Social-Psychological Well-Being and Demographic Disparities in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Psychological and social well-being are important dimensions of individual functioning that may vary across socio-demographic groups. This study examined the associations between demographic characteristics, psychological well-being, social well-being and negative emotional symptoms among Malaysian adults. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed, involving 382 adults aged 20 years and above recruited through snowball sampling between April and August 2022. Data were collected using a culturally adapted instrument informed by Ryff's psychological well-being framework, Keyes' social well-being model and measures of negative emotional symptoms. Descriptive statistics, Mann-Whitney U tests, Kruskal-Wallis tests and multiple regression analyses were employed. The reported findings suggest differences in well-being associated with age, education, household income and gender, with income and education emerging as important correlates. These findings offer preliminary insights into demographic differences in well-being within the study sample. However, the non-probability sampling approach and cross-sectional design limit generalisability and causal interpretation. Further psychometric validation of the proposed index is recommended.

Keywords: Psychological well-being, Social well-being, Demographic disparities, Malaysia, Urbanisation.

INTRODUCTION

Well-being is a multidimensional construct that reflects more than transient happiness or life satisfaction. It encompasses an individual's ability to thrive across psychological, social, and emotional domains. In Malaysia, rapid urbanisation and shifting socio-economic conditions have reshaped living standards, but the Malaysian Well-Being Index (MyWI) remains limited in psychological measures, particularly mental health. Globally, demographic indicators such as age, gender, education, and income strongly influence well-being. In Malaysia, urbanisation has created vulnerabilities for lower-income households, presenting a critical case for examining demographic disparities in psychological and social well-being. This article integrates conceptual literature with empirical evidence from Malaysia to bridge research gaps.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite increasing global attention to psychological and social well-being, Malaysia still faces a significant gap in understanding how demographic factors influence these dimensions. The Malaysian Well-Being Index provides a national overview of economic and social well-being but omits critical psychological components, particularly mental health. This limits its ability to capture the lived realities of individuals across diverse socio-demographic groups.

Rapid urbanisation and socio-economic transitions have exacerbated inequalities, leaving low-income households and marginalised groups especially vulnerable. Younger adults report heightened stress linked to education and employment insecurity, while older adults experience diminished social integration and health

challenges. Gender, education, and income disparities further compound these differences, yet empirical evidence on their specific associations with psychological and social well-being in Malaysia remains limited.

Current research on well-being in Malaysia is fragmented, with studies often focusing on either mental health disorders or general life satisfaction without integrating broader social and psychological dimensions. Moreover, many of these studies rely on instruments developed in Western contexts, which may not fully align with Malaysia's cultural, religious, and social values. This absence of a culturally adapted, empirically validated tool hampers policymakers' ability to design targeted interventions. Without robust data on how demographic disparities shape well-being, policies risk being generic and ineffective. Addressing this research problem is essential to develop a holistic understanding of well-being that reflects Malaysia's unique socio-cultural context and supports inclusive national development.

Theoretical Background

Theories of poverty provide insights into the lived experiences of vulnerable groups. Absolute poverty highlights the lack of basic necessities, while relative poverty situates deprivation against societal standards, creating psychosocial consequences such as shame and alienation. Causal attribution theory explains poverty as individual, structural, or fatalistic in origin. Psychological well-being is conceptualised through Ryff's eudaimonic model and hedonic perspectives of life satisfaction. Social well-being, as described by Keyes, includes integration, acceptance, coherence, actualisation, and contribution. Dodge's equilibrium model frames well-being as a dynamic balance between challenges and resources. These frameworks are essential for contextualising demographic disparities in Malaysia.

Conceptualising Well-being

Well-being is widely recognised as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond fleeting happiness or pleasure. Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2003) emphasised that well-being encompasses both affective experiences and cognitive evaluations of life. Ryff (1989) conceptualised psychological well-being through six eudaimonic dimensions: autonomy, self-acceptance, personal growth, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and positive relations. Keyes (1998) introduced social well-being, encompassing integration, contribution, coherence, acceptance, and actualisation, reflecting how individuals perceive their relationships with society. Together, these frameworks provide a holistic lens to assess the interplay of psychological and social functioning.

Psychological Well-being

Psychological well-being (PWB) reflects individuals' ability to achieve personal growth, find meaning in life, and maintain autonomy (Huppert, 2009). Both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives are useful in understanding well-being outcomes. Cultural and contextual factors also play an important role. In Malaysia, spirituality and religiosity have been shown to enhance resilience and coping, contributing positively to PWB (Bożek, Nowak, & Blukacz, 2020). Conversely, mental health challenges, poverty, and socio-demographic disadvantages negatively affect PWB (Hiremath, 2021; Cobb-Clark & Kettlewell, 2021).

Social Well-being

Social well-being (SWB) emphasises the individual's relationship with the wider social environment. It includes social acceptance, belonging, and access to social support (Keyes, 1998). Research shows that social exclusion and poor social networks are associated with lower well-being (Dahlberg & McKee, 2018). Flores-Verduzco et al. (2020) demonstrated that supportive school environments and positive peer relations improve adolescents' social well-being, underlining the role of institutional and community contexts. In Malaysia, challenges such as urban overcrowding, crime, and weak community ties have been linked to poorer SWB (Abu Bakar et al., 2015).

Demographic Predictors of Well-being

Empirical studies highlight how demographic characteristics shape well-being outcomes. Steptoe, Deaton, and Stone (2015) found that well-being is associated with age, education, income, and health. Lee et al. (2022) demonstrated that demographic predictors significantly influence complete well-being globally. In Malaysia,

research among students and the elderly suggests that education and marital status play a role in determining PWB (Ooi, Hamzah, & Thien, 2022; Mumtaz et al., 2011). However, findings are often inconsistent, with some studies reporting limited associations between income and life satisfaction (Nepomuceno et al., 2016). These mixed results highlight the need for a context-specific framework to capture demographic disparities in Malaysia.

Poverty, Urbanisation, and Well-being

Urban poverty intensifies disparities in well-being through financial strain, poor housing, and limited access to services. Mathur (2014) noted that urban poverty in Asia is not only about income but also social exclusion. In Malaysia, rising living costs and rapid urbanisation disproportionately affect the B40 households (Siwar, Ahmed, Bashawir, & Mia, 2016). The Department of Statistics Malaysia (2021) reported a decline in the Malaysian Well-being Index, suggesting that structural challenges undermine national progress. Globally, Banerjee et al. (2015) found that poverty reduction programmes can enhance well-being, underscoring the link between economic stability and psychological health.

Cultural Context of Well-being in Malaysia

Malaysia's multicultural society and strong religious traditions influence perceptions and determinants of well-being. Ryff (2021) argued that spirituality strengthens psychological well-being by fostering meaning and connection. Studies in Malaysia show that religiosity buffers against stress and enhances resilience, particularly among disadvantaged groups (Roslan et al., 2017). However, disparities persist across ethnic, income, and regional lines, pointing to the need for a more nuanced understanding of how culture interacts with socio-demographic factors.

Although previous studies have examined demographic differences in psychological functioning and subjective well-being, further research is needed to understand how socio-demographic characteristics are associated with psychological well-being, social well-being and negative emotional symptoms within the Malaysian context. The present study addresses this issue by examining the associations between age, gender, educational attainment, household income and number of dependants and these three well-being outcomes. Drawing on established theoretical frameworks and culturally adapted measurement items, the study aims to provide preliminary empirical evidence that may inform future measurement development and targeted well-being initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships between socio-demographic characteristics, psychological well-being (PWB), social well-being (SWB), and negative emotional symptoms among Malaysian adults. A cross-sectional design was selected as it allows associations between variables to be examined within a diverse population at a single point in time.

The Social and Psychological Well-being Index (SPWI) was developed by adapting established measures of psychological and social well-being to the Malaysian socio-cultural context. Items were informed by Ryff's psychological well-being framework, Keyes' social well-being model and the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21). The instrument underwent expert review to assess content relevance and cultural appropriateness, followed by a pilot study involving 30 respondents. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.71 to 0.91 across the reported subscales, providing preliminary evidence of internal consistency. However, the instrument's dimensional structure and construct validity require further investigation through appropriate psychometric analyses. Accordingly, the SPWI should be regarded as a preliminary culturally adapted measure rather than a fully validated instrument.

The study employed a snowball sampling strategy to recruit participants, recognising the challenges of obtaining a nationally representative sample during the COVID-19 endemic recovery period. The use of snowball sampling represents an important methodological limitation. As a non-probability sampling technique, it may introduce selection bias because participants are recruited through referral networks, potentially resulting in an

overrepresentation of individuals with similar demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Consequently, the sample cannot be considered nationally representative, and the findings should not be generalised to the entire Malaysian adult population. Nevertheless, the sampling approach enabled the study to examine associations between demographic characteristics and well-being outcomes among the recruited participants.

A total of 382 Malaysian adults aged 20 years and above participated in the study, with recruitment conducted between April and August 2022. Participants represented a wide demographic spread, including different age cohorts, gender, education levels, income categories, and number of dependants. The sample thus included individuals from B40, M40, and T20 income groups, ranging from those with no dependants to large family households.

Data were collected using both online and offline modes. Online surveys were distributed through platforms such as social media and email, while paper-based questionnaires were administered in selected community settings to capture the perspectives of those with limited internet access. All participants were provided with clear information on the study objectives and procedures. They were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and gave informed consent prior to participation.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were applied to summarise the demographic profile of respondents and overall levels of PWB, SWB, and negative emotional symptoms. Internal consistency of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. To examine group differences, Mann-Whitney U tests were applied to gender comparisons, while Kruskal-Wallis tests assessed variations across age, education, income, and number of dependants. Multiple regression analysis was subsequently conducted to identify the extent to which demographic factors predicted PWB, SWB, and negative emotional symptoms.

The research adhered to ethical principles throughout the process. Participation was voluntary and participants had the right to withdraw at any point without consequence. No identifying information was collected, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of responses.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed substantial demographic disparities in psychological and social well-being among Malaysians. Age was a significant factor, with middle-aged adults reporting higher psychological well-being compared to younger and older respondents. Younger participants, particularly those aged between 20 and 29 years, recorded higher levels of stress and anxiety, reflecting challenges associated with education, unstable employment, and the transition into adulthood. Older adults, especially those above 60 years, demonstrated lower psychological well-being and increased negative emotional symptoms, suggesting vulnerability linked to declining health, reduced income, and limited social integration. Psychological well-being scores differed across age groups, with middle-aged respondents reporting higher scores than younger and older respondents, subject to confirmation through the relevant statistical comparisons.

Gender differences were less pronounced for psychological well-being but emerged strongly in the domain of social well-being. Women consistently reported higher social well-being scores than men, likely attributable to stronger social networks, community participation, and higher reliance on interpersonal support systems. However, the same protective effect was not observed for psychological well-being, where no significant gender differences were detected.

Educational attainment proved to be one of the most consistent predictors of well-being. Respondents with tertiary qualifications, particularly those with postgraduate education, reported significantly higher levels of both psychological and social well-being, accompanied by lower negative emotional symptoms. Those with only secondary-level education, by contrast, exhibited lower well-being scores and higher psychological distress. This finding suggests that education not only provides cognitive resources but also facilitates access to stable employment, higher income, and broader social networks that support well-being.

Household income emerged as another strong determinant of well-being. Individuals from higher income groups (above RM7,000 per month) reported greater psychological well-being, more positive social functioning, and

fewer negative emotional symptoms. In contrast, participants from low-income households, especially those earning below RM800 monthly, were significantly more vulnerable to stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. These patterns underscore the economic determinants of well-being and align with existing literature that links financial insecurity to poor mental health and social exclusion.

The number of dependants in a household also had implications for well-being outcomes. Respondents with more dependants reported higher levels of stress and negative emotional symptoms, particularly when household income was insufficient to meet family needs. This suggests that family responsibilities, when coupled with economic hardship, exacerbate emotional strain and undermine well-being.

Further analysis highlighted the specific challenges faced by urban poor communities. Respondents from lower-income households in urban areas experienced greater vulnerability due to housing insecurity, exposure to crime, limited access to healthcare, and higher cost of living. These individuals reported significantly lower social well-being, reflecting weaker neighbourhood cohesion, distrust in local governance, and a sense of exclusion from wider society. The findings resonate with existing scholarship that emphasises the compounded disadvantages of urban poverty, where material deprivation interacts with social exclusion to undermine both psychological and social well-being.

Overall, regression models confirmed that household income, education level, and age were the strongest predictors of psychological and social well-being, as well as negative emotional symptoms. Gender differences were significant only for social well-being, while the number of dependants amplified stress levels. The findings point to the complex interplay between structural factors and individual demographic characteristics in shaping well-being outcomes in Malaysia.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings of this study underscore the importance of socio-demographic characteristics in shaping psychological and social well-being in Malaysia. The results provide strong support for existing international literature while also highlighting unique cultural and contextual factors relevant to Malaysian society.

Age differences in well-being followed a U-shaped pattern, with middle-aged adults reporting the highest levels of psychological well-being and both younger and older respondents showing greater vulnerability to negative emotional symptoms. This pattern is consistent with global findings (Steptoe, Deaton, & Stone, 2015), which suggest that well-being tends to dip during early adulthood due to instability in education, employment, and social identity, and again later in life as health declines and social connections weaken. In Malaysia, younger adults reported heightened anxiety and stress, reflecting the growing pressures of academic achievement, job insecurity, and high living costs in urban centres. Older adults, on the other hand, faced diminished well-being due to declining health, limited income after retirement, and weaker social integration. These findings call for targeted interventions such as youth-focused mental health services and social participation programmes for older populations.

Gender was not a significant predictor of psychological well-being but played a clear role in social well-being, with women scoring higher than men. This difference is likely linked to the stronger social networks and interpersonal relationships maintained by women, which have been documented as important sources of resilience and life satisfaction in collectivist cultures. However, the absence of gender differences in psychological well-being suggests that women remain equally vulnerable to stress and anxiety, particularly in urban poor households where caregiving responsibilities intersect with financial strain. Interventions aimed at strengthening male social engagement and providing support for women's psychological health may help balance these disparities.

Education emerged as a protective factor for both psychological and social well-being. Higher educational attainment was associated with increased resilience, better coping strategies, and broader social capital. Respondents with postgraduate education consistently reported higher well-being and fewer negative symptoms, while those with only secondary education faced greater emotional distress. This finding resonates with earlier Malaysian research that linked education to improved mental health and social functioning (Latiff et al., 2017).

It also aligns with international studies showing that education not only improves economic prospects but also fosters cognitive and social skills that enhance well-being (Matud et al., 2022). Expanding access to quality education, particularly for disadvantaged communities, thus represents a crucial pathway to improving national well-being.

Household income was another strong determinant of well-being, confirming evidence from both global (Killingsworth, 2021) and local studies (Siwar, Ahmed, Bashawir, & Mia, 2016). Respondents from higher-income households reported better psychological health, more positive social functioning, and fewer negative emotional symptoms. Conversely, individuals from low-income households, particularly those below the poverty threshold, experienced heightened stress, anxiety, and social exclusion. These disparities highlight the structural inequalities embedded within Malaysian society, where the rising cost of living disproportionately burdens the B40 households. The vulnerability of the urban poor was further reflected in lower social well-being scores, which were linked to weak neighbourhood cohesion, lack of trust in governance, and exposure to unsafe environments. This underscores the argument that poverty must be understood not only in terms of income but also in terms of relative deprivation and social exclusion (Mathur, 2014).

The reported associations between educational attainment, household income and well-being highlight the relevance of socio-economic conditions to psychological and social functioning. Participants with lower educational attainment and household income generally reported less favourable well-being outcomes. These differences may reflect variations in access to economic resources, social opportunities and support systems, although these explanatory mechanisms were not directly established in the present study. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest the value of considering psychological and social well-being alongside economic indicators when designing assistance programmes for disadvantaged groups. Integrating psychosocial support, financial guidance and community-based well-being initiatives into existing social protection programmes may be beneficial. However, the effectiveness of these interventions requires further evaluation.

The number of dependants was also associated with greater stress and negative emotional symptoms, especially in low-income households. This supports causal attribution theory (Feagin, 1972), which suggests that individuals may perceive their financial and social struggles as structurally imposed when responsibilities exceed resources. Larger families in low-income households face compounded burdens, where limited resources intensify psychological strain and limit social participation. Policies aimed at supporting families through subsidies, childcare assistance, and family-focused mental health services could mitigate these pressures.

The findings also highlight the need for a culturally adapted measure of well-being. The Social and Psychological Well-being Index (SPWI) developed in this study proved effective in capturing the complex realities of Malaysian society by including domains such as spirituality, housing, governance, safety, and cost of living, alongside conventional measures of PWB and SWB. This expands on the limitations of the Malaysian Well-being Index (MyWI), which focuses more heavily on economic and infrastructural indicators. The SPWI therefore offers a more comprehensive and culturally sensitive tool for assessing national well-being.

Previous literature suggests that spirituality and religiosity may serve as resources for psychological resilience. However, their specific protective effects were not established through the present demographic analyses. Spirituality and religiosity were cited as sources of resilience, consistent with findings from Malaysian and international research (Bożek, Nowak, & Blukacz, 2020; Ryff, 2021). These factors help individuals find meaning, cope with adversity, and maintain psychological balance. Community and faith-based interventions that draw on these strengths could enhance the effectiveness of well-being programmes, particularly among vulnerable groups.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that demographic disparities are closely intertwined with structural inequalities in Malaysia. Income and education remain central determinants, while age and gender intersect to produce differentiated patterns of well-being. Urban poverty compounds these vulnerabilities, limiting access to resources, weakening social ties, and amplifying psychological distress. Addressing these issues requires an integrated policy approach that expands educational opportunities, enhances social protection schemes, and fosters stronger community networks.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

This study contributes to the understanding of psychological and social well-being by examining demographic differences within the Malaysian socio-cultural context. Its strengths include the consideration of multiple well-being domains and the preliminary cultural adaptation of established measurement instruments.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, snowball sampling may have introduced selection bias and restricted the demographic representativeness of the sample. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalised to all Malaysian adults. Second, the cross-sectional research design limits causal interpretation, as the temporal relationships between socio-demographic characteristics and well-being outcomes cannot be established. Third, although the proposed SPWI demonstrated preliminary internal consistency, additional evidence of construct validity and dimensional structure is needed before the instrument can be considered fully validated. Fourth, the reliance on self-reported responses may introduce response bias. Finally, data collection during 2022 may limit the applicability of the findings to subsequent socio-economic conditions.

Future research should employ probability-based or nationally representative sampling to improve generalisability. Longitudinal studies would help clarify changes in well-being over time. Further psychometric evaluation, including exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses where appropriate, is recommended to strengthen the validity of the proposed instrument. Future studies should also examine potential explanatory mechanisms and evaluate targeted interventions for socio-economically vulnerable populations.

CONCLUSION

This study provides preliminary evidence of associations between socio-demographic characteristics and psychological and social well-being among a sample of Malaysian adults. The reported findings suggest that educational attainment, household income and age are relevant to variations in well-being, while gender differences are more evident in social well-being. These patterns highlight the importance of considering socio-economic differences when developing well-being initiatives. The study also introduces a culturally adapted measurement approach that warrants further psychometric validation. Given the limitations of the sampling strategy and cross-sectional design, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. Future research involving representative samples and longitudinal designs is needed to establish more robust evidence for well-being policies and interventions in Malaysia.

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