

THRIVING IN SINGLEHOOD: COMPARING THE SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE

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Abstract: This study aims to measure the level of subjective well-being (SWB) among emerging adults who are single and examine if there is any difference relating to gender. A total of 199 emerging adults participated in an online survey that assessed subjective well-being (using Satisfaction with Life Scale and Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule). The current study reveals a prevalent high level of life satisfaction among the majority of emerging adults in this study (76.88%), and a relatively balanced distribution on positive affect (52.26%) and negative affect (54.77%). Results of a t-test revealed that males scored higher than females on positive affect dimension. However, no significant difference was found between male and female in term of life satisfaction and negative affect dimensions in SWB. These findings provide a deeper insight into the SWB of emerging adults who are single by looking at SWB across the three dimensions. Gender-related source of stress may extend into emerging adulthood for females, thus explaining the lower positive affect compared to males. Despite the emphasis on romantic engagement in the Emerging Adulthood Theory, the study highlights that emerging adults who are single can still thrive. These findings have implications for societal perceptions of singlehood in Malaysia and warrant the need for future research to understand the well-being of individuals within the context of emerging adulthood in the country.

Keywords: Subjective Well-Being, Singlehood, Emerging Adults, Gender

INTRODUCTION

Emerging adulthood, a unique developmental stage situated between adolescence and adulthood, is characterized by individuals navigating the intricacies of identity development and assuming adult responsibilities (Arnett, 2000). This transitional phase often involves the exploration of non-marital romantic relationships (Côté, 1997), representing a pivotal facet of this developmental period. In this context, active involvement in romantic relationships during emerging adulthood emerges as a substantial developmental endeavour that exerts a noteworthy impact on subjective wellbeing (SWB) (Furman & Collibee, 2014).

As articulated by Diener (1984), SWB encapsulates how individuals assess and experience their lives, comprising cognitive and affective aspects. The cognitive aspect pertains to how individuals appraise their lives, while the affective aspect delineates how individuals experience their lives in practising positive versus negative manners. Empirical investigation underscores a positive association between a higher commitment to a romantic relationship and an elevated SWB (Dush & Amato, 2005).

However, the initiation of romantic relationships is not universally experienced by all emerging adults. The pursuit of such relationships is challenged by the need for financial stability and mental preparedness for the demands of a serious commitment (Shulman & Collony, 2013). An alternative perspective suggests that staying single during this developmental period is progressively normative and does not necessarily compromise one's SWB (Beckmeyer & Cromwell, 2018).

Despite the typical age range of 18 to 25 for emerging adulthood, this phase may extend beyond these parameters for certain individuals (Arnett, 2000). In Malaysia, a prolonged singlehood trend is observed in marriage statistics from 2018 to 2022 (Department of Statistics Malaysia; DOSM, 2019; DOSM, 2023). While the total number of marriages rebounded in 2021 and 2022 after a dip to 186,297 in 2020 due to the COVID-19 impact, there was a 0.5% decline in nationwide marriages from 2021 to 2022. The median age for brides across the nation increased from 26.0 years in 2018 to 27.0 years in 2022. Furthermore, compared to 2021, the median age for grooms increased across both Muslim (28.0 years) marriages and non-Muslim (31.0 years) marriages. For brides, the median age remained at 26.0 years for Muslim marriages and increased to 29.0 years for non-Muslim marriages since year 2021. These statistics highlight that while the number of

marriages in Malaysia has increased in the past two years, the trend of prolonged singlehood is shown in the risen median age for both grooms and brides as observed across Muslim and non-Muslim marriages from 2018 to 2022. Notably, since 2018, the 25 to 29-year age group consistently exhibits the highest number of marriages. This demographic shift reflects the diverse choices made by emerging adults, with a substantial portion opting for marriage and a significant segment choosing to remain single. The criteria outlined by Arnett (2000), classifying individuals aged 18 to 25 as emerging adults, is relevant for the current study to ensure a comprehensive examination of the demographic under consideration. Arnett's (2000) conceptualization of emerging adulthood as a distinct life stage, bridging the gap between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood, and that emerging adults are typically unmarried and without children. By adopting these criteria and extending the age range to 29 based on the occurrence of prolonged singlehood in Malaysia, the current study aims to capture the experiences of emerging adults who are single during this specific developmental stage.

In the Malaysian setting, a study revealed that single women aged 30 to 50 faced societal judgments, feeling labelled as abnormal, unlucky in love, lonely, and picky (Alwi & Lourdunathan, 2020). It is crucial to consider that this research employed in-depth interviews to explore the nuances of their singlehood experiences. On a different note, a study involving undergraduate students in Malaysia and India discovered that having a positive attitude towards being single is linked to greater life satisfaction (Tan et al., 2021). Nonetheless, Tan et al.'s (2021) research primarily focused on undergraduate students, excluding those who are already part of the workforce. Despite this, the exploration of singlehood remains inadequately examined in Malaysia, contributing to limited understanding about the experiences of emerging adults who are currently being single in the country. Collectively, there is an urgent need to address this substantial gap in comprehending the unique experiences of this unique group within the Malaysian context, particularly given the extensive research conducted on SWB in Western countries.

Gender

Having received prodigious scholarly attention, questions about how gender influences SWB have sparked off contrasting viewpoints. In Istanbul, a study revealed that females exhibited higher levels of SWB among undergraduate

samples (Akbağ & Ümmet, 2017). Globally, data from 156 countries indicates that working females generally express greater life satisfaction compared to their male counterparts, despite being more susceptible to negative sentiments (Tay et al., 2014). However, during emerging adulthood, males were found to be more satisfied with their lives across various aspects compared to females (Yaremtchuk, 2014). Adding to the complexity of SWB literature, some researchers found no gender differences, suggesting that gender may not be a significant predictor in understanding individuals' SWB, especially in countries which are narrowing the gender gap (Batz-Barbarich et al., 2018).

Considering the role of relationship status in gender-specific SWB, previous studies have endeavoured to address this question. Over a 17-year timeframe, both married females and males reported higher levels of life satisfaction than their unmarried counterparts (Lee et al., 1991). Additionally, the affirmative influence of marriage is more evident among males concerning the positive affect, with no differences in life satisfaction compared to females (Diener et al., 1997). However, it is imperative to note that comparisons done by Lee et al. (1991) and Diener et al. (1997) predominantly involved unmarried and married adults, and they did not particularly look into one specific age group of emerging adults, which were later introduced by Arnett in 2000. Additionally, their studies were conducted 30 years ago, resulting in a scarcity of information on within-group differences, specifically among the group of emerging adults who are single in today's contemporary society.

The study aims to identify the level of subjective well-being across all components (life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect) among emerging adults who are single. Besides to examine the differences between male and female emerging adults who are single in subjective well-being across all components (life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This quantitative cross-sectional study employed an online survey methodology distributed through social media platforms to recruit participants. The selection of this approach is substantiated by the data from the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC,

2020), revealing that the age groups of 20 to 24 and 25 to 29 constitute the top two segments with the highest internet usage at 34.1% and 11.8%, respectively. This statistic underscores the prevalence of internet use among Malaysian emerging adults, justifying the appropriateness of employing online surveys to reach and engage emerging adults who are single in data collection. In capturing the experiences of emerging adults who are single concerning their subjective well-being, this study employed self-report measures with Likert scale instruments.

Participants

The current study encompassed a cohort of 199 emerging adults who are single within the age range of 18 to 29, including both undergraduate students as well as individuals who have entered the workforce which were recruited through a virtual snowball sampling technique. Based on the characteristics of emerging adults illustrated by Arnett (2000), the inclusive criteria for the current study comprised individuals meeting the following conditions: (i) being Malaysian and aged between 18 and 29, currently residing in Malaysia, and (ii) currently being single. Conversely, exclusion criteria stipulated as: (i) must not have been married or is currently dating; (ii) should have maintained a single status for more than three months following a romantic breakup. This temporal criterion was informed by research indicating that the impact of romantic breakups on life satisfaction tends to vary, with those having experienced poorer relationship quality prior to the breakup exhibiting a greater decline in life satisfaction (Rhoades et al., 2011). By establishing a benchmark of three months of singlehood, the current study aimed to capture a more extensive nuanced dataset, excluding extreme cases while ensuring robust data collection.

Instruments

The assessment of subjective well-being was measured through two distinct scales. To mitigate potential limitations associated with composite score, the decision was made to analyse these components individually.

Satisfaction with Life Scale

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) was used to gauge individuals' overarching judgment regarding their life satisfaction. Comprising five items, the SWLS demonstrated excellent reliability in the current study, attaining a Cronbach's alpha of .90.

Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule

The Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988) was used to measure individuals' mood states. This 20-item scale touches on two distinct facets, encompassing 10 items each for positive and negative affect. The present study opted for PANAS due to its recognized efficacy as a gold standard for comprehending subjective well-being, complementing the use of SWLS. The two subscales of PANAS exhibited commendable reliabilities, with Cronbach's alphas of .86 for positive affect and .90 for negative affect subscale, respectively.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the online survey were analysed using statistical software IBM SPSS version 28.0. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) were calculated for all variables. Independent t-test was used to test the hypotheses of this study.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

As shown in Table 1, among the 199 respondents, 133 are females (66.8%) and 66 are males (33.2%). The majority of respondents are between the age of 18-25 (71.9%) while the minority comes from the category of 26-29 (28.1%).

Table 1: Demographic Statistics of Respondents

Demographic	N	Percentage	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age			24.04	2.543
18 – 25	143	71.9		
26 – 29	56	28.1		
Gender				
Male	66	33.2		
Female	133	66.8		

Table 2 displays respondents' scores on satisfaction with life, positive affect, and negative affect. The categorization of satisfaction with life adheres to the delineated benchmarks provided by the developers (Diener et al., 1985), resulting in six distinct well-being categories. However, given the complexity of analysing six categories, the current study amalgamated "extremely dissatisfied," "dissatisfied," and "slightly dissatisfied" into the

low satisfaction with life group, and conversely, grouped "extremely satisfied," "satisfied," and "slightly satisfied" as high satisfaction with life, while maintaining the neutral group as initially proposed. Conversely, for the continuous scales, such as positive affect and negative affect, mean scores were utilized as cut-off points to classify scores as either low (below the mean) or high (above the mean).

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of Subjective Well-being

Variable	N	%	Min	Max	M	SD
Satisfaction with Life	199		9	35	24.20	5.966
Low	36	18.09	9	19	14.64	3.482
Neutral	10	5.03	20	20	20.00	.000
High	153	76.88	21	35	26.73	3.788
Positive Affect	199		17	50	33.14	6.404
Low	104	52.26	17	33	28.29	4.098
High	95	47.74	34	50	38.45	3.663
Negative Affect	199		10	43	22.75	8.096
Low	109	54.77	10	23	16.55	4.084
High	90	45.23	24	43	30.27	4.625

Note. % = Percentage, *Min* = Minimum, *Max* = Maximum, *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation.

The overall mean satisfaction with life for the entire sample was 24.20 ($N = 199$), with the high group displaying a notably elevated mean ($n = 153, M = 26.73$) in comparison to the low group ($n = 36, M = 14.64$). Similarly, the overall mean positive affect for all participants was 33.14 ($N = 199$), with the high group exhibiting a substantially higher mean ($n = 95, M = 38.45$) compared to the low group ($n = 104, M = 28.29$). Conversely, the overall mean negative affect was 22.75 ($N = 199$), with the low group registering a notably lower mean ($n = 109, M = 16.55$) in contrast to the high group ($n = 90, M = 30.27$).

Inferential Statistics

Table 3: Independent T-Test for Three Components of Subjective Well-Being Between Male and Female

Dimension/Gender	N	Mean	t	p-value	Effect Size
Satisfaction with Life					
Female	133	24.62			
Male	66	23.36	1.398	.164	.211

Positive Affect					
Female	133	32.28			
Male	66	34.88	-2.804	.006	-.413
Negative Affect					
Female	133	22.67			
Male	66	22.92	-.204	.835	-.031

Table 3 presents a significant difference in the positive affect component of subjective well-being between female and male emerging adults who are single, with males ($M = 34.88$) scoring slightly higher than females ($M = 32.38$), $t(197) = -2.804, p < .05$. Despite the uneven distribution of the sample across genders, the effect size, calculated through Cohen's d , yielded a value of $-.413$, indicative of a minimal to moderate effect size. In contrast, the analysis reveals no significant difference between males and females in the satisfaction with life component, $t(197) = 1.398, p > .05$, and the negative affect component, $t(197) = -.204, p > .05$.

DISCUSSION

The results reveal a prevalent high level of satisfaction with life among the majority of participants. In aligning with previous research, German individuals who were single reported sustained happiness as they aged (Böger & Huxhold, 2018). Likewise, Oh et al. (2022) found life satisfaction among German singles that were followed over a decade. The current study extends empirical support to the Malaysian context, emphasizing that single individuals can indeed experience life satisfaction during emerging adulthood era. Based upon the framework of Emerging Adulthood Theory (Arnett, 2000), which posits emerging adulthood as a distinct phase distinguished by identity exploration, the engagement in romantic relationships is emphasized as vital to forming identity in the field of love. However, the current study provides evidence that emerging adults are able to experience singlehood positively, with a high level of life satisfaction reported. Arnett (2000) elucidates that this life stage entails a plethora of options, including a wide range of potential mates and work opportunities. In this context, it becomes evident that singlehood is a viable option for today's emerging adults, and it does not necessarily have a negative impact on their subjective well-being or impede their progress in exploring their identities.

On the other hand, the results demonstrate a relatively balanced distribution of both positive and negative affect among the participants. While it is challenging to draw definitive conclusions about this finding, however, it suggests a tendency among emerging adults who are single to report not only low negative affect but also low positive affect. This lends support to previous findings that positive affect and negative affect are two distinct dimensions rather than the two opposite ends of a single dimension (Ortuño-Sierra et al., 2015). However, this finding opposes the results put forth by Bookwala and Fekete (2009), which suggested that single individuals experience higher levels of negative affect. This inconsistency could be attributed to the different age group studied; their research focused on individuals aged 40 and above, while the current study focused on emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 29. Additionally, this finding challenges Diener's (1984) notion that subjective well-being involves robust positive affect. Different from Jovanović and Joshanloo (2021), which suggests that life satisfaction is positively closely linked to positive affect, the current study suggests that high life satisfaction in emerging adults who are single may coexist with lower positive affect. It is important to note the context in which the data was collected; from January 2022 to May 2022, a time when Malaysia was gradually shifting from pandemic to endemic. Despite the stage of endemic, considerable social distancing measures had already been widely deployed. Furthermore, the current study included both students and working individuals, many of whom may still be in hybrid or work from home mode.

Therefore, it is plausible that emerging adults who are single may have participated in fewer social activities, resulting in non-social behaviour, which has been linked to lower levels of positive affect (Coplan et al., 2013; Gazelle, 2008). Previous research has found a significant fall in positive affect among undergraduate students following a COVID-19 quarantine (Kornilaki, 2022), and this effect could have extended to the working participants in the current study.

Moreover, the results show a significant gender difference in positive affect, with males scoring higher than females. The difference could be explained by females' tendency to internalize personal challenges. To illustrate, in the early stage of adolescence, the novelty and stress of romantic involvement

are related with heightened internalizing symptoms in girls (Davila, 2008). However, as girls mature and enter later stages in life, a romantic involvement surpasses an intimate friendship as a source of connection and emotional backing (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). Consequently, it is possible that emerging adult females who do not engage in romantic relationships in the current study will nonetheless have higher internalizing symptoms as a result of the lack of a romantic partner. This can be attributed to the experiences of singlehood, which may present distinct challenges and stressors. For instance, in the specific context of Malaysia, an interview-based investigation has revealed that single females openly acknowledged the stigmatization they encounter (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009). Consequently, it is plausible to consider that this internalization impacts the assessment of positive affect ratings among females, particularly when subjected to such stigmatization. Besides, earlier research has pointed out heightened appearance concerns experienced by adolescent girls due to gender-related pressure (Abrams & Stormer, 2002). This pressure becomes more pronounced when they become more concerned with their appearances. As indicated by Gillen and Lefkowitz (2009), females tend to be more attuned to societal messages concerning appearance than males. As individuals transition into emerging adults, the influence of appearance concerns may potentially intensify, especially for single females. On top of that, it has been shown that males commonly prioritize physical attractiveness in mate selection (Li et al., 2013). In addition, increased instances of comparing one's appearance were associated with lower positive affect (Taniguchi & Ebesu, 2019). The confluence of these factors suggests that the pressure on appearance, initially identified during adolescence, extends into the phase of emerging adulthood for females. As illustrated by Swami et al. (2022), emerging adults who excessively care about their appearance may experience anxiety of receiving negative judgements with regards to their appearance in social circumstances, which in turn, raises anxiety in dating scenarios. Hence, single emerging adult females may be more susceptible to lower positive affect compared to their male counterparts, particularly within the framework of mate selection during singlehood.

Furthermore, no substantial gender differences were detected in terms of life satisfaction and negative affect among emerging adults who are single. This finding aligns with a comprehensive meta-analysis that covered 44 years of well-being research across 106 nations, which concluded that gender has

minimal impact on life satisfaction at the aggregate level (Batz-Barbarich et al., 2018). Likewise, similar results have been reported by Amati et al. (2018) in a sample of Italian individuals aged 18 to 64. These consistent findings suggest that, even within the distinct context of emerging adults who are single, gender may not significantly influence their life satisfaction and negative affect.

More importantly, the current study explores the role of gender by examining the individual components of subjective well-being. It sheds light on how gender influences the positive affect experienced by emerging adults who are single and emphasizes the importance of further investigation to understand how other potential factors may yield an impact on individuals' assessment of subjective well-being. Notably, the lower positive affect observed in single emerging adult females suggests that this group may face specific challenges and pressures. Despite the disproportionate gender representation in the sample, the moderate effect size provides evidence supporting the significance of this finding. Future research should address the gender ratio imbalance to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of gender differences in the positive affect component. On top of that, future research should explore factors such as societal attitudes towards single women (Huang & Turnage, 2022) and internalized stigma (Ochnik, 2016). For instance, individuals who are single and start to believe and accept the negative stereotypes that society imposes on them, tend to have lower self-esteem and greater risk of poor mental health (Ochnik, 2016). Integrating these factors in future research could better contribute to the complexity of subjective well-being and singlehood experiences. This study provides a deeper understanding on how subjective well-being may be experienced across specific age groups like emerging adults and people from certain demographic groups such as males or females. While we found only limited gender differences, there is enough to warrant future research in this area. More studies should explore subjective well-being among emerging adults.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the subjective well-being of Malaysian emerging adults who are single, revealing a prevalent high level of life satisfaction and a relatively balanced distribution on both positive and negative affect. The nuanced findings, which show a tendency to report both low negative and

positive affect, cast doubt on definitive conclusions about this demographic. It is noteworthy that emerging adults who are single can indeed experience happiness, marked by a high level of life satisfaction coupled together with a low level of negative affect. Gender differences were evident, with males reporting higher levels of positive affect, a pattern possibly influenced by the higher rates of internalising concerns among females. Importantly, there is no significant gender differences observed in life satisfaction or negative affect, which is consistent with larger meta-analytical patterns. The current study provides a deeper insight into the subjective well-being experiences of emerging adults who are single by examining the components individually. The findings highlight the importance of continued research on subjective well-being that may be experienced by individuals from different age groups and gender.

Informed Consent Statement

All participants had granted their consent to this study.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

The study was done compliance with the ethical guidelines approved by the Jawatankuasa Etika Penyelidikan Manusia (JEPeM) from Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Author's Contribution

Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing, Chong Hoi Yan; Interpretation of data, Final review with critical and intellectual participation in the manuscript, Intan Hashimah Mohd Hashim & Farhana Kamarul Bahrin.

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Data Availability Statement

All data is available upon request.

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