

UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT WELL-BEING: THE INFLUENCE OF EMOTION REGULATION AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract: Adolescence represents a critical developmental stage characterized by rapid emotional, social, and psychological changes that significantly influence overall well-being. This study examined the relationships between emotion regulation, friendship quality, and psychological well-being among secondary school students in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. A total of 379 adolescents aged 13 to 16 years were selected from two secondary schools using a multi-stage cluster random sampling method. Data were collected through self-report questionnaires, including the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, the Best Friend Index, and the Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being. Correlational analyses revealed that psychological well-being was positively associated with age ($r = .123, p < .05$), maternal education ($r = .194, p < .01$), paternal education ($r = .212, p < .01$), cognitive reappraisal ($r = .305, p < .01$), and positive friendship quality ($r = .322, p < .01$). In contrast, a weak but significant negative correlation was found between psychological well-being and negative friendship quality ($r = -.013, p < .05$). Multiple regression analysis further identified positive friendship quality, cognitive reappraisal, age, and lower levels of negative friendship quality as significant predictors of psychological well-being. These findings underscore the importance of emotional regulation and social relationships in shaping adolescent well-being, highlighting the need for further research at a national scale to inform targeted interventions and support policies for Malaysian youth.

Keywords: Psychological well-being, emotion regulation, cognitive reappraisal, friendship quality, adolescents

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial developmental phase characterized by rapid and dynamic transitions in emotional, social, and psychological domains [1]. These developmental changes are not only biologically driven but are also significantly shaped by environmental and relational factors, including family background, peer relationships, and individual coping mechanisms [2]. As adolescents navigate the complexities of identity formation, emotional self-regulation, and peer integration, their psychological well-being becomes a key indicator of successful development [3]. Psychological well-being in this context refers to an individual's sense of self-acceptance, purpose in life, autonomy, personal growth, and positive social relationships [4]. Amid increasing concerns over adolescent mental health in Malaysia and globally, understanding the contributing factors to psychological well-being has become a pressing priority for researchers, educators, and policymakers alike [5, 6].

While much attention has been given to risk factors such as academic stress, family conflict, and exposure to digital media [7], it is equally important to explore protective factors that promote resilience and thriving during adolescence. Emotion regulation and friendship quality are two such factors that are increasingly recognized for their role in enhancing adolescent psychological functioning [8, 9]. Emotion regulation enables adolescents to manage internal emotional experiences and express them in socially acceptable ways [10], whereas friendship quality reflects the extent to which peer interactions provide emotional support, trust, intimacy, and conflict resolution [11]. Together, these factors are hypothesized to significantly influence psychological well-being outcomes

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

This study draws upon Gross's Process Model of Emotion Regulation [12] and Ryff's Model of Psychological Well-Being [13] as its conceptual foundation. Gross posits that emotion regulation involves strategies that individuals use to influence their emotional experiences, particularly cognitive reappraisal (changing the interpretation of a situation to alter its emotional impact) and expressive suppression (inhibiting emotional expressions). Among these, cognitive reappraisal is widely regarded as an adaptive strategy associated with positive psychological outcomes.

Simultaneously, Ryff's six-dimensional model of psychological well-being provides a comprehensive understanding of well-being beyond mere happiness or the absence of distress. These dimensions, namely autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance, offer a nuanced framework for assessing adolescent psychological functioning. Prior research has established links between cognitive reappraisal and higher well-being, as well as between supportive friendships and greater life satisfaction. However, studies integrating both emotional and social predictors within the Malaysian adolescent context remain limited.

3. Method

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design involving a total of 379 adolescents aged between 13 and 16 years, who were selected from two secondary schools in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. To ensure adequate representation across various grade levels and demographic backgrounds, a multi-stage cluster random sampling technique was utilized. Data collection was carried out using three standardized and validated self-report instruments. The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire [12] was used to measure two central emotion regulation strategies: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. The Best Friend Index [14] assessed the quality of the respondents' closest peer relationships, with specific subscales for evaluating both positive and negative dimensions of friendship. To measure psychological well-being, the study employed Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being [4], which encompass six dimensions of well-being and are scored through a series of Likert-scale items. Statistical analyses included Pearson correlation to explore bivariate relationships among variables and multiple regression analysis to identify significant predictors of psychological well-being.

4. Finding and Discussion

The results revealed several statistically significant associations between psychological well-being and the variables under study. Psychological well-being was found to be positively correlated with age ($r = .123$, $p < .05$), maternal education ($r = .194$, $p < .01$), and paternal education ($r = .212$, $p < .01$), suggesting that older adolescents and those with more educated parents tend to report higher levels of well-being. Notably, strong positive correlations were also observed between psychological well-being and both cognitive reappraisal ($r = .305$, $p < .01$) and positive friendship quality ($r = .322$, $p < .01$), highlighting the importance of adaptive emotional regulation strategies and supportive peer relationships. Conversely, a weak but statistically significant negative correlation was found between psychological well-being and negative friendship quality ($r = -.013$, $p < .05$), indicating that conflictual or strained peer interactions may slightly diminish well-being.

Multiple regression analysis further revealed that four variables, positive friendship quality, cognitive reappraisal, age, and lower levels of negative friendship quality, significantly predicted psychological well-being. Among these, positive friendship quality and cognitive reappraisal emerged as the strongest predictors. These findings underscore the interconnected roles of emotion regulation and peer relationship quality in shaping adolescent psychological well-being.

These findings reinforce the view that psychological well-being during adolescence is not determined solely by internal traits or external stressors but is co-constructed through daily interactions and coping strategies (Lerner et al., 2015) [3]. The positive relationship between cognitive reappraisal and well-being supports previous literature that emphasizes the value of adaptive emotion regulation in managing stress and fostering resilience [12, 15]. Adolescents who engage in cognitive reappraisal may be better equipped to reinterpret negative experiences, leading to lower levels of distress and greater emotional stability [16].

Likewise, the quality of peer relationships, especially close friendships, emerges as a crucial factor [9]. Supportive friendships offer validation, emotional closeness, and practical support, all of which are essential for identity development and psychological growth [17]. In contrast, friendships marked by conflict, betrayal, or lack of trust can erode self-esteem and contribute to psychological distress [18]. Interestingly, the data also suggest that even modest levels of negative friendship experiences can significantly diminish well-being, emphasizing the importance of peer dynamics [11, 19].

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, this study provides empirical evidence for the integral role of both emotion regulation and friendship quality in predicting psychological well-being among Malaysian adolescents. The findings contribute to a growing body of research advocating for the integration of emotional and social competencies in youth development initiatives.

The study's implications are manifold. From an educational and psychological intervention standpoint, the findings suggest the need for school-based programs that enhance students' emotion regulation skills, particularly training in cognitive reappraisal. Such programs can be embedded into existing guidance and counselling services or developed as part of social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula.

Moreover, promoting healthy peer interactions should be a core component of youth development programs. Teachers, school counsellors, and parents can play an active role in fostering environments that support positive friendships and mediate peer conflicts. At a policy level, the Ministry of Education and other relevant agencies may consider investing in adolescent mental health programs that incorporate emotional intelligence, peer mentoring, and conflict resolution training as part of a holistic well-being agenda.

As Malaysia continues to prioritize mental health in its educational and social agendas, evidence-based insights such as these are essential to inform interventions and policy strategies that promote resilient and thriving adolescents.

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