

# HOW DOES GRATITUDE RELATE TO HAPPINESS IN MALAYSIAN YOUNG ADULTS? THE MEDIATING ROLE OF RESILIENCE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL POLICY

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## Abstract

While a considerable body of evidence suggests a positive, direct relationship between gratitude, happiness, and resilience, the indirect effects through mediating variables remain unexplored in the literature. This study investigates how gratitude relates to happiness through resilience, using the cognitive model of the broaden-and-build theory as our framework. A total of 134 young Malaysian adults aged between 18-27 years completed an online survey, providing data on self-reported subjective happiness, gratitude, and resilience, and their demographics. Results show that while both gratitude and resilience are significant predictors of happiness, resilience is a stronger predictor and mediates the relationship between gratitude and happiness. These results suggest that gratitude and resilience are essential and influential factors of happiness among the participants. It implies that grateful young adults may enhance their happiness by building resilience. Therefore, programs and interventions that consist of the elements of gratitude enhancement and resilience-building can contribute to happiness among young people, in tandem with the Malaysian Youth Policy provision and societal well-being indices.

**Keywords:** Subjective wellbeing, appreciation, gratitude, resilience, youth, indirect effects

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## Introduction

Research on the role of happiness in promoting the quality of life and individuals' wellbeing has been growing in recent years. Drawing on both the hedonism and eudaimonia approaches (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), this growing body of research has helped shape our understanding of nature of the relationship and the impact of happiness on other variables. For example, happiness is associated with significant increases in physical and mental health (Diener & Chan, 2011); longevity (Diener & Chan, 2011; Headey & Yong, 2019); work productivity (Salas-Vallina, Pozo-Hidalgo, & Gil-Monte, 2020); and social relationship quality (Clark, Fleche, Layard, Powdthavee & Ward, 2016). Such increases often last over the long-term, with happy people being more grateful and more resilient in bouncing back after facing challenging situations or adversities (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Witvliet, Richie, Root Luna & Van Tongeren, 2019; Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley & Joseph, 2008). Studies have also demonstrated that happiness is positively associated with intrinsic religiosity and internal locus of control (Watkins, Woodward, Stone & Kolts, 2003) and can buffer against depression for resilient people (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh & Larkin, 2003).

Both gratitude and happiness have been identified as significant correlates of resilience (Gomez, Vincent, & Toussaint, 2013). Defined as a dynamic process of positive adaptation despite significant adversities (Masten, 2015), resilience appears to be best promoted through gratitude and happiness enhancement (Gomez et al., 2013). Resilient individuals can bounce back from stressful experiences more quickly and effectively (Witvliet et al., 2019). They also use positive emotions to rebound from stressful experiences while simultaneously finding positive meaning in those stressful encounters (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). According to the cognitive model of the broaden-and-build theory (Alkozei, Smith, & Killgore, 2018), gratitude can predispose individuals to think more openly, explain negative situations in a more positive way, and build emotional and personal resources when dealing with daily stressors. These, in turn, lead to improved psychological health and subjective

well-being. Therefore, as an essential personal resource, resilience is likely to be an underlying mediating mechanism that links gratitude and happiness.

Almost 45 percent of Malaysia's population is between 15 and 39 years old (National Statistics Department, 2018). The number of young people is projected to grow, albeit slower (National Statistics Department, 2016). The right policies would enable youth to become the driving force for the country's economy and development. However, the government has not yet capitalized on the potential of positive states, such as happiness, gratitude, and resilience, among the youth in the course of the nation's development and social change. Significantly few studies have addressed these positive states among the Malaysian people, in general, and young people, in particular. The latest World Happiness Report (Helliwell, Layard, Sachs & De Neve, 2020) ranks Malaysia 82nd out of 153 countries, with a score of 5.384 - placing the country the fourth place after Thailand (54th), the Philippines (52nd), and Singapore (31st). Trung, Cheong, Nghi and Kim (2013), who examined data from the fifth wave of the World Value Survey across the Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, found that happiness is the lowest among the age group of 25 and 37. The latest World Value Survey (2018) also reveals a similar pattern of findings in that Malaysians' happiness with life starts to decline in their early twenties and reaches a low point in their mid-thirties and mid-forties. Given these scenarios, there is a need for more research into happiness and other positive states so that the data can be used to inform future decisions of policymakers and government officials.

The need for such research is further heightened by the fact that many young Malaysian adults, teenagers, and children, are struggling with mental health issues. The latest National Health and Morbidity Survey 2019 (Institute for Public Health, 2019), for instance, shows that about 424,000 children in Malaysia are experiencing poor mental health, while 4.7 percent of those aged between two and 17 years have functional difficulties. The key findings from the Adolescent Health and Nutrition Survey 2017 (Institute for Public Health, 2018) also presents bleak and alarming evidence of mental health problems amongst the young population, with an increasing rate of suicidal ideation, especially in girls. It is an accepted fact that mental health problems can significantly affect happiness, relationships, and even

physical health. If left unaddressed, mental health problems among children and youth can lead to high costs. Therefore, addressing resilience, positivity, gratitude, altruism, and other positive states is critical.

For this reason, child and adolescent mental health are included as one of the critical indicators of progress under Goal 3 of the Sustainable Development Agenda (United Nations, 2015; Bruckauf, 2017). However, except for a few studies (e.g., Mohd Hashim & Mohd Zaharim, 2020; Zaremohzzabieh, Samah, Samah & Shaffril, 2019), research on happiness, gratitude, and resilience among adolescents, teenagers, and young adults in Malaysia, is sorely lacking. It is essential to investigate these positive states as part of human strengths that could help these population groups cope with challenges in life.

Also, the relational structure between gratitude and happiness, mediated by resilience, is still relatively unclear because most extant studies have yet to examine the potential mediating effect of resilience in the association between gratitude and happiness. Previous research (e.g., Gomez et al., 2013; Witvliet et al., 2019) has mostly reported the direct relationships between these variables. However, due to their unique characteristics and contributions, the relationships among gratitude, happiness, and resilience might be more complicated than the direct and straightforward links found in previous studies. Based on Alkozei, Smith, and Killgore's (2018) model, grateful individuals have a more positive view of stressors in the social environment, building their resilience and helping them attain a higher happiness level. Therefore, it is possible that grateful young adults could enhance their happiness by building resilience. Hence, examining resilience as a potential mediator in the relationship between gratitude and happiness would help expand the empirical base and understand the mechanisms that link gratitude, happiness, and resilience in the literature.

Perhaps, the most important of all is that researchers have only recently begun to question the role that positive states might play in devising social policies. In Europe, happiness has been reported to play a critical role in informing welfare choices and policies and promoting job creation, social inclusion, and equality (Greve, 2010). Governments, such as in Bhutan, the United Kingdom, Italy, and

France, have also started to adopt non-financial or non-economic indices as guidelines for social and administrative policies or have used data on citizens' happiness to shape public policies and evaluate their effectiveness (Helliwell et al., 2020). Although Malaysia has initiated the Malaysian Well-being Index (formerly known as the Malaysian Quality of Life Index), the Malaysian Urban-Rural National Indicators for Sustainable Development (MURNInets), and the Malaysian Family Wellbeing Index (MFWI), to measure the wellbeing of the society, these indices only focus on the calculation of tangible aspects of wellbeing (Ramli et al., 2017; Dali, Sarkawi, & Abdullah, 2017). In other words, they seem to disregard the non-tangible aspects of wellbeing, such as social, political, emotional, psychological, happiness, and spiritual aspects, as well as other factors, toward the construction of the indices. The most recent Malaysian Youth Policy (2015) also does not offer a clear and direct policy approach regarding the positive states among youth. Instead, these fall into the category of health and wellbeing as part of the 'healthy and prosperous lifestyle' package (Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia, 2015).

## **The Present Study**

Considering the substantial role of resilience as both a preventive and protective factor in fostering psychological well-being, empirical investigations of its mediating impact on the relationship between gratitude and happiness are warranted to elucidate the mechanisms behind this association. Therefore, the present study examines the relationship between gratitude and happiness among young Malaysian adults and investigates whether this relationship is mediated by resilience. Against this background, the researchers hypothesize that happiness is positively correlated with, and predicted by, gratitude and resilience. Additionally, the researchers expect that resilience mediates the relationship between gratitude and happiness, even after controlling for the effect of age. Although the inclusion criterion for participants was set as young adults, age was still controlled in the analyses because gratitude, happiness, and resilience may differ as participants progress through early adulthood to later young adulthood. The paper concludes with implications for social policy. It makes the case that the most effective way to maximize the experiences and benefits of happiness among young adults is to increase and strengthen their level of resilience.

## Method

### Study design and participants

The study is a cross-sectional, self-administered, anonymous online survey. Using Google form, the survey was pre-tested on a sample of 12 young adults (Males = 6; Females = 6) between the ages of 18 and 28 years and residing in Malaysia. This step was undertaken to check if any part of the survey would be unclear or problematic for the participants. The participants brought up no issues, and the link to the survey was then posted on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

A total of 134 participants ( $Mage = 21.90$ ;  $SDage = 1.98$ ) responded to the online survey. All of them fulfilled the inclusion criteria of this study: (i) aged between 18 and 28 years; (ii) residing in Malaysia; and (iii) can read and understand the basic English language. All participants are university students enrolled in various courses, with the majority being fourth-year students (45.5%). Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Frequency	Percentage (%)	M and SD
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	67	50	
Female	67	50	
<b>Age</b>			
18 - 19	19	14.18	$M = 21.90$ ; $SD = 1.98$
20 - 21	36	26.87	
22 - 23	57	42.53	
24 - 25	17	12.69	
26 - 27	5	3.73	
<b>Level of Study</b>			
Year 1	26	19.41	
Year 2	25	18.66	
Year 3	22	16.41	
Year 4	61	45.52	

( $n = 134$ )

## Measures

**Happiness:** Happiness was measured through the four-item Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS: Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). Each item has seven options that required participants to finish a sentence fragment. For example, item 1, “*In general, I consider myself .....*” is responded to on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 - *Not A Very Happy Person* to 7 - *A Very Happy Person*. The SHS was scored by reverse-coding item 4, and the sum of all items was calculated, with higher scores indicating a higher level of happiness. In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the SHS is .69, demonstrating an acceptable internal consistency level.

**Gratitude:** The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6), developed by McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2001), is a six-item self-report scale that measures the disposition to experience gratitude in daily life. The items are rated on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 - *Strongly Disagree* to 7 - *Strongly Agree*. The scale score is the sum of items, with reverse coding of items 3 and 6. Higher scores reflect a greater level of gratitude. In this study, the scale shows satisfactory evidence of reliability with Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .73.

**Resilience:** The six-item Brief Resilience Scale (BRS: Smith et al., 2008) was used to measure participants' ability to bounce back or recover from adversities, stress, setbacks, or failures. Items 1, 3, and 5 are positively worded, while items 2, 4, and 6 are negatively worded. Participants rated each item using a five-point response scale, ranging from 1 - *Strongly Disagree* to 5 - *Strongly Agree*. The scale scores are the sum of the items' ratings, with negatively worded items being reverse-coded. Higher total scores indicate a higher level of resilience. This scale also demonstrates an acceptable internal consistency in this study, with Cronbach's alpha of .61.

## Procedure

Ethics approval for conducting this study was obtained from the Research, Publications, and Innovation Ethics Committee of the University. The SHS, GQ-6, and BRS scales are in the public domain and can be used freely for research purposes. All participants filled out an informed consent form on the first page of the online survey. Participation in the study was voluntary, with no monetary

compensation or incentive offered. Participants were assured of confidentiality, personal data protection, and their rights to withdraw from the study. Common method bias was controlled via procedural remedies, such as maintaining participants' profile anonymity, not collecting their internet protocol address or email address, and minimizing apprehension in the survey evaluation (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee & Podsakoff, 2003).

## Results

Data collected were analyzed using IBM SPSS 22.0 with PROCESS version 3.3 software (Hayes, 2017) and checked for normality, outliers, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity, underlying the correlational and regression analyses. The results of the Q-Q plot show a normal distribution for all variables. No case outliers were identified as the Cook's distance value obtained is .10, below the criterion = 1 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2017). No multicollinearity issue was detected as the tolerance value is above the cut-off of .1 (Field, 2018), and the variance inflation factor (VIF) is below the cut-off value of 10 (Field, 2018). Homoscedasticity was estimated using the Durbin-Watson test, and it was found that the values for all predictors are close to 2 (i.e., 1.87), as recommended by Field (2018). Descriptive and correlation analyses were then conducted to examine the general data distribution and the relationships among the variables. The Pearson correlation results indicate that happiness is significantly and positively associated with gratitude ( $r = .54, p < .001$ ) and resilience ( $r = .41, p < .001$ ). There is also a significantly positive relationship between gratitude and resilience ( $r = .30, p < .001$ ). Table 2 presents these results.

Table 2: Intercorrelations Among the Variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i><math>\alpha</math></i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>
1 Happiness	18.64	4.29	.69	1	.54**	.41**
2 Gratitude	32.57	5.58	.73		1	.30**
3 Resilience	18.84	3.63	.61			1

( $n = 134$ )

\*\*Correlation is significant at the .001 level (two-tailed).



To test the direct effects of gratitude and resilience on happiness while controlling for age, hierarchical regression analysis was performed, in which age was entered first into the regression, followed by gratitude and resilience (see Table 3). Age has a significant effect on happiness ( $B = .39, \beta = .18, p = .04$ ) only in Step 1, and the model in Step 1 (age only) accounts for 3.3% of the variance in happiness. With the addition of gratitude (model in Step 2), the change in  $R^2$  is significant ( $\Delta R^2 = .27$ ), indicating that gratitude is a significant predictor of happiness ( $B = .41, \beta = .53, p < .001$ ). In the final model (Step 3), both gratitude ( $B = .35, \beta = .45, p < .001$ ) and resilience ( $B = .32, \beta = .27, p < .001$ ) are significant predictors of happiness scores; in each case, the relationship is positive with higher gratitude and higher resilience scores being associated with higher happiness scores. The final model accounts for 36.51% of the variance in happiness ( $\Delta R^2 = .07$ ) and the change in  $F$  is statistically significant.

Table 3: Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Happiness

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$
<b>Step 1</b>						.033	.033*
Age	.390	.185	.181	2.109	[.024, .756]		
<b>Step 2</b>						.298	.265**
Age	.114	.163	.053	.697	[-.209, .436]		
Gratitude	.407	.058	.530	7.031	[.293, .522]		
<b>Step 3</b>						.365	.068**
Age	.071	.156	.033	.452	[-.238, .379]		
Gratitude	.348	.058	.453	6.047	[.234, .462]		
Resilience	.324	.087	.274	3.727	[.152, .496]		

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .001$

Based on the hierarchical regression models' results above, a nonparametric bootstrapping method (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) via PROCESS software (Hayes, 2017) was used to test the significance of the mediating effects. Using Model 4, 5000 bootstrap samples for bias correction, 95% confidence intervals (CIs), and age as a covariate (to control for any potential age confounds), the total effect ( $c$ ), the direct effect ( $c'$ ), and the indirect effect ( $ab$ ) were estimated. If the CIs fail to contain zero, it means the mediation effect (i.e.,  $ab$ ) is statistically significant (Hayes, 2017).

Results show that resilience mediates the relationship between gratitude and happiness, with indirect effects  $B = .06$ ,  $Boot SE = .04$ , and  $CI [.005, .159]$ , which is statistically different from zero. The total effect of gratitude on happiness is  $B = .41$ ,  $CI [.292, .522]$ , while its direct effect is  $B = .35$ , and  $CI [.234, .462]$ . These results suggest that resilience positively mediates the effects of gratitude on happiness (see Figure 1 for a summary of these results).

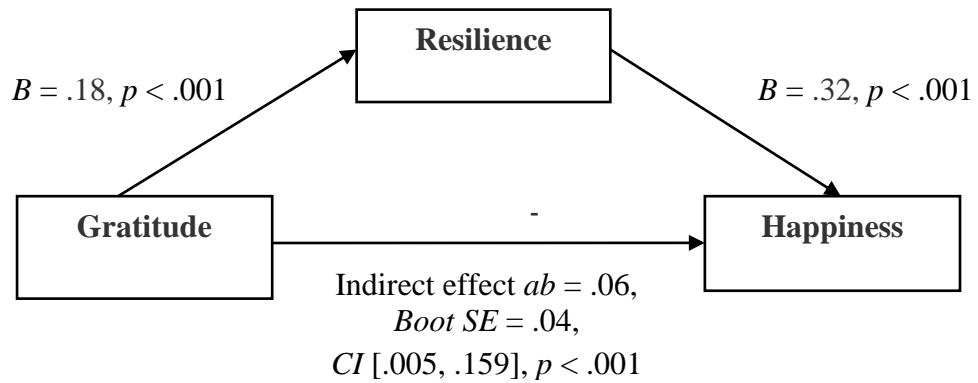


Figure 1: Mediation Model Linking Gratitude, Resilience, and Happiness Among Young Adults

## Discussion

This study's main objective is to investigate the mediating role of resilience in the relationship between gratitude and happiness among young Malaysian adults. Two significant results emerge from our analyses. First, gratitude and resilience are found to be positively and significantly correlated with happiness. When happiness was regressed on gratitude and resilience with age as a covariate, both variables uniquely and significantly predict happiness. These results are consistent with previous research (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Witvliet et al., 2019; Gomez et al., 2013) that gratitude and resilience are essential and influential factors of happiness among young Malaysian adults.

Second, as hypothesized, resilience mediates the relationship between gratitude and happiness, hence providing support for an indirect effect of gratitude on happiness via resilience. From a theoretical point of view, this result is consistent with the cognitive model proposed by Alkozei et al. (2018), that posits gratitude

leads people to hold a positive view of themselves and their life, resulting in lessening the adverse effects of stressors, which then evoke an increase in resilience, and subsequently, increased happiness. Moreover, most studies have examined direct effects when linking gratitude to happiness. To gain a more detailed understanding of the underlying mechanisms, researchers have called for a more robust approach to the study of happiness. Thus, the model investigated in this study contributes to the aforementioned call by demonstrating that the effects of gratitude on happiness are neither direct nor isolated, but rather are mediated by resilience.

Because resilience is a significant mediator in the relationship between gratitude and happiness, it might be necessary to include programs that can build personal resources, such as resilience, in interventions to increase happiness. Therefore, higher education institutions, agencies, associations, and those working with young adults in various settings might be well advised to precisely tailor their interventions or programs accordingly. For example, it is suggested that psychological interventions, such as cognitive behavior therapy-based and skills-based psychoeducation interventions targeted at young people, be included as part of the activities and training programs. Studies have demonstrated that such interventions have successfully promoted resilience and reduced the risk of developing mental health problems (Reavley, Bassilios, Ryan, Schlichthorst & Nicholas, 2015).

Additionally, Fissi (2014) argued that policies that consider psychological happiness could free policymakers from the fetters of economism and the rules and procedures of political liberalism. These would involve: (i) using empirical data on happiness and subjective well-being to obtain information on the overall quality of people's lives to improve public policies and increase politicians' accountability; and (ii) pressing governments to take care of their citizens' happiness and subjective well-being in a different way from the neo-utilitarian approach. The starting point for this strategy would be to consider social policy reforms that include psychological states and other objective and subjective variables. As discussed in the Introduction section, some of these ideas have already been initiated in Malaysia, albeit at the early stages. Also, the need to use multidimensional indices that go beyond the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), such as the Inclusive Wealth Index and the happiness

index, has been mooted at the Malaysia Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Summit 2019 (Malaysian CSO-SDG Alliance, 2019). In this regard, our recommendation is for the government to stay the course and resist forces seeking to displace these efforts. More specifically, positive states, such as happiness, gratitude, and resilience, should be one of the major priorities in the Malaysian Youth Policy 2015. This is important because psychological health and well-being will remain high on the sustainable development agenda in the foreseeable future.

Although this study supports the hypothesis that a high level of gratitude may lead to a higher level of happiness through resilience, we qualify the interpretation of the results within the context of three limitations. First, because the participants in this study are predominantly young adults in universities, generalization to other populations is impossible. Future work would do well to include samples from more significant assortments of age and locality, which would offer the opportunity to assess a broader range of gratitude, happiness, and resilience levels, thereby allowing broader generalization. Second, although the measures used in this study have adequate reliability and common method bias was mitigated to some degree by procedural remedies, response bias and social desirability bias may still occur as these measures are all self-reports. Other assessment methods or objective measures of the outcome variables, or ratings by different sources (e.g., peer report, colleagues' rating, among others) should be used in future research to minimize these biases further. Finally, since our data are cross-sectional, they cannot demonstrate causal associations between the variables. Longitudinal or experimental studies are suggested to verify the results.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of the study highlight the importance of resilience when examining the relationship between gratitude and happiness, hence adding to the literature on the mechanisms to study the gratitude-happiness link. To genuinely promote happiness and well-being among young adults, it is necessary that interventions, programs, and policies that are implemented consist of the element of gratitude enhancement and resilience building. Focusing on character strengths and

well-being in other contexts, beyond the university life, across life-span, and in other cultures, may further elucidate the mechanisms and interrelationships among these positive states. We did not explicitly test these aspects in the present study. Therefore, future research involving other demographic variables is warranted to understand the underlying processes better.

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