

Adaptability, Social Support, and Psychological Wellbeing Among Malaysian Adults

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Abstract

Malaysian adults are regularly exposed to a wide variety of complex stressors (exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic): these stressors, without sufficient protective resources, threaten to negatively impact upon psychological wellbeing. Recent literature has shown that personal resources (e.g., one's adaptability) and situational resources (e.g., one's social support) are associated with psychological wellbeing; however, limited research has examined the unique contribution of these resources to psychological wellbeing among collectivist cultures (e.g., Malaysian adults). Here, a sample of 136 Malaysian adults completed a survey measuring their adaptability and social support as well as different components of psychological wellbeing (i.e., flourishing, psychological distress, and life satisfaction). We found that adaptability and social support contribute significantly, and independently, to psychological wellbeing (all measures) among Malaysian adults, with social support being the stronger predictor in each case. Further, no significant interaction effects between adaptability and social support on psychological wellbeing were observed. The findings corroborate a developing literature suggesting that adaptability and social support may be targeted in efforts to enhance psychological wellbeing but also indicate that among Malaysian adults of a collectivist culture, social support may be more salient.

Keywords: adaptability; social support; psychological wellbeing; distress; Malaysian adults.

Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak negatively impacted Malaysian adults, who typically possess a collectivist culture lifestyle. For example, in an effort to control the circulation of the COVID-19 virus, Malaysia (like many other countries) imposed mass quarantine and new Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) such as keeping distance of one metre from one another and wearing masks, which, at the time, became new norms (World Health Organisation, 2020). Since the pandemic outbreak in Wuhan, China back in December 2019, many scholars

identified the negative impact of quarantine on people's wellbeing and mental health (Brooks et al., 2020) including Malaysian adults (Sundarasan et al., 2020). There is a need, therefore, to explore and understand factors that might influence one's psychological wellbeing under situations (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic) where there is significant change to daily life. Recent studies indicate that adaptability (a personal resource) and social support (a situational resource) are important protective factors associated with psychological wellbeing in both individualist (see Holliman et al., 2021) and collectivist cultures, specifically in Chinese

participants (e.g., Holliman et al., 2022). However, no study to date has examined these relationships among other collectivist cultures, such as those from Malaysia. To fill the gap, the current study investigates whether (and to what extent) adaptability and social support are associated with Malaysian adults' psychological wellbeing.

Conservation of Resources (COR) Model

The Conservation of Resources Theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018) has been found to be a reliable basis to understand psychological functioning such as wellbeing, life satisfaction, and distress. Individuals are motivated to protect, as explained by COR, and to procure and preserve psychological resources (Hobfoll, 1989) for survival purposes. From this perspective, resources are classified as things that a person values, specifically objects, energies, personal characteristics (such as adaptability), and conditions (such as social support). The COR theory explains that when the resources of an individual are threatened, or when there is a lack of investment in new resources, stress occurs (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Hobfoll (1989) argued that traumatic stress results from a loss of resource acceleration, particularly those that are most valued by the individual and thus resources, such as wellbeing, optimism, and social support are important to be protected.

The COR theory argues that under stressful situations and with strong association to broader life conditions, resources are the key components to decide individuals' appraisals and will determine how individuals can cope with stressful situations. The COR theory suggests that individuals (such as Malaysian adults) who lack resources are more vulnerable to experience spirals loss than those with plenty of resources and thus can have resource gain. Hobfoll (1989) explains further, that loss spirals happen when resources are depleted, and thus these individuals cannot cope with future-loss threats, which therefore may lead to further loss. Individuals, groups, and communities' initial losses will cause them to be more vulnerable to the negative impact of ongoing resource challenges.

Individuals are more resilient when endowed with greater resources; however, the loss of an

ongoing resource will keep challenging even richly resource-endowed individuals or groups. Therefore, for communities and individuals already lacking in resources (e.g., those experiencing the imposed restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic), loss spirals are considered as a powerful force. The successful adaptation will generate new resources which will replenish an individual's resource pools and offset chronic resource loss. Individuals will have to employ gain strategies and apply riskier resource protection when lacking coping capabilities (Hobfoll, 1989). Unsuccessful strategies will cause psychological distress and loss in the resources invested. These unsuccessful loss-prevention strategies will cause the loss of secondary resource, resulting in loss spirals.

In this research, we utilised this COR theory and model to understand the factors that contribute to psychological wellbeing, life satisfaction, and psychological distress of Malaysian adults during the pandemic. We applied the approach of Zhou and Lin (2016), among others, whereby 'adaptability' is classified as a personal resource and 'social support' as a conditional resource.

Adaptability and Psychological Wellbeing

Adaptability is defined as a personal resource under the COR model and is referred to as cognitive, behavioural, and emotional adjustment in uncertain and novel situations (Martin et al., 2012, 2013). Adaptability is grounded in several theoretical frameworks such as self-regulation whereby individuals direct, control, and monitor their emotions, cognitions, and behaviours with adjustment to situational demand (Zimmerman, 2002).

The recent empirical study of Holliman et al. (2021) found that adaptability, the personal resource, made an independent and significant contribution to psychological wellbeing, psychological distress, and life satisfaction among both university students and non-studying adults. This was compatible with the COR theory and model, suggesting that adaptability may function as protection against current and future stress and the successful management of novelty and stressful situations (Hobfoll, 2001). This, in turn, arguably is likely to impact upon one's psychological wellbeing.

Social Support and Psychological Wellbeing

Social Support, which is classified under conditional resources in the COR model, is referred to as the support perceived that one obtains from social tiers by individual to groups, other individuals, and the larger community (Lin et al., 1979). Social Support is generally accepted as a key factor that impacts upon lifespan development as a key mechanism in regulating one's emotional wellbeing (Chu et al., 2010).

A developing literature has shown that social support is a significant predictor of psychological wellbeing (Holliman et al., 2021; Siedlecki et al., 2013). This was again compatible with the COR theory and model, suggesting that social support, as a form of situational, conditional resource, may protect individuals from negative psychological outcomes (Dollete & Phillips, 2004).

Unique Contributions and the Role of Culture

Malaysia is an Asian country with a collectivist culture. Collectivist culture emphasizes group needs and goals more than individuals (Hofstede, 1980). In such cultures, relationships with other members of the group play a central role in one's identity. An individual's culture might therefore be of importance when it comes to understanding the relations between adaptability, social support, and psychological wellbeing. For example, it is conceivable that adaptability (an individual's strength) may feature more prominently in individualist cultures and less so with a collectivist culture, whereas social support may feature more prominently (relative to adaptability) in collectivist cultures (Goodwin & Hernandez Plaza, 2000), although, this remains an empirical question.

Hofstede (1980) did a survey and rated countries on a 1 to 100 scale from aggregated responses. Hofstede rated that eight of the ten most collectivist cultures belonged to South and Central America, with two (Indonesia and Pakistan) belonging to Asia and the Mid-East, respectively (Hofstede, 1991). Under Hofstede's survey, Malaysia scored 26 on individualism and few other Asian countries (China, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) scored 20 on

individualism (Hofstede, 1991). The degree of individualist/collectivist culture may therefore be another important factor to consider in this research area. In the study of Zhou and Lin (2016) using a Chinese population (collectivist culture), social support was found to moderate the relationship between adaptability and life satisfaction (psychological wellbeing outcome); however, it remains unknown whether there is a similar moderating role of social support for a Malaysian sample (collectivist culture) when testing the relationship between adaptability and a range of psychological wellbeing outcomes (e.g., flourishing, life satisfaction, psychological distress) since collectivist culture scores of China and Malaysia were rated differently according to Hofstede (1991).

Summary, Rationale, and Research Questions

Previous literature has shown that adaptability and social support are important for psychological wellbeing (e.g., Holliman et al., 2021). However, there are some limitations in the existing literature: 1) there is a need to disentangle variables and examine unique effects, and 2) there is a need to add to the sparse literature focusing on different cultures and how adaptability and social support may influence wellbeing. Therefore, the purpose of the present study, was to use a Malaysian adult sample (i.e., a different collectivist culture compared to Holliman et al., 2022), and examine the influence of adaptability and social support on psychological wellbeing.

Taken together, the current study addressed two major questions:

1. Do adaptability and social support contribute significantly, and independently, to psychological wellbeing outcomes among Malaysian adults?
2. Is there an interaction effect between adaptability and social support on psychological wellbeing outcomes among Malaysian adults; specifically, a moderating role of social support?

Method

Participants and Procedure

One hundred and thirty-six participants were sampled using an online survey (hosted on

Gorilla Experiment Builder (www.gorilla.sc) and distributed to groups in Facebook and through WhatsApp sharing. The sample comprised of 84 females (61.8%) and 52 males (38.2%). The participants ranged between 18 and 64 years of age ($M = 41.02$; $SD = 14.2$). The inclusion criteria required all participants to reside in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak (between 1st January 2020 to 1st January 2022). Participants were required to read an information sheet detailing the aims of the study and then provide informed consent. They were then presented with the survey measures and finally read the debrief sheet. Before data collection began, the study gained approval from the Institutional Research Ethics committee.

Measures

Adaptability. The Adaptability Scale is a 9-item scale designed to measure one's cognitive, behavioural, and emotional adaptability (Martin et al., 2013). Participants responded to items (e.g., "I am able to revise the way I think about a new situation to help me through it") using a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Martin et al. (2013) demonstrated that the adaptability scale has adequate psychometric properties. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .92.

Social Support. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support is a 12-item scale designed to measure individual's perceived level of social support in relation to friends, significant others, and family (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988). Participants responded to items (e.g., "There is a special person who is around when I am in need") using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree). The MSPSS has been shown to have very good reliability and validity (Zimet et al., 1988). Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .94.

Psychological Wellbeing

Flourishing. The Flourishing Scale (FS; Diener et al., 2009) is an 8-item scale to measure self-perceived success and positive psychological functioning and wellbeing. Participants responded to items (e.g., "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life") using a 7-point Likert scale

from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The FS has been shown to have good reliability and construct validity in past research (e.g., Diener et al., 2009). Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .92.

Psychological Distress. The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10; Kessler et al., 2002) is a 10-item scale used to measure general levels of psychological distress in participants. Participants responded to items (e.g., "During the last 30 days, about how often did you feel tired out for no good reason") using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (None of the time) to 5 (All of the time). Prior measurement work has revealed adequate psychometric properties (see Kessler et al., 2002). Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .94.

Life Satisfaction. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) is a 5-item scale used to measure global satisfaction with life. Participants responded to items (e.g., "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing") using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The SWLS has previously been demonstrated to have good reliability and validity (e.g., Pavot et al., 1991). Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .90.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among the key variables are presented in Table 1. As indicated, adaptability and perceived social support were significantly positively associated with flourishing and life satisfaction. Moreover, both adaptability and perceived social support had a significantly negative association with psychological distress. Mann-Whitney U tests revealed no significant differences in adaptability ($U = 2158$, $p = .90$), social support ($U = 1900.5$, $p = .20$), wellbeing ($U = 2147$, $p = .87$), distress ($U = 2461.5$, $p = .21$), or life satisfaction scores by sex ($U = 2073.5$, $p = .62$).

Moderated Regression Analyses

Data were screened and all statistical assumptions were met for each model. Moderated regression analyses were conducted to examine perceived social support as a moderator of the relationship between adaptability and psychological wellbeing outcomes (wellbeing, distress, life satisfaction) respectively. The total scores of the key predictor variables (i.e., Adaptability) and the moderator (i.e., Social Support) were first mean-centred and an interaction term computed by multiplying the centred predictors (Aiken & West, 1991).

Flourishing

It was found that there was a significant positive relationship between adaptability ($\beta = .43$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = [.29, .48]$), and perceived social support ($\beta = .55$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = [.23, .34]$), on psychological wellbeing. However, no interaction effect was observed ($\beta = -.04$, $p = .38$, 95% $CI = [-.00, .00]$). The variance explained by the predictors was 65.5%.

Distress

It was found that there was a significant negative relationship between adaptability ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .01$, 95% $CI = [-.46, -.08]$), and perceived social support ($\beta = -.36$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = [-.35, -.14]$), on psychological distress. However, no interaction effect was observed ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .10$, 95% $CI = [-.02, .00]$). The variance explained by the predictors was 21.6%.

Life Satisfaction

It was found that there was a significant positive relationship between adaptability ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = [.09, .38]$), and perceived social support ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = [.09, .24]$), on life satisfaction. However, no interaction effect was observed ($\beta = .00$, $p = .23$, 95% $CI = [-.00, .01]$). The variance explained by the predictors was 24.8%.

Discussion

Findings of note

In the current study, we examined the roles of adaptability and social support, on a range of psychological wellbeing (flourishing, life satisfaction, and psychological distress)

outcomes. We found that adaptability and social support were significant and independently associated with flourishing and life satisfaction and these findings answered RQ1. Further investigation using moderated regression analyses found that adaptability and social support had no interaction effects with psychological wellbeing outcomes among Malaysian adults and thus there is no moderating role of social support which answered RQ2, and each will be discussed in turn.

Firstly, based on the psychological wellbeing outcomes, adaptability and social support were significant predictors with social support being the strongest predictor for Malaysian adults. The findings of this study concerning adaptability and social support were consistent with Conservation of Resource theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018) and supported the study of Holliman et al. (2021) and Kim et al. (2008) on implicit or perceived social support on collectivist culture. According to COR, the resources for example social support (conditional) and adaptability (personal) are important to protect against future and current stress (Hobfoll, 2001). Individuals with higher levels of these resources should have a more positive psychological wellbeing (Buzzai et al., 2020). This result has further supported the notion that effective cognitive, emotional, and behavioural adjustment in novelty and uncertain situations (e.g., an individual's adaptability; Martin et al., 2012, 2013) may have acted as an important mechanism to regulate Malaysian adults' psychological wellbeing during a period of particular uncertainty (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic).

Secondly, we found that social support is stronger than adaptability in predicting psychological distress. This can potentially be explained as social support may be more salient in collectivist rather than individualist cultures. Indeed, Malaysian/Asian cultures normally do not encourage much independence (adaptability) from a young age (Hofstede, 1980), and consequently this personal resource (adaptability), arguably, was not utilised as a key resource to avoid stress. Unlike western cultures, most Malaysians/Asians still stay close to their families, physically and emotionally, even after marriage and therefore will approach their families and friends, and significant under

situations of stress and uncertainty (Kemmelmeyer, 2001).

Thirdly, our findings were not consistent with those of past literature demonstrating that social support is a moderator of psychological wellbeing (e.g., Holliman et al., 2022; Zhou & Lin, 2016). Specifically, we observed that although social support was a significant predictor, it was not a moderator of the relationship between adaptability and psychological wellbeing outcomes. In both studies of Holliman et al. (2022) and Zhou and Lin (2016), the participants were from China. Under Hofstede's survey on individualism, Malaysia scored 26 and China scored 20 (Hofstede, 1991). Thus, Hofstede's survey may have explained why our results are more aligned with Holliman et al. (2021) of UK students and non-students participants (individualist culture). Malaysia was under British colonization for many years (1826-1957) and might have influenced the culture towards more individualism as compared to other Asian countries such as China, Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam which all scored 20 (Hofstede, 1991).

Implications for practice

Malaysian adults may be more predisposed to utilise conditional resources such as social support due to its collectivist culture as compared to other cultures (e.g., individualist; Hofstede, 1980). However, adaptability was still a significant resource as observed in our findings. Therefore, for such populations, it may be prudent for other resources (e.g., adaptability) to be honed and developed to provide additional psychological protection to manage situations of stress, novelty, and uncertainty in the future (as recommended by COR theory). By navigating stressful situations through adjustment of emotions (such as enhancing the enjoyment regulatory rather frustration or anxiety), cognitions (thinking to look for effective response), and behaviours (trying new ones). Eventually, individuals may recognise the importance of their regulatory response and new situations can then be recognised and managed more effectively. Adaptability can be developed via support from academics and initiation during the schooling period to students, and/or adjustment to the environment and provision to minimise

novelty, uncertainty and minimise the change (e.g., Crosling et al., 2009). However, Malaysian working adults may benefit from such endeavours by self-directed engagement with this process and potentially through gradual exposure to tasks which one would normally avoid (e.g., under the supervision of a manager at work).

Limitations and further directions

There are some limitations in this study when interpreting the findings. Firstly, although the COR model was utilised in this study, there is still a lack of potentially important participant details such as socio-economic status, ethnicity and spoken language that need to be considered that may have had an influence on our findings (Holliman et al., 2021). Further, there are other psychological variables that were not measured which are known to positively influence psychological wellbeing, such as psychological flexibility (e.g., Waldeck et al., 2021). As such, future researchers may consider including such factors as controls or as potential moderators in this line of research. However, it is important to note that future researchers would need a much larger sample size when accounting for additional predictor or control variables.

Secondly, this study used a cross-sectional correlation design and thus, is unable to account for causality of relationships. Future researchers may consider adopting more longitudinal or ecological momentary assessment designs to detect the fluctuations more precisely between adaptability, social support, and psychological wellbeing across different time points (see Pancani et al., 2023).

Thirdly, our study was not able to account for participants' *behaviours* in response to situations of novelty, change or stress. Indeed, future researchers may consider including measures of behaviour engagement as this may provide greater insight into the mechanisms of which adaptability (and social support) can influence psychological wellbeing (Martin et al., 2013). However, it would also be prudent for future researchers to explore how such populations experience how and when adaptability might operate to buffer psychological wellbeing by utilising more qualitative approaches (see Holliman et al., 2019).

Conclusion

In this study, we examined the independent effects of adaptability and social support, in relation to psychological wellbeing. The findings demonstrate the importance of social support and adaptability in uniquely predicting the psychological wellbeing of Malaysian adults, a collectivist culture, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, social support appeared to most salient as a psychological mechanism which might be contributed by unique characteristics of collectivist culture. Together, these findings hold practical implications for researchers who may seek to understand how Malaysian adults manage situations or change, novelty, and uncertainty, and the extent to which personal (adaptability) and conditional (social support) resources are associated with psychological wellbeing outcomes.

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Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and correlations between key variables ($N = 136$).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Adaptability					
2. Social Support (PSS)	.31**				
3. Flourishing	.62**	.69**			
4. Psychological Distress	-.33**	-.42**	-.52**		
5. Life Satisfaction	.38**	.44**	.53**	-.41**	
Mean	49.34	66.11	46.03	20.18	25.60
SD	7.39	12.62	6.59	8.58	5.74

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.