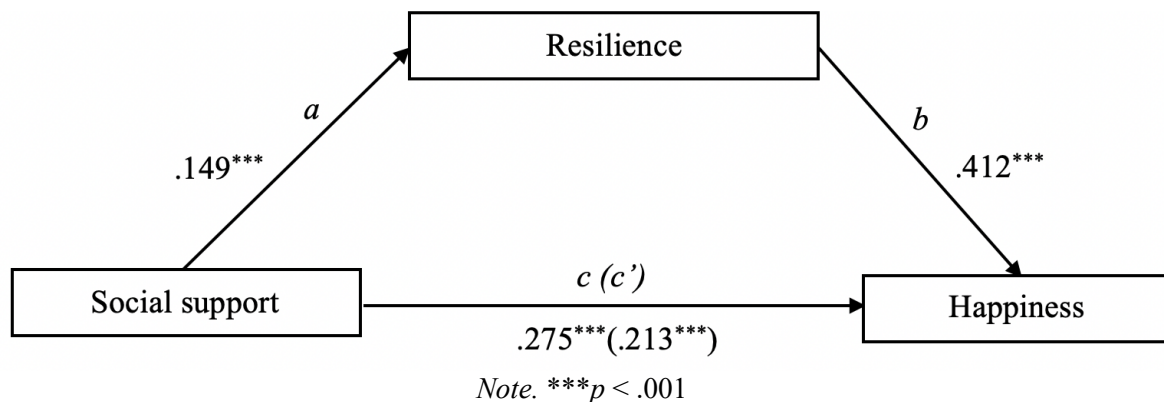
Note. \*\* $p < .01$

The positive significant relationship between social support and resilience can be supported by research conducted by Wilks and Spivey (2010) which has shown that students with higher social support from family members and friends were found to have a higher level of resilience than those who have a lower level of social support. Besides, the relationship between social support and resilience can be supported by Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory. The theory hypothesized that one’s wellbeing is affected by how the individual interacts and maintains a good relationship with others such as family members and neighbours (Boon, Cottrell, King, Stevenson & Millar, 2011). Therefore, social support can foster resilience in an individual as positive social support from others helps to hinder psychological and behavioural stress responses of an individual (Sippel et al., 2015). For instance, individuals with supportive social support systems were able to effectively handle negative impacts such as stress and difficulties in life (Lower, 2014). Therefore, high social support can influence the level of one’s resilience as it is found to be associated with active and positive coping mechanisms which in turn reduces the likelihood of engaging in negative behaviours of an individual (Sippel et al., 2015).

According to relational regulation theory, Lakey and Orehek (2011) suggested that social support has found to be correlated with one’s level of happiness as it has promoted and enhanced one’s positive effects such as cheerfulness and joy through support from others. Besides, it is proposed by Papadopoulos et al. (2015) that social support was found to be positively correlated with happiness as individuals who have received support from others were found to feel happier. For instance, individuals with a lower level of social support were associated with six-fold increase in the risk of developing depression as it was found to have a close correlation with happiness (Bum & Jeon, 2016). Thus, it has been demonstrated that social support was essential in predicting the

level of happiness as it helped in maintaining a close relationship with others and in regulating emotions (Lee & Padilla, 2015).

The mediation model was tested using SPSS PROCESS macro. The mediation model in Figure 1 shows the resilience's indirect effect on the relationship between social support and happiness. In path *c*, the regression of social support on happiness (ignoring resilience) was significant,  $B = .275$ ,  $SE = .035$ ,  $t = 7.850$ ,  $p < .001$ . Path *a* then demonstrated that the regression of the social support on resilience was significant,  $B = .149$ ,  $SE = .034$ ,  $t = 4.379$ ,  $p < .001$ . In path *b*, the regression of resilience on happiness (controlling for social support) was significant,  $B = .412$ ,  $SE = .094$ ,  $t = 4.400$ ,  $p < .001$ . Path *c'* revealed that social support significantly predicted happiness while controlling for resilience,  $B = .213$ ,  $SE = .035$ ,  $t = 6.074$ ,  $p < .001$ . The significant mediation effect was further validated by the bootstrapped estimate of the indirect effect of .062 ( $SE = .023$ , 95%  $CI = .022$  to  $.112$ ) using 10,000 bootstrapped samples. Resilience partially mediated the association between social support and happiness.



**Figure 1.** Mediation model for social support, resilience, and happiness

Besides the significant correlation found on all variables, resilience is a significant mediator of the relationship between social support and happiness. Although Malaysians are facing COVID-19 and MCO, their happiness are enhanced through social support via resilience. This is because the findings show that the higher the level of social support received by Malaysians, the higher the level of resilience and eventually leading to a higher level of happiness. According to broaden and broaden theory by Barbara Fredrickson, it suggested that one's mental health can be promoted when happiness and positive social support collaborate with resilience (Lower, 2014). It is suggested that individuals with a higher level of resilience were more likely to find positive meaning in life even during adversity which eventually led to an increase in positive affects (Nath & Pradhan, 2012). For instance, individuals who experienced a higher level of happiness were more likely to engage in positive events such as socializing with others and volunteering in activities (Faircloth, 2017). In addition, Sippet et al. (2015) proposed that an increase in level of social support has regulated individuals' emotions by promoting resilience such as redefined adverse life events to be less threatening.

As implications, social support played a key role in predicting the level of resilience and happiness of individuals even at the times of adversity; therefore, it is important to address social support especially from family members, significant others and community when identifying intervention strategies for future research. There are several effective ways to improve the resilience levels through social support. First, individuals are encouraged to increase their daily interactions with people such as their family members, friends and significant others as receiving attention and support from others can help in fostering resilience. As resilience is often associated with the adaptability of an individual to deal with life changes, it is important to develop a strong relationship or connection with others as having reliable support from the surroundings can help to increase the sharing of feelings and problems. It is because it can help in reducing stress and other negative impacts through positive encouragement and feedback from others during challenging times. Besides that, individuals can try to improve personal development skills in a diversity of fields through education and training programs. Personal development skills such as interpersonal skills, cognitive reframing, problem-solving skills, and mindfulness meditation can be one of the successful ways in enhancing one's resilience. For instance, mindfulness meditation is effective to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression by removing negative thoughts and regulating our emotions.

Another intervention that could be implemented to improve the level of happiness through social support is by utilizing the connections with others to create a special and meaningful bond or social network with them. It is important to form a strong and healthy relationship with others as it can help to reduce negative feelings such as sadness, despair, and fear, especially when facing stresses or difficulties in life. For instance, close relationships with others help to provide unconditional support to struggling individuals in forms of encouragement, praise, and accompaniment. Besides that, engagement in physical fitness can help an individual to deal better with life stresses which usually can lead to happiness. In addition, group exercise with others such as family members and friends can be more effective as it encourages social interaction which can help to provide motivation to each other during the exercise session. Thus, the development of psychological interventions that include social support is essential to increase the level of resilience and happiness among individuals.

However, there are several limitations that should be highlighted in this study. First, this study was conducted in an online survey form through Google Forms due to MCO. There could be an existence of survey fraud from participants as some may have been dishonest or not fully committed to participating in the survey. As an example, the participants might have randomly chosen an answer if they did not understand the questions asked. Due to the ease of accessibility to this survey, it has led to an increased response rate in the late adolescent group which more than 50% of the participants in this study were aged between 19 to 21 years old. As this survey was administered electronically to the participants, it was unable to reach the population who do not have access to the Internet, do not own smartphones or are elderly in age. Therefore, future research is recommended to include interviewers as it is easier to explain any doubts to the participants and to recruit participants from different age groups. Another limitation of this study is there were only three types of social support identified in this study which consisted of family, friends, and significant others. However, there were several types of social support sources such as spiritual support, online support groups, and health care providers such as clinical psychologists

and therapists. Thus, future research with more consideration on other types of social support sources should be investigated to find a significant correlation between the effect of social support on the level of resilience and happiness, respectively. Lastly, the researchers acknowledge the difficulty of generalizing the findings of this study onto the whole Malaysian population due to the small number of responses collected. Therefore, future researchers are advised to replicate this study with a larger sample size to ensure a representative distribution of the Malaysian population.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

As the number of mental health issues are constantly increasing in Malaysia, resilience must be studied and cultivated as it is important in the context of Malaysia, especially in times of adversity such as in response to COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to investigate the mediating effect of resilience on the relationship between social support and happiness. The findings from this study shows a positive significant correlation of social support and happiness where resilience partially mediated the relationship. Also, this study proposes that an increase in social support shows a higher level of resilience which eventually leads to a higher level of happiness. It is important to understand the importance of resilience on social support and happiness especially during the MCO period where resilience can help Malaysians overcome this period. Moreover, this study suggests some ways to improve methods of social support to increase the level of resilience which leads to a higher level of happiness, including having to focus on the difficulties during conducting the study and some recommendations for future studies.

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