

Chapter #2

PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON UNIVERSITY STUDENT'S RESILIENCY IN TIME OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The start of 2020 marked a fresh beginning when people moved forward with new resolutions. However, when the first Movement Control Order was announced in Malaysia, many university students had to adapt to online learning norms to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. This caused worry, anxiety, and stress in many students. To manage these unexpected circumstances, university students had to augment their resilience during academic challenges in the midst of the pandemic. To better understand the situation, this study examined previous adversity, happiness and religious faith that were predicted to enhance students' resiliency. Four-hundred and fifteen university students in Sabah, Malaysia participated in the study. The mean age was 21.96 years ($SD=4.08$). Students who were happier and more religious were more resilient, while students who experienced many previous adversities showed less resilience. Based on these findings, we hope that more university programs will be devised to elevate students' happiness, build stronger faith and offering psychological programs for students who have experienced many previous difficulties.

Keywords: resiliency, religious faith, happiness, past-life adversity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Each person has individual strategies in dealing with any circumstances. Past life adversity, happiness and religious faith are a few examples of factors that may increase one's resiliency to rebound from foreseen and unexpected challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Cosmas, 2020). The spread of the coronavirus which originated in Wuhan, China caused great worry and panic, not only in the Wuhan community, but also among people worldwide. In the early stage of the pandemic in East and Southeast Asia, coronavirus cases in Japan, South Korea, and Thailand were subsequently reported by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Taylor, 2020). To prevent the spread of cases, governments worldwide, including that of Sabah, Malaysia implemented lockdowns to control COVID-19. COVID-19 cases were first reported in Malaysia in January 2020 (Sundarasan et al., 2020). Many schools and universities were temporarily closed and replaced with fully online and distance learning. In Malaysia, the first phase of lockdown started on 18 March until 01 April 2020 and extended to other phases because of the increasing COVID-19 cases. This crisis caused concern in the Malaysian government and society because of the economic, social and health impacts. Many well-planned activities were disrupted and need to be adjusted, which affected public and private university students who were in the middle of their study.

Students who stayed on-campus or off-campus ruminated about their study, family, budget, and safety (Cosmas, 2020). Their worries were intensified when they were required to refrain from engaging in any outdoor activities or preventing from going home in order to adhere to the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The new norms of social life and education forced students to reflect on their inner strengths to understand all the circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown period provided more time for university students to meditate and explore their inner strengths, such as happiness, religious faith, that may help to elevate their resilience (Cosmas, 2020), which can also be boosted by past-life adversity (Reiner, 2021). During the difficult times, students might need to restore and lift their resiliency to help them gain and maintain their momentum in dealing with learning challenges particularly during the pandemic. Precker (2020) defines resiliency as a person's capability to resist, bounce back and develop in the face of stress and demand to change.

During the pandemic, many students struggled to adjust to new academic norms as they moved from face-to-face learning to fully online and distance learning. Some students faced difficulties in attending online classes due to the poor internet connection or lack of infrastructure, such as electricity, particularly students in rural areas. This could cause worry, anxiety, and stress because they might miss their lessons and the online exams. On the flip side, they had more time for reading, completing their academic tasks and being involved in personal in-door activities, which might help increase their positive feelings such as happiness. According to Tyagi, Gaur, and Sharma (2020), most students were happy while staying at home because they had adequate time for themselves that could help them keep their emotions under control. Regarding those students who stayed on-campus, they had more time to focus on their studies and were able to attend online classes because of the good internet connection provided by the university.

Social support from significant others, such as family members and friends, may also help students regain their happiness during the lockdown (Liu Mei, Zhing Ni, Sivaguru, & Cong, 2021). Additionally, support from the university and government (Md Shah et al., 2020) can bring happiness to students during the pandemic. For instance, the Sabah government provided tangible assistance to 40 public and private higher learning institutions in Sabah (Borneo Post, 2020) and food aid to university students during the lockdown (Malay Mail, 2020). Support derived from various sources can enhance students' happiness and lead to greater resiliency in facing with COVID-19 challenges. The effects of happiness on resiliency were discussed in past studies (e.g., Aboalshamat et. al., 2018; Kirmani et al., 2015; Tyagi et al., 2020) which also revealed an effect of resiliency on happiness. Positive emotions are essential not only for producing durable happiness, but also for bolstering coping and resilience in the face of adversity (Lyubomirsky & Della Porta, 2008).

In terms of religious beliefs, most university students in Sabah consider themselves religious. Their engagement in religious activities, such as praying daily, joining online religious talks and prayers, and reading relevant religious materials, may help them better understand things that happen around them. The collaborative approach based on religious coping is related to improvements in mental health (Cornah, 2006). Involvements in religious activities can also elevate religious and spiritual beliefs, which may help students reflect and search for meaning of life as part of the recovery process from traumatic life events (Vitelli, 2018).

Past studies (e.g., Ellison & Fan, 2008; Patrick & Kinney, 2003) revealed that people who are devoted to their religious faith were happier, healthier, and had more coping resources than those for whom religion and spirituality are less important. Strong spiritual

beliefs may also lead to higher levels of psychological well-being (Foskett et al., 2004; Kumar & Singh, 2014). Besides happiness and religious faith, past-life adversity is also one of the factors that can boost students' resiliency. Previous studies (e.g., Gartland et al., 2019; Miller-Lewis, Searle, Sawyer, Baghurst, & Hedley, 2013) revealed that students' who experienced difficulties during childhood might be more resilient because of their increased independence and determination. Miller-Lewis et al. (2013) found that loving child-parent relationships and a child's healthy self-concept could generally provide positive effects and were beneficial to children who faced either low or high-adversity. This contradicted Seligman's (1975) theory of learned helplessness, stating that past-life difficulties could create helplessness. For instance, some people tend to remain in one state or condition and fail to act or escape from a previous situation because of their past experiences of having failed many times. This may cause feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness (Ciccharelli & Meyer, 2006), such as when dealing with difficult circumstances caused by the coronavirus pandemic. However, other studies revealed that past-life difficulties could help a person regain self-confidence and move forward for a better way (Gunnar, Frenn, Wewerka, & Van Ryzin, 2009; Seery, Holman, & Silver, 2010).

Based on the preceding arguments, we conducted this study to examine the effects of each variable – happiness, religious faith, and past-life adversity – on resiliency. This may help us understand these factors' contributions to students' resiliency during the COVID-19 pandemic. The academic challenges faced by students before the pandemic might also be different during the pandemic because of increased challenges to handling academic demands.

2. BACKGROUND

Some people perceive that they cannot control their happiness or manage their own emotions, because they are all influenced by biological and environmental factors (Stevens, 2010). This belief can become a self-fulfilling prophesy and lead to unhappiness. It cannot be denied that people's emotions change and they cannot be happy all the time, however, when people think positively, they tend to perceive things positively, which may spark happiness in their lives. These happy moments may help people be in control and maintain mindfulness, which lead to strong resiliency in facing life's difficulties. When people feel happy, they tend to think positively and perceive life's challenges in a favorable way, (Cherry, 2019). This is in line with past studies' (e.g., Cosmas, 2020; Lower, 2014) findings that individuals who scored higher in happiness also had higher resiliency. In other words, happiness can elevate resiliency.

Religion is also used as a tool to overcome any difficulties in life. People who practice a religion regardless of their faith background, tend to rely on their spiritual beliefs when facing any kind of circumstance. Their beliefs may help them search for meaning and reflect on phenomena that occurs around them, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Most people believe that spirituality plays an important role in human life (e.g., Rahmati, Khaledi, Salari, Bazrafshan, & Haydarian, 2017) especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As revealed in past studies (e.g., Lower, 2014; Pirutinsky, Cherniak, & Rosmarin, 2020), religion can stand as a coping mechanism in dealing with stress. By engaging in religious activities, such as praying daily, perceiving religion as an important source of happiness, comfort, meaning, and life's purpose may strengthen students' faith and resiliency. Increased religious involvement may also help improve students' capability to cope with adversity. Hence, we believe that religious faith can enhance resiliency, especially during the coronavirus lockdown.

Past-life adversity also contributes to strong resiliency. Cassidy (2015) stated that academic and life challenges can provide opportunities for students to develop resiliency and be more successful. This was revealed in past studies (e.g., Cheetham-Blake, Turner-Cobb, Family, & Turner, 2019), where the participants who managed more past life adversities and stress reported higher levels of well-being than those with fewer stressful experiences. This might be because those with past life adversities learned from them and other challenges in healthy ways. They also learned how to bounce back after stressful events (Riopel, 2020). In Newcomb, Burton, and Edwards' (2019) study, which involved 265 undergraduate students in Queensland, Australia, found that students who experienced childhood adversity tended to show more strong character (e.g., more independent, and higher determination), which in turn led to greater development of resilience. Kinman and Grant (2011) also found that social work trainees with highly developed emotional and social competencies were more resilient in coping with stress. The preceding argument on past-life adversity shows that students who experienced life's difficulties in the past tend to have strong resiliency when dealing with any difficult circumstance.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Study design

During the restrictions amid the coronavirus, the most convenient and safe data collection strategy is doing it online. Prospective participants were invited to join this study via a Google form survey link on various platforms (e.g., WhatsApp & email). This might help involve more students from public and private universities. In this study, potential participants were recruited based on purposive sampling and snowball sampling, which focused on both public and private university students in Sabah, Malaysia. The participants were selected based on purposive sampling, that is, based on a population's characteristics, given this study's objective (Crossman, 2020). We also used the snowballing strategy by requesting those students who already participated in this study to forward the survey link to their friends.

3.2. Objectives

Based on the three preceding factors (i.e., happiness, religious faith & past-life adversity), we predicted that students who scored a higher level of happiness, who had strong religious faith, and who experienced past life difficulties (e.g., academic, financial, and family problems) might be less vulnerable when facing difficulties during the coronavirus lockdown and pandemic. This is because each of this factor contributed to students' resiliency. These three factors were thoroughly examined and discussed in this paper.

3.3. Research instrument

A set of questionnaires consisting of demographic profile and four scales (i.e., resiliency, religious faith, happiness, & past-life adversity) was used to gather data. The **Demographic Profile** was used to gather data about the participants' gender, religion, academic year, university, academic level, and residency. The **Brief Resilient Coping Scale** (Sinclair & Wallston, 2004) was used to measure the students' resiliency coping skills, with their responses ranging from 1- 'does not describe me at all' to 5- 'does describe me very well.' The sample items for this scale were 'I look for creative ways to alter difficult situations,' and 'I actively look for ways to replace the losses I encounter in life.' The categorization of the three groups of resilient copers was based on the accumulated scores: low resilient copers (4–13 points), medium resilient copers (14–16 points), and high

resilient copers (17–20 points). A higher score was defined as higher resiliency. The **Subjective Happiness Scale** (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) was used to measure students' happiness during the three phases of the coronavirus lockdown. The sample items were 'In general I consider myself ...' and 'Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself...'. The scale response ranged from 1- 'not a very happy person' to 7- 'a very happy person.' A higher score indicated a happier feeling. The **Religious Faith Scale** (Plante & Boccaccini, 2007) was used to measure participants' religious faith by asking them to rate the level of agreement with each item based on the 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree'). The sample items were 'praying daily,' 'I look to my faith as the source of inspiration,' and 'I look to my faith as a source of comfort.'

The Past-life Adversities Scale (adapted from Boparai, Marie, Aguayo, Brooks, & Juarez, 2017 & Felitti et al.'s 1998 scales), was used to examine the challenges faced by the participants in daily life, such as financial, familial, relationship, and academic challenges. The response scale was binary (1 = 'yes' and 2 = 'no.'). The internal consistency for each scale in this study ranged from .60–.95.

4. RESULTS

A total of 415 public and private university students (74% and 22.80%, respectively; 1 student did not indicate a university) participated in this study. The mean age was 21.96 (SD =4.08). The participants comprised 330 females (79.50%), 84 males (20.20%), and 1 (0.3%) who did not disclose a gender. They represented various religion faiths and academic years. More than 50 % were staying off campus, staying with their families (see Table 1).

Table 1.
The Demographic profiles of Participants (N=415).

Variables	Number	Percentage
Academic Year		
Year 1	201	48.42
Year 2	84	20.24
Year 3	95	22.90
Year 4	25	6.02
Year 5	8	1.92
Missing values	2	.50
Religion		
Muslim	215	51.80
Christian	188	45.30
Buddhist	2	.50
Hindu	9	2.20
Missing	1	.20
Residency		
Off campus	215	51.80
On campus	200	48.20
University		
Public	307	74.00
Private	107	25.80
Missing	1	.20

Regarding the correlations between the independent variables and the dependent variables, only happiness and religious faith showed positive correlation with resiliency; past life adversity showed a negative correlation (see Table 2). The participants who scored higher in both happiness and religious faith also scored higher in resiliency. In contrast, there was an inverse relation between the students' past life adversity and resiliency. The more they experienced past-life adversity, the lower their resiliency was. This contradicts the previous findings that the more students experienced past life difficulties, the stronger their resiliency was. This is explained in the discussion section.

Table 2.
Mean, SD, and Pearson Correlation between the Independent Variables (Happiness, Religious Faith, Past Life Adversity) and Dependent Variables (Resiliency).

Variables	Mean	SD	Resiliency
Happiness	20.15	4.76	.23*
Religious faith	39.60	6.79	.26*
Past life adversity	20.15	4.76	-.11*

Note, $p < .05^*$

In this study, we extend the analysis by examining the effect of each independent variable (i.e., happiness, religious faith, and past life adversity) towards resiliency by using the simple regression analysis. The simple regression test for the alternate hypothesis showed a positive and significant effect of happiness on students' resiliency ($\beta = .24$, $t_{1,414} = 4.96$, $p < .01$). The happier the students, the higher their resilience. Happiness contributed 5.6% to the variance of resiliency. Religious faith contributed 6.4% to the variance of resiliency ($\beta = .26$, $t_{1,414} = 5.43$, $p = .00$). The students who were happier and had stronger religious faith tended to be more resilient, while the experience of many previous adversities had a significant and negative effect on students' resiliency. These two findings demonstrated that students who reported being happier and having stronger religious faith tended to show high resilience. In contrast, students who experienced more past-life adversity (e.g., felt unsupported or unloved, lived with divorced parents, dealt with family members with social problems, or were diagnosed with a critical illness) tended to have lower resiliency. Past-life adversity showed a significant effect on resiliency ($\beta = -.11$, $t_{1,141} = -2.31$, $p = .02$) which contributed 1.3% on the variance resiliency (see Table 3).

Table 3.
Simple Regression Analyses of the Effects of Happiness, Religious Faith, and Past-life Adversity on Students' Resiliency.

Variables	B	R square	Sig.
Resiliency	.24	0.056	.00
Happiness			
Resiliency	.26	0.064	.00
Religious faith			
Resiliency	-.11	0.01	.02
Past-life adversity			

5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The study showed that happiness and religious faith contributed most to the students' resiliency, while past life adversity showed a lower effect on resiliency. For future studies, it might be interesting to examine these three variables and their effects on resiliency during the COVID-19 pandemic based on students' demographic backgrounds (e.g., religion, ethnicity, and location). This may broaden the understanding of the contributions of happiness, religious faith and past life adversities across religions, ethnicities, and locations. These factors are relevant among university students in Malaysia, who come from various cultural and religious backgrounds. Hence, this uniqueness needs to be taken into consideration in the future. We also suggest that future studies increase the number of participants involved from various states in Malaysia. Another interesting point that can be considered is to conduct a follow-up study, not just a one-shot study. This may help researchers review patterns in university students' resiliency across the different phases of Malaysia's COVID-19 lockdown. For instance, university students in Malaysia have experienced a long COVID-19 lockdown, starting with phase 1 on 18 March 2020 and continuing until now, when the country is entering an additional four progressive phases based on the National Recovery Plan (The Star, 2021).

6. DISCUSSION

The study revealed that participants who were happier showed higher resiliency. This happy feeling could be acquired from various sources during the pandemic, such as gaining more time to complete their academic tasks and other personal activities. However, we did not examine their sources of happiness, including their stay with their families. Nonetheless, we assume that these external variables might contribute to their happiness and need to be explored in future studies. Regarding staying with family, Tyagi et al.'s (2020) study revealed that students who were staying at home had more time to read and completed their academic tasks, which led to their happiness. All of these can help them keep their emotions under control and be more focused on their academic tasks. By staying home, they will also be less worried of being infected. This in turn can help strengthen students' resiliency when dealing with huge changes such as those they experienced during the pandemic. This is because being happy not only feels good, but it is associated with successful outcomes in life, however, we cannot deny that some students might find it difficult to feel happy, especially during the pandemic. In times of stress and uncertainty, people can experience panic and become irrational. However, in order to defeat Covid-19, it is essential to remain positive, optimistic and collaborative; choosing to be happy will support all of these (Al Atabi, 2020). This is because happiness can help people recognize their fears and anxieties, which can in turn help nourish and sustain their emotional resilience (Harrar, 2020).

In this study, we found that a higher in religious faith may increase students' resiliency during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in line with past studies' (Agaibi, 2018, Glicken, 2006; Rahmati et al., 2017) findings that resiliency can be strengthened by religious faith. Religious faith is a powerful source of hope, meaning, peace, comfort, and forgiveness for oneself (Brewer-Smyth & Koenig, 2014). Resilience appears to be an important concept in religion, and religion appears to correlate with an individual's resilience (Lower, 2014). This might be one of the reasons that contributed to resiliency. Most participants in this study held personal religious beliefs, identifying as Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu. Only one did not disclose a religion. The participants

recognized religion and spirituality as an important part of life. Strong religious faith and spirituality are associated with increased coping mechanisms, greater resilience in dealing with stress, optimistic life orientations, greater perceived social support, and lower levels of anxiety (Pardini, Plante, Sherman, & Stump, 2001). Resiliency can be strengthened by religious faith when dealing with adversity (Agaibi, 2018, Glick, 2006; Rahmati et al., 2017).

In this study, students' past life adversity showed significant and negative effect on students' resiliency. This is in contrast to some studies' (e.g., Gartland et al., 2019; Miller-Lewis et al., 2013; Newcomb et al., 2019) findings that past-life difficulties positively contributed to students' resiliency. However, our findings are supported by the results of other studies (Lee et al., 2018; Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008). Lee et al. (2018) reported an inverse relation between psychological resilience and depressive symptoms among 294 victims of Hurricane Katrina that occurred in 2005. The participants who were experienced adversity caused by the disaster showed higher levels of depression and lower levels of resiliency. Disappointment or trauma might cause them to show low resiliency as stated by Cherry (2021), disappointment and failure can drive people to unhealthy, destructive, or even dangerous behaviours. Some people might take time to forget or recover from their past-life difficulties. According to Heid (2019), the level of an individual's resiliency depends on the context and other variables that are largely out the person's control. This means that some people who face past-life adversity might rebound and gain strength, but others might need more time to rebuild their strength after what they had experienced in the past. This in line with Norris et al. (2008) argument that resilience is a process that leads to adaptation, not an outcome that leads to stability.

Additionally, young people today might lack hardiness compare with older generations. This becomes worse when they face the consequences of pandemic, where they have limitations in the things they used to do before the pandemic. Their frequent use of social media might also reduce their social skills in understanding and dealing with people, which could have helped them gain social support. As stated by Twenge (2017), the young generation's frequent use of social media has also caused them to feel more isolated, which can affect their social skills and quality of life. Self-reliance can be fostered by creating a good relationship with the young generation and teaching them empathy and respect, as well as how to engage in a tough discussion with people who may oppose their argument (Divecha, 2018).

7. CONCLUSION

The study shows that two of the examined factors (happiness & religious faith) can help students regain their resiliency in dealing with unforeseen challenges during the coronavirus pandemic. This study offers a glimpse of hope in terms of reflecting on how students' inner peace and strength (i.e., happiness and religious faith) need to be understood as resources that will deliver psychological assistance during the pandemic, apart from external supports. This may help them be more resilient when facing any difficulties related to the pandemic and any unexpected events in the future. Resilience comprises a set of skills that can be taught and learned; it is not based on genetics. It is the ability to withstand pressure, bounce back and grow in the face of stressors and changing demands (Precker, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic that caused uncertainty and mental breakdown among many university students worldwide may offer students the opportunity to reflect on the importance of happiness and religious faith while coping with coronavirus hardships. All

these factors may help them to overcome life's challenges and grow in faith. However, happiness is often overlooked in education. Therefore, it is hoped that educational systems will not discount the important contributions of happiness and religious faith in increasing the resiliency of university students. This is because resilience is one of the most effective factors contributing to healthy coping with life's disturbances (Javanmard, 2013), such as students' experiences during the coronavirus pandemic.

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