

Neighbourhood Social Capital and Neighbourhood Safety in Predicting the Subjective Well-being of Young Malaysians

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ABSTRACT

A safe neighbourhood provides a trusting platform for people to interact with one another, and in turn, promotes higher levels of social capital among neighbours. Young people who grow up in a safe neighbourhood may learn to form trusting relationships with their neighbours. This experience might enhance their subjective well-being by reconciliation and regeneration of their own worldviews with that of others. On the other hand, these trusting relationships with neighbours could increase the perceived safety of the neighbourhood because the sense of security is based on the amount of help they could get, especially in emergency circumstances. Thus, in this paper, we aim to explore the role of Perceived Neighbourhood Safety as a mediator to Neighbourhood Social Capital (NSC) and Subjective Well-Being. We surveyed 5,237 youths ranging in age from 15 to 25 years. Respondents were recruited using stratified and clustering sampling. Results from the Pearson correlation show a significant relationship between NSC and the Subjective Well-Being of youth; youth who trust and reciprocate towards their neighbourhoods perceive life as happier. This study also found that Perceived Neighbourhood Safety is a partial mediator for NSC and Subjective Well-Being in youth. These findings show that the importance of the neighbourhood bond goes beyond crime prevention to include well-being of youth in a community. Therefore, there is a need to promote activities that could strengthen the

elements of trust and reciprocity among neighbours. Future research could look into how different activities could enhance the subjective well-being of neighbours from different age groups.

Keywords: Neighbourhood safety, social capital, subjective well-being, young people

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INTRODUCTION

Neighbourhood Social Capital (NSC) refers to the norms of trust and reciprocity held among people who reside near each other. There is an expectation that trusted neighbours would act in the best interest of the person who trusts them (young person) and that both person who trusts them and trusted exchange favours asynchronously. Neighbourhoods with high social capital achieve better social outcomes such as higher education levels, lower poverty and lower unemployment than neighbourhoods with low social capital (Putnam, 1995). However, how this group interaction effect could be reflected in the psychological state of an individual remains unknown. In this research, we studied the neighbourhood social capital among young Malaysians aged 15 to 25 years old to determine if this quality of neighbourhood networks is associated with their subjective well-being.

We hypothesised that the experiences of growing up with supportive neighbours would promote a higher level of subjective well-being among young people. How young people perceived their current happiness might be reflected in their relationships with their neighbours. Good neighbours offer young people a stable living environment, which allows them to explore life with the confidence of having a safe place to return to. On the other hand, bad relationships with neighbours cause anxiety among young people, who are then wary of their neighbours. These negative perceptions and the fact that having a bad relationship with the neighbours lowers one's social

support will lower the subjective well-being of young people. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the relationship between neighbourhood social capital and subjective well-being of young people.

It is established that high neighbourhood social capital can promote safe neighbourhoods by enhancing interaction among neighbours (Chong, 2007; Kanan & Pruitt, 2002; Morrow, 2000; Onyx, Woods, Bullen, & Osburn, 2005; Ross & Yang, 2000; Ziersch, Baum, MacDougall, & Putland, 2005). This ensures that people living in these neighbourhoods have greater subjective well-being than do those who do not enjoy safety of their neighbourhoods. Interaction with neighbours can foster a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood and allow trust and reciprocity to bloom within the neighbourhood. For example, those who live in a neighbourhood with high social capital spend more time with their neighbours, visit each other at their homes, attend parties and play games together. By engaging in neighbourhood activities, young people learn to play the role of responsible citizens. This sense of ownership has been shown to foster vigilant and safer neighbourhoods (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004; Warin, Baum, Kalucy, Murray, & Veale, 2000). A sense of security in one's neighbourhood encourages young people to interact freely and openly beyond their own walls. This happens because young people share the responsibility of protecting and preventing criminal activities from occurring in the neighbourhood. One of the main reasons young people do not participate

in community activities is because they do not feel safe in their neighbourhoods (Onyx et al., 2005). Therefore, the positive relationships formed between people who live in a close-knit neighbourhood could establish a safe platform for increasing neighbourhood social capital, especially among young people.

Previous studies show that young people who live in safe neighbourhoods enjoy higher subjective well-being (Brown, Bowling, & Flynn, 2004). As discussed above, residing in a perceived safe neighbourhood means that one trusts the people who live in that neighbourhood. This kind of trust can lead to a feeling of satisfaction about life and happiness. This is especially true among young people. Young people may feel that a sense of security in the neighbourhood allows them to focus on the positive part of life i.e. the meaningful bond with their neighbours. On the other hand, young people who live in a neighbourhood characterised as low in social

capital might perceive their neighbourhood as being unsafe because the neighbours do not know each other. Moreover, in some cases, the neighbourhood council might even rely on a private security service to protect and guard the neighbourhood. The formal relationship between security officers and neighbours might not be as trustworthy as the direct involvement of young people in guarding the neighbourhood. Thus, neighborhood safety might lead to a lower level of subjective well-being.

In this paper, we aimed to test the mediation effect of perceived neighbourhood safety between neighbourhood social capital and subjective well-being. Figure 1 demonstrates the theoretical framework we adopted in this paper. First, we establish the relationship between social capital and subjective well-being. Then, we discuss how perceived neighbourhood safety is related to social capital and levels of subjective well-being.

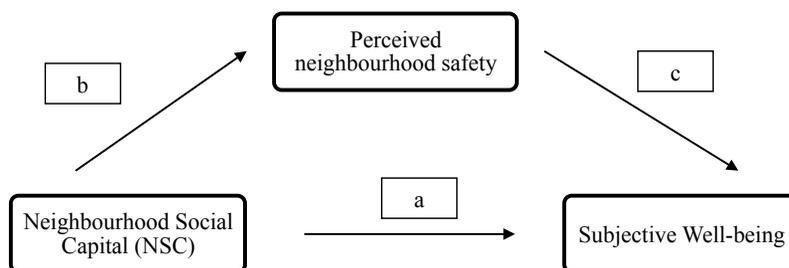


Figure 1. Theoretical research framework

Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is a significant relationship between Neighbourhood Social Capital (NSC) and Subjective Well-Being.

Hypothesis 2: There is a significant relationship between Neighbourhood Social Capital (NSC) and Perceived Neighbourhood Safety.

Hypothesis 3: There is a significant relationship between Perceived Neighbourhood Safety and Subjective Well-Being.

Hypothesis 4: There is a mediating effect of Perceived Neighbourhood Safety between Neighbourhood Social Capital (NSC) and Subjective Well-Being after controlling for the possible effect of Perceived Neighbourhood Safety.

METHODOLOGY

This was a nationwide cross-sectional study. We surveyed 5,237 young people aged 15 to 25 years ($M=19.51$, $SD=3.14$) from both East and West Malaysia. The sample was selected through a stratified two-stage sampling method. First, Malaysia was stratified according to geographical location by six zones (i.e. North Peninsula, East Peninsula, Central Peninsula, Southern Peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak). Stage two stratification was by age, ethnicity and gender. This sampling method ensured that the sample composition reflected the true make-up of the Malaysian population. Confidentiality was emphasised in this study and respondents were assured that their identity would not be traced at any point.

The main constructs in this study were Neighbourhood Social Capital, Perceived Neighbourhood Safety and Subjective Well-Being. Neighbourhood Social Capital was measured using three questions, with a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (extremely disagree) to 5 (extremely agree)

as a response. Subjective Well-Being was measured using a four-item questionnaire developed by the Office for National Statistics (Tinkler & Hicks, 2011). The four-item questionnaire intends to capture what people think about their life. The items include questions on their satisfaction with life, happiness, feeling of restlessness and if they think their life is worthwhile. Responses for each item are in a 5-point Likert scale, with the lowest score of 1 (never) to 5 (always).

RESULTS

The sample in this study was reflective of the population. Table 1 shows a comparison of demographic factors between the sample and the population. Other demographic details are also included. For academic background, most respondents obtained a secondary level of education (63.0%), followed by tertiary (28.5%) and primary (8.6%).

Table 1
Demographic profile of respondents

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	2,391	45.7
Male	2,846	54.3
Age Group		
15-19 years old	2,703	51.6
20-25 years old	2,534	48.4
Education level		
Primary school	450	8.6
Secondary school	3,297	63.0
Tertiary	1,490	28.5

Neighbourhood Social Capital Based on Gender

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare neighbourhood social capital scores for males and females. As shown in Table 2, the result demonstrates significant differences in scores for males and females for Neighbourhood Social Capital (NSC). Female respondents displayed higher

mean scores ($M=3.71$) than did male respondents ($M=3.67$). In other words, female respondents had more trust and reciprocated more towards neighbours than did male respondents. This indicates that female respondents are probably close to people in their neighbourhood. This closeness allows them to become friendly and trust others more.

Table 2
T-Test for neighbourhood social capital based on gender

Neighbourhood Social Capital	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Male (Mean=3.67, SD=0.686)	-2.142	5,235	0.032
Female (Mean=3.71, SD=0.648)			

Neighbourhood Social Capital Based on Age Group

To test the differences in Neighbourhood Social Capital scores in terms of age group, we conducted an independent samples t-test. Table 3 demonstrates that there were

significant differences for Neighbourhood Social Capital (NSC) based on age group. Specifically, NSC for those who were older (age 20-25 years old) showed that they were more trusting compared to those who were younger (15-19 years old).

Table 3
T-Test result for neighbourhood social capital in terms of age group

Neighbourhood Social Capital	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
15-19 years old (Mean=3.66, SD=0.69)	-2.87	5,234.55	0.004
20-25 years old (Mean=3.71, SD=0.64)			

Neighbourhood Social Capital Based on Level of Education

One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to explore the impact of Neighbourhood Social Capital (NSC) on levels of education. Respondents were divided into three groups. Group 1 had primary level of education; Group 2 had secondary level of education and Group 3

had tertiary level of education. The ANOVA results in Table 4 demonstrates that there was no significant difference in terms of level of education for Neighbourhood Social Capital (NSC). This result shows that people who are still in the school system or people who left school might not report a difference in terms of trust and reciprocity with neighbours.

Table 4
ANOVA result for NSC based on level of education

Types of Social Capital	df	F	Post-Hoc test (LSD)		
			Level of education	Mean	Standard deviation
Neighbourhood Social Capital	2,234	1.06	Primary	3.64	0.71
			Secondary	3.69	0.66
			Tertiary	3.68	0.67

Relationship between Neighbourhood Social Capital (NSC) and Perceived Neighbourhood Safety with Subjective Well-being

Hypothesis 1. For this study, we were interested in the relationship between Neighbourhood Social Capital (NSC) and Subjective Well-Being. We found that respondents who practised reciprocity and trusted their neighbours tended to have good Subjective Well-Being. In other words, residents in a trusting community are probably happier ($r=0.267$, $p<0.05$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported; young people who had positive NSC had high Subjective Well-Being.

Hypothesis 2. Our second hypothesis was that young people who build social capital with neighbours have significantly higher perceived neighbourhood safety. The results of the Pearson correlation revealed a significant correlation between NSC and Perceived Neighbourhood Safety ($r=0.47$, $p<0.001$). This result revealed that NSC had a significant effect on Perceived Neighbourhood Safety. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported; people who had high social

capital were more likely to report that their neighbourhood was safe.

Hypothesis 3. Our third hypothesis explored the relationship between Perceived Neighbourhood Safety and Subjective Well-Being. The results of the Pearson correlation revealed a significant correlation between Perceived Neighbourhood Safety and Subjective Well-Being ($r=0.22$, $p<0.001$). This result revealed that Perceived Neighbourhood Safety had a significant impact on Subjective Well-Being. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported; people who perceive their neighbourhoods as safe are more likely to report high subjective well-being.

Hypothesis 4. The fourth hypothesis explored the relationship between Neighbourhood Social Capital (NSC) and Subjective Well-Being after controlling for the possible effect of Perceived Neighbourhood Safety. We used regression analysis, and the result showed that the relationship between NSC and Subjective Well-Being was still significant after controlling for Perceived Neighbourhood Safety (Table 1). This result

suggested that Perceived Neighbourhood Safety acts as partial mediator. In other words, happiness and satisfaction with life could be determined either by having good neighbours or feeling safe living in

a particular neighbourhood. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was not supported; individual Subjective Well-Being is determined by having good NSC as well as perceiving safety in a neighbourhood.

Table 5
Result for regression

	β	F	P	R ²
1st model				
DV: Subjective Well-Being				
Perceived neighbourhood safety	0.16	256.36	<0.001	0.05
2nd model				
DV: Subjective Well-Being				
Perceived neighbourhood safety	0.09	231.05	<0.001	0.08
Neighbourhood Social Capital (NSC)	0.19			

DISCUSSION

This paper found that two neighbourhood factors, Neighbourhood Social Capital and Perceived Neighbourhood Safety, were associated with Subjective Well-Being. By improving neighbourhood social capital and perceived neighbourhood safety, young people's well-being will also improve. Higher Subjective Well-Being is important for young people; it reduces the likelihood of their becoming involved in risky behaviour.

Hypothesis 1 was supported; young people who practised trust and reciprocity with their neighbours enjoyed better Subjective Well-Being. This suggests that having close neighbours could strengthen social and daily support. This result was expected because young people who enjoy good relationships with their neighbours and trust them are more likely to gain help and be joyful around the neighbourhood, which

results in good Subjective Well-Being. Likewise, young people who are positive and remain satisfied with life in general are more likely to reach out to their neighbours and form meaningful and trustworthy relationships with them.

Hypothesis 2 was supported; young people who had good social capital with their neighbours were more likely to feel safe in their neighbourhoods. This suggests that young people who have high NSC are more likely to perceive that their neighbourhood is safe; they can walk in the area (day or night) without the fear of getting robbed. This further suggests that trusting neighbours is important for building a sense of safety in the neighbourhood. Even in the event of emergency, young people who have trustworthy neighbours might feel calmer because they know they can get help from their neighbours.

Hypothesis 3 was supported; young people who perceived their neighbourhoods as safe are more likely to report good Subjective Well-Being. Young people feel more satisfied with life when they live in a safe neighbourhood. Safe neighbourhoods provide a favourable environment for young people to focus on their wellness rather than on how to prevent crime. In other words, feeling safe in the neighbourhood helps young people feel satisfied about life in general.

Hypothesis 4 was not supported; Perceived Neighbourhood Safety served as a partial mediator between Neighbourhood Social Capital and the Subjective Well-Being of young people. It seems that neighbourhood safety was not the sole factor in increasing young people's well-being. Neighbourhood Social Capital also had a direct effect on young people's well-being after controlling for the safety factor. In other words, young people who are happy with life do not just practise good relationships with their neighbours, they also feel safe living in a particular area. In addition, young people who have social capital with their neighbours probably also feel safer in the environment and thus develop a sense of positive well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study supports the idea that with the presence of neighbourhood safety, a neighbourhood has an effect on young people's well-being to a certain degree. Nonetheless, the direct effect of neighbourhood social capital on young

people's well-being suggests that social interaction among neighbours is still the key to promoting happiness among young people. This implies that neighbours could come together and work on safety issues in the neighbourhood. Also, young people's source of well-being is from social connectedness with the neighbourhood. Future research could focus on the meaning of social capital in young people's daily lives and how young people translate its meaning into the wider perspective of life in terms of happiness.

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