

# Association Between Self-Esteem and Happiness Among Adolescents in Malaysia: The Mediating Role of Motivation

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## Abstract

Adolescence is the developmental process of becoming an adult. This journey of physical and psychological maturation is filled with challenges and hormonal chaos, and teenagers experience unhappiness at times. From a psychological perspective, this study aimed to examine the association between motivation, self-esteem and happiness; and to explore the mediating role of motivation in the association between self-esteem and happiness among adolescents in Malaysia. 480 secondary

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school students were recruited using a multistage cluster sampling method and answered the Malay versions of the Subjective Happiness, Brief Motivation and Rosenberg Self-esteem scales. Both self-esteem and motivation were found positively correlated to happiness. The hypothetical mediating role of motivation on the association between self-esteem and happiness was also supported, indicating that individuals with higher self-esteem have higher motivation which may result in greater happiness. Since the direct association between self-esteem and happiness remained significant, a partial mediation of adolescents' motivation between self-esteem and happiness is indicated. The results showed that perceived self-esteem plays a role in predicting happiness and the presence of motivation enhances happiness, providing an insight to nurture happier adolescents for parents and educators in Malaysia.

### **Keywords**

Motivation, self-esteem, happiness, adolescent, Malaysia

## **Introduction**

No one is happy all the time, but a person can be happy under the right condition. In the process of becoming adults, adolescents undergo physiological and psychological growth can be emotionally stormy and devastating at times due to assorted reasons (Twenge et al., 2019). Studies revealed that more and more teenagers are unhappy in general, struggling with mood disorders and suicidal ideation for a prolonged period. A U.S. study reported that there is an increase of 52% in episodes of major depression among teenagers from year 2005 to 2017 (Twenge et al., 2019) while several studies in Malaysia recorded a high prevalence of suicidal ideation and depressive symptoms (Chin et al., 2019; Chin & Wu, 2020, 2019; Wu & Yaacob, 2017), indicating the mental health of adolescents is an critical topic today.

What conditions would make adolescents happy? The development of positive psychology as a domain in research has stimulated great interests in the study of human happiness, self-esteem and motivation that are vital components in an individual's life, including adolescents who are facing the challenges of both emotional and physiological growths. These domains of happiness, self-esteem and motivation ensure that life is fulfilling as they mediate relationships, mental health and overall life satisfaction (Baumeister et al., 2003; Myers & Diener, 2018).

In accordance with the two-process model (TPM; see Sheldon, 2011) of psychological needs, these needs involving the good feeling derived from various basic types of psychosocial experiences when acquiring those basic experiences.

Psychological needs are defined as both inborn behavioral motives and as experiential nutriment that are necessary to achieve wellness. Psychosocial experiences such as self-esteem refer to the perspective of needs-as-requirements, equivalent to psychological vitamins that are essential in order for people to be happy and healthy. Psychological needs are also regarded as those motives that people have to perform certain behavior, such as motivation to learn. Adopting TPM as the theoretical background, this study set forth to investigate whether self-esteem and motivation are the right conditions for happiness in Malaysian adolescents specifically.

Happiness, self-esteem and motivation are distinct but interrelated concepts. In general, happiness can be defined cognitively as an enduring feeling of satisfaction (Cheng & Furnham, 2002). Nevertheless, it was found to have overlapped with life satisfaction and subjective well-being as they were used interchangeably in several past studies (e.g., Easterlin et al., 2011; Gray et al., 2013; Myers & Diener, 2018). Besides, happiness has also been identified to be able to predict our abilities in constructing personal qualities to promote life satisfaction (Coffey & Warren, 2020; Cohn et al., 2009); also, individuals who perceive to be happy are more adaptable in daily challenges and interpret negative events in a more positive light (Salavera et al., 2017). Self-esteem can be defined as the overall feelings of self-worth (Baumeister et al., 2003). It is usually recognized as a determinant for positive self-development and has also been causally connected to the successes and failures one may face (Baumeister et al., 2003). Motivation is a broad term that can be defined as a complicated strength that stirs people to act and to achieve goals that may be related to subjective well-being (Yi et al., 2014). With the research interest on schooling adolescents, motivation is operationally defined as academic motivation (Pintrich et al., 1993). As these concepts are all related to well-being, this study aimed to explore the connections between these domains with a focus on three research questions: Is higher levels of self-esteem associated with higher levels of happiness? Is higher levels of motivation associated with higher levels of happiness? Does motivation play a mediator role in the association between self-esteem and happiness?

Past studies have identified a close connection between self-esteem and happiness where high self-esteem was found to be a strong predictor of happiness (Anand & Singh, 2015; Baumeister et al., 2003; Flynn & MacLeod, 2015; Neff, 2011; Tan et al., 2017). Such finding explained that individuals with high self-esteem possess underlying qualities that bring about positive feelings regarding their life in general, as well as better emotional experiences which are the components of happiness (Lu et al., 2001; Myers & Diener, 2018).

Similarly, studies revealed a positive association between motivation and happiness (Hassanzadeh & Mahdinejad, 2013; Omar et al., 2013). The idea that motivation inspires individuals to make progress, which in turn cultivates happiness has been the underlying explanation behind these findings

(Hassanzadeh & Mahdinejad, 2013). It is also believed that motivational processes can increase happiness within an individual (Shayan & AhmadiGatab, 2012).

On the other hand, related studies have also found an association between self-esteem, motivation and sad moods where individuals with higher self-esteem were found more motivated to alter their sad moods to become happier (Wood et al., 2009). They attributed these findings to an individual's internal beliefs that they deserve to be happy (Wood et al., 2009). These findings explained that high self-esteem warrants a higher sense of entitlement to the feeling of happiness which in turn motivates an individual to be happy. A few studies also support the mediating role of motivation in the association of psychological needs and various emotional-behavioral outcomes such as positive and negative affect (McDonough & Crocker, 2007), academic engagement (Karimi & Sotoodeh, 2020) and academic burnout (Chang et al., 2016). This idea is further supported by self-determination theory (SDT: Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991) suggesting that individuals who meet their psychological needs tend to experience more self-determined motivations, which in turn lead to more positive outcomes (i.e., Karimi & Sotoodeh, 2020; McDonough & Crocker, 2007). Thus, the SDT lends support to the mediation model of this study in examining the mediating role of motivation in the association between self-esteem and happiness.

The Ministry of Health Malaysia reported a rise in adolescent suicidal rate, from 7.9% in 2012 to 10% in 2017 (Kumar, 2019). The suicidal ideation that always stems from severe unhappiness is a serious phenomenon when it prevailed highly in Malaysian studies, recording 36.7% (Chin & Wu, 2020) and 60% (Wu & Yaacob, 2017) of their teenage respondents have suicidal ideation, and 29.9% displaying depressive symptoms (Chin et al., 2019). Apart from suicidal risk factors, the roles of self-esteem and motivation in relation to happiness are as relevant as the protective factors (Ahmad et al., 2014) that should not be overlooked. However, these domains are not well-explored especially within the adolescent population in Malaysia. The existing information is still vague and have a significant gap in terms of knowledge available. This gap may get in the way of the proper utilization and comprehension of the factors. Self-esteem and motivation are known to fluctuate and change as an individual enters adolescence. Therefore, a proper understanding of its impact on connected variables may provide a more comprehensive outlook on each domain. As mentioned above, each factor has a major implication on an individual's well-being; thus, further exploration of the roles of these domains is necessary.

The interrelationship between self-esteem, motivation and happiness is evident in literatures. However, the mediating factors between self-esteem and happiness are not fully elucidated. It would be useful to provide further evidence

that better clarifies the underlying mechanism between self-esteem and happiness. Therefore, with various literature supports, it is plausible to foresee motivation could be considered as the mediator in the association between self-esteem and happiness.

## Methods

### *Design and the subjects of the study*

This is a cross-sectional and correlational quantitative research study. This study was carried out among secondary school students aged between 13 and 17 years (Mean = 15.06, Standard deviation = 1.26) in Malaysia. The data collection were conducted at Perak, Penang and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, located in the West Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The respondents were randomly selected using a multistage cluster sampling method. Among 480 participating school students, 52% were Malay, 25% Chinese, 12% Indigenous people, and 11% Indian. On the other hand, 58.5% of participants were females.

Multistage cluster sampling is a mixed-structure of cluster sampling that includes several stages of selection. Large sampling clusters of the population are distributed into a smaller cluster in a few stages for data collection. According to statistics shown from the Educational Management Information System (EMIS), in 2016 there were 21,88,525 secondary students in Malaysia, enrolled at 2,404 operating secondary schools (MOE, 2016). With a population of more than 10,00,000 the target sample size for recruited respondents is 384 (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). This study recruited 480 respondents to cater for any reduced sample size due to incomplete data collection.

First of all, the primary clusters within two states and one federal territory were selected through random numbers from the 14 states and three federal territories in Malaysia, which were Pulau Pinang, Perak and Kuala Lumpur. Then, two secondary schools within the two states and one federal territory were selected through random numbers for secondary clusters. The last step in cluster sampling was a sampling unit with 80 students from each school, recruited from Form 2 (Grade 8) and Form 4 (Grade 10) as respondents. The reason for such demographic recruitment was that the government does not allow Form 3 (Grade 9) and Form 5 (Grade 11) to participate in this study as they have to focus on the public examination of the School-based Form Three Assessment, *Penilaian Tingkatan 3 (PT3)* and Malaysian Certificate of Education, *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM)*, while students in Form 1 are too young for this study. 40 participants formed a cluster, with a total of 12 clusters were recruited in this study.

## Procedures

Several levels of approvals were obtained before the actual data collection commenced, including the Ministry of Education (MOE, 2016), Department of Education (*Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri- JPN*) for each selected state, District Education Office (*Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah- PPD*) and the school principals. Next, prior written permission from parents consenting their children to participate in the research were obtained. Participants were then informed that their involvement is voluntary and anonymous. The questionnaire of the study was administered in Malay language, translated from the original English language followed by the procedure of backward translation.

## Measures

*Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS)*. Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) is a 4-item inventory with 7-point Likert scales in the range of 1 (not a very happy person) to 7 (a very happy person). The SHS was designed as a brief index of subjective happiness or well-being. A mean score for this scale was computed with a high score indicates high happiness level. The Cronbach alpha for the scale was .71.

*Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaires (Brief Motivation Scale)*. Items in the Brief Motivation Scale are a subscale of Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaires (Pintrich et al., 1993). It is a shortened version with 8 items and used to measure an individual's motivation to learn. This scale utilizes a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 7 (very true of me). The mean value was calculated. The higher the mean score, the higher the motivation to learn. The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .80.

*Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale*. The Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (SES) is a 10-item inventory with a 4-point scale that refers from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). It consists of 10 statements that measure the positive and negative feelings and are interrelated to the self-worth and self-acceptance of individuals. The computed score with a higher total score corresponds to a higher level of self-esteem. The SES indicated a high level of internal consistency with .71.

## Results

Pearson Correlational analysis showed that there was a significant positive correlation between the level of motivation and happiness,  $r(478) = .35, p < .001$ . The higher the level of motivation, the higher is the level of happiness. The results also revealed a positive and significant association between the level of

**Table 1.** Correlation between motivation, self-esteem, and happiness (N = 480).

Measure	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
1. Motivation	5.30	.90	-.51	.61	1		
2. Self-esteem	34.63	5.30	-.22	.07	.25***	1	
3. Happiness	4.86	.92	-.12	.03	.35***	.45***	1

Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

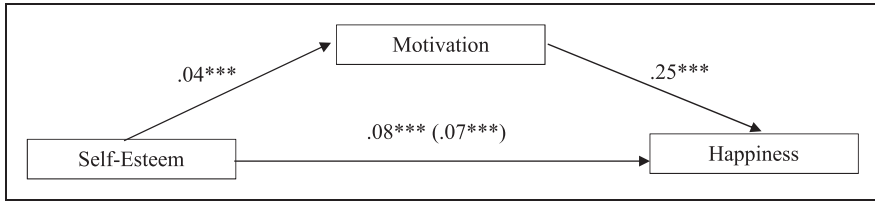
**Table 2.** Self-esteem and happiness mediated by motivation (N = 480).

Step	IV	DV	B	SE	t
1	Self-esteem	Happiness	.08***	.01	11.09
2	Self-esteem	Motivation	.04***	.01	5.72
3	Motivation	Happiness	.25***	.04	6.12
	Self-esteem		.07***	.01	9.58

Note: B = Unstandardized coefficient. \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; Indirect link:  $B = 0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.00$ , 95% Confidence Interval,  $CI = [.01, .02]$ .

self-esteem and happiness,  $r(478) = .45$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that adolescents who have a high level of self-esteem are happier (see Table 1).

Hayes's (2013) SPSS macro Process with a bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval (CI) based on 5,000 bootstrap samples were performed to explore the mediating role of motivation in the association of self-esteem on happiness. In this hypothetical mediation model, motivation was served as a mediator variable, self-esteem as an exogenous variable, and happiness as an endogenous outcome variable. The regression weight of direct association on the link between self-esteem and happiness, excluding the mediator, was significant ( $B = .08$ ,  $t = 11.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Next, motivation was found to be predicted by self-esteem ( $B = .04$ ,  $t = 5.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and itself also served as a significant predictor of happiness ( $B = .25$ ,  $t = 6.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The path coefficient for the direct association between self-esteem and happiness decreased but remained significant when motivation was controlled ( $B = .07$ ,  $t = 9.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As predicted, the mediating role of motivation was found significant in the relationship between self-esteem and happiness ( $B = .01$ ,  $SE = .00$ ) with a 95%  $CI [.01, .02]$ . The direct association between self-esteem and happiness remained statistically significant, indicating that adolescents' motivation only partially mediated the relationship between self-esteem and happiness. See Table 2 and Figure 1 for the results of the relevant mediation analyses and their summary.



**Figure 1.** The mediation model showing the association of self-esteem and motivation on happiness (N = 480).

## Discussion

A positive correlation was found between self-esteem and happiness. The finding gives support to previous studies (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Gray et al., 2013; Uchida et al., 2004) which argued that self-esteem is closely linked to happiness in adolescents. Researchers have stated that self-esteem is a positive feeling essentially to regulate personal emotion and social adjustment (Baumeister et al., 2003). Panahi (2016) found that self-esteem has positive associations with the ability to control, positive emotions, and hopefulness; and negative associations with depression, anxiety and loneliness. This finding can also be further explained by previous studies which stated that individuals with a lower level of self-esteem have a higher tendency to experience depression, dissatisfaction with life, anxiety and are usually less motivated (Joiner et al., 1999; Quatman & Watson, 2001). Hence, self-esteem does have a well-established connection to happiness. In terms of social outlook, self-esteem has a strong correlation with happiness in individualistic countries (Baumeister et al., 2003). And now, this study reveals a clear connection between self-esteem and happiness in Malaysian context, a collectivistic social environment by large. Such findings indicate that self-esteem is equally important in boosting happiness in both social outlooks, despite the differences where individualistic nation boosts up self-esteem by attending to their internal attributes and collectivistic nation by focusing on groups and relationships (Baumeister et al., 2003).

The study also found that learning motivation and happiness were correlated positively. This finding is consistent with a past Malaysian study revealing that college students reported greater happiness when they were feeling motivated (Omar et al., 2013) as well as studies from other countries outside of Malaysia (e.g. Guillen-Royo & Kasser, 2015; Kasser & Ryan, 1996). It is explained that motivated individuals are more inclined to pursue self-acceptance or affiliation to satisfy their basic psychological needs which then leads to better psychological well-being (Schmuck et al., 2000). These findings lend supports to TPM.



TPM posits that psychological needs necessitate psychosocial experiences that work like psychological vitamins to promote happiness and health (Sheldon, 2011). Both self-esteem and motivation are a form of psychological nutrients that enables adolescents reaching out to happiness.

Lastly, motivation was found to mediate the association between self-esteem and happiness. Self-esteem helps to increase experiences and achievements which are related to motivation indirectly (Hutz et al., 2014). They were found complementing one another where individuals with higher levels of motivation and enthusiasm to achieve would have predominantly higher experiences gained, which in turn leads to higher levels of self-esteem and happiness (Kamkar et al., 2012; Lyubomirsky et al., 2006). Self-esteem has also been found to be closely associated with optimism and lack of hopelessness which are the constructs under motivation (Kamkar et al., 2012; Lyubomirsky et al., 2006). Also, youths experience more positive emotions when they have a higher commitment to school, a good level of self-esteem, proper communication skills and the motivation to attain success (Yi et al., 2014). In summary, motivation is identified as one of the predictors of happiness and also acted as a protective factor against negative emotions. Thus, motivation is essential for a person to strive as well as to feel good, showing a direct association with happiness and also mediating the association between happiness and self-esteem. The finding from the mediation analysis can be utilized to support the SDT, where SDT explains that self-determined persons are motivated individuals who incline to fire up need-satisfying behaviors to increase happiness in life (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The findings in this study have indispensable implications specifically in certain domains on a person's well-being and overall happiness. Firstly, this study highlights the importance of motivation and self-esteem in an adolescent's life which can be used to create greater awareness among law-makers, educators and parents. This awareness may then encourages society to find proper methods to cultivate motivation and self-esteem from a young age. As self-esteem and motivation are both found to increase happiness, the cultivation and enhancement of these attributes should start as early as possible in a person's life and should continue into young adulthood. Individuals involved in child development could find ways to promote these attributes in children and adolescents. This can be seamlessly incorporated by ensuring proper learning environments and counseling programs in schools and universities.

Self-esteem and motivation may also play a protective factor against mental health challenges in adolescents directly and indirectly. Mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety are often closely related to lack of happiness in a person. Thus, having higher knowledge of these domains will have an added benefit as it may help to reduce the prevalence of mental health challenges among adolescents.

This study has a few limitations that need to be taken into account. First, participants of this study were recruited from schools in Kuala Lumpur, Perak and Pulau Pinang, all situated in the West Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. In general, Malaysia consists of East Malaysia (i.e., Sabah, Sarawak and Federal Territory of Labuan), East Coast of Peninsular (i.e., Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang) and West Coast of Peninsular (i.e., Perlis, Kedah, Penang, Perak, Selangor, Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka and Johor). This limits the representability of the data as it does not account for the adolescent population in other areas in Malaysia. Future research should include a wider and more diverse sample by including respondents from all other states in Malaysia to increase the accuracy of knowledge. Secondly, this study only focused on the association between individual factors and happiness among adolescents, which may have overlooked the importance of environmental factors such as family and community. Future studies can address these variables to obtain a more holistic view of the contributing domains in the field of happiness studies.

## **Conclusion**

This study focused on the association between happiness, motivation and self-esteem among Malaysian adolescents. Besides providing more evidences on the correlation between self-esteem and motivation with happiness, it has also contributed new knowledge especially in identifying the hypothetical mediating role of motivation in the link between self-esteem and happiness. The results also play a role in filling in the knowledge gap found in current context which may help to pave the way for more comprehensive research in the future. We foresee that further studies on this topic may help to consolidate the information found and may help to expand this specific field of knowledge.

## **Compliance with ethical standards**

### *Ethical approval*

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

### *Informed consent*

Parental and individual consents were obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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