

IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING WITH MEDIATING EFFECT OF HAPPINESS AMONGST UNIVERSITY STUDENTS DURING COVID-19

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Abstract

This study focused on the relationship of social support with happiness and subjective well-being of university students during the COVID-19 outbreak. Primary data was used to acquire the objectives of the study and online forms were used to collect data from a sample of 200 students. The results revealed a positive correlation between social support & happiness ($r = .58, p < .01$) and subjective well-being ($r = .64, p < .01$) and also a positive correlation between happiness and subjective well-being ($r = .59, p < .01$). The differences between males and females in this regard were also significant with females scoring higher on all variables. Additionally, as the findings suggest that social support, particularly from family, friends, and significant others, can play an important role in promoting happiness and subjective well-being among university students during times of crisis it can lead to the strengthening of support networks and also help academic authorities pay special attention to the needs of the students.

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Key Words: *Social support, subjective well-being, happiness, mediation analysis, university students, COVID-19.*

Introduction

Human beings are adapted to living together by forming social relationships (Fiske, 2019). Every person needs people they can rely on, be it in times of need or to care for them. Many people that are a part of our lives like family, friends, spouse or partner can provide this kind of support.

The life of university students is packed with multiple cultural and social challenges, for example academic burden and living in a different, newer environment. (Hamdan-Mansour & Dawani, 2007). Some students may be able to overcome these challenges but others, as a negative response might stress more and have lower life satisfaction. In such times perceived social support from various sources plays an essential part in the adjustment of students. (Rahat & İlhan, 2016) The experience of feeling important, being given attention and being loved by the people in our lives refers to social support. It is a broad term which refers to the individual's perception regarding social resources networks in their lives which may include various forms of support such as instrumental, emotional support etc. (Zhou, 2014).

COVID-19 an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, as of July 28th, 2022 has led to the deaths of 6,443,249 people around the world (Worldometer). As a result of the coronavirus outbreak, millions of individuals have immensely suffered, not just due to the death toll but also due to the isolation from not being able to interact with others due to community guidelines. Because of this isolation many individuals are facing a fear of death and immense mental distress (Sahoo et al., 2020). The pandemic has had an incredibly negative effect on the lives of students and has not only led to an increase in the levels of depression, stress and anxiety but also shows a decrease in their life satisfaction (Gómez-García et al., 2022). In such times it is important to have all the support one can get from their family and friends, even more for students who might be isolated

and stuck studying online from home. At present many students might be new to university life and at such a crucial point in their lives, social support is much needed, in fact a study revealed that the way students perceive social support, at the start of university life is beneficial to their well-being as well as mental health. (Cobo-Rendón et al., 2020)

Lyubomirsky (2001) defines happiness as a combination of different factors such as emotional states of joy, positive well-being, feelings of contentment and the perception that your life is worthwhile. Myers (2006) describes happiness as a feeling of contentment, gladness or satisfaction that suggests one's increased insight. In a study carried out by Schnettler et al. (2017) the family support students receive has a positive relation to their life satisfaction and happiness. A study on Croatian citizens across different life spans was revealed by correlation analysis that all three sources of social support had positive correlation with well-being in terms of happiness and life satisfaction but the correlation was found to be moderate. (Brajša-Žganec et al., 2018)

Subjective well-being refers to the judgments people make about their lives which includes their happiness, emotions that are pleasurable, life satisfaction, and the absence of unpleasant emotions (Diener, 2000). Life satisfaction is also directly related with happiness (Diener et al., 1985; Edwards & Lopez, 2006). The positive impact of social support on life satisfaction in the general population, among older adults has been consistently proven. (Abu-Bader et al., 2003) Another similar study also found social support to be an important predictor of life satisfaction among older adults (McInnis-Dittrich, 2021). A study carried out on American Indian older adults found that the adults having greater social support had higher life satisfaction. The same study found that social support was correlated with life satisfaction in the older adults (Soonhee, 2015). Support from parents is highly important in an individual's development (Lemos et al., 2011) and has great influence on life satisfaction of adolescent and university students (Goodwin & Hernandez Plaza, 2000).

Social support has proven to be a buffer against symptoms of stress and depression especially for students in universities. Students who have the support of the people around them are shown to have better life satisfaction. One such study was conducted by Alorani & Alradaydeh (2018) on 919 university students in Jordan which found a positive correlation between social support and life satisfaction. Other studies have evidenced that the provision of high levels of social support to adolescents leads to improved psychological health as well as better adjustment than adolescents with low levels of social support (Feiring & Lewis, 1991; Ystgaard, 1997).

When it comes to gender, a great number of studies have found that the way males and females perceive support from the people around them differs significantly. Gender is known to have an impact on social interactions as well as how males and females seek and give social support (Matud et al., 2003). Females are proven to have larger and better quality social networks as compared to males (Kneavel, 2020). Studies have also evidenced a persistent gender gap on subjective well-being (Stevenson & Wolfers 2009; Viera Lima, 2011). This study also wanted to find whether there would be gender differences on happiness. Namazi (2022) carried out a study on Iranian engineering students revealed significant differences between the means of happiness of female and male students.

Rationale

Existing literature suggests that social support, subjective well-being and happiness are interrelated and may play an important role in promoting better mental health, especially during stressful and uncertain times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This study sought to build on this literature by examining the relationship between these variables in the specific context of university students during the pandemic. The main focus of the researchers was to interrogate the association between social support, happiness, and subjective well-being, how happiness acts as a mediator between these variables i.e. social support and subjective well-being and gender differences on all variables. Despite the abundance of the literature, the mediating function

of pleasure in the connection between social support and subjective well-being, particularly amongst university students during the COVID-19 pandemic has yet to be carried out. It will also play a vital role in promoting the importance of support systems for university students in the Pakistani population and how it'll lead to better life satisfaction for these students in terms of happiness.

Method

Objectives

- To explore the relationship between social support, happiness and social support and subjective well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To analyze the mediating role of happiness between social support and subjective well-being in the time of COVID-19 pandemic.
- To see the differences in scores of males and females on all variables i.e. social support, happiness and subjective well-being.

Hypotheses

1. There will be a positive correlation between social support and happiness and social support and subjective well-being.
2. Male and female scores will differ on all variables i.e. social support, happiness and subjective well-being.
3. Happiness will play a mediating role between social support and subjective well-being.

Sample

Following COVID-19 guidelines the authors opted to random sampling by using online Google forms to collect data from 200 students (100 males & females) aged 20 to 28 years from universities in Peshawar, Pakistan i.e. University of Peshawar and NCS. The exclusion criteria for the study as to palliate potential confounds was that data was not collected from students of the department of Psychology as their participation could have led to improvement of variables under study.

Instruments

Demographic Sheet. The demographic sheet used in this study obtained information related to age, sex, university and education level of the participants.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support. Developed by Zimet et al. (1988) this scale measures the support gained from family, friends and significant others. It has 12 items and every item is rated on a 7-point likert scale with values ranging from “very strongly disagree” to “very strongly agree”. This scale was utilized due to its ease of use and administration as well as its three factor structure (support from family, spouse and friends). The overall reliability of the scale is 0.85 (Zimet et al., 1988).

Satisfaction with life Scale. Also known as SWLS, is a short scale Ed Diener et al. (1985) designed to measure judgments of satisfaction of an individual with their life as a component of subjective well-being and has a total of 5 items and each item is rated on a 7-point likert scale with values ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. Higher scores are indicative of higher life satisfaction. The scale was used due to its consistently reported good reliability by several studies i.e. 0.87 Diener et al. (1985) and 0.85 by Pavot et al. (1991).

Subjective Happiness Scale. It is a 4 item 7-point Likert scale developed by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) that quantifies subjective happiness in terms of ratings. The 4th item of the scale is reverse coded. The possible score range of this scale is from 1 to 7 and higher scores indicate more happiness. The scale is easy to administer and has a good reliability over a wide range of samples ranging from 0.79 to 0.94 (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

Procedure

The researchers could not visit the designated sites in order to collect data hence online Google Forms containing the general introduction of the research topic and researchers, a consent form and the relevant scales were generated and floated on different online forums. The data obtained

was shortlisted based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria and then a simple random sampling technique was used for the selection of participants. SPSS 22.0 was used to analyze the data.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 22.0) for the analyses which were Correlation, t-test as well as a series of regression analyses to test the hypotheses.

Results

Correlation Coefficient of Social Support, Subjective well-being and Happiness in University students

Table 1 Correlation coefficient indicated a significant relationship between social support and subjective well-being ($r = 0.64$, $p < 0.01$), and social support and happiness ($r=0.58$, $p < 0.01$) suggesting that higher social support meant higher happiness and subjective well-being. The table also indicates a positive correlation between happiness and subjective well-being ($r=0.59$, $p < 0.01$).

Mean, Standard deviation, t-values

Table 2 lists the means, standard deviation and t-values which indicate that there are significant gender differences on all three scales i.e. social support scale, satisfaction with life scale and happiness scale. An examination of the group means indicates that females ($M = 61.08$, $SD = 10.37$) perceive significantly higher social support as compared to males i.e. ($M =48.44$, $SD = 14.01$). Additionally, results indicate that females have significantly higher scores ($M=24.28$, $SD= 4.82$) as compared to males ($M=20.92$, $SD=5.32$) on satisfaction with life scale. Females also scored higher ($M=19.44$, $SD= 3.98$) than males ($M=16.46$, $SD=4.66$) on the happiness scale.

Mediation Analysis

Table 3 and 4 provide the mediation and path estimates respectively, which is explained as under. A series of regression analyses

| | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|-------|------|
| Social Support scale | 48.44 | 14.01 | 61.08 | 10.37 | 7.24 | 9.20 | 16.07 | 1.02 |
| Satisfaction with life scale | 20.92 | 5.32 | 24.28 | 4.82 | 4.68 | 1.94 | 4.77 | 0.66 |
| Happiness scale | 16.46 | 4.66 | 19.44 | 3.98 | 4.86 | 1.77 | 4.18 | 0.68 |

Table 3
Mediation Estimates

| Effect | Label | Estimate | SE | 95% Confidence Interval | | Z | p |
|-----------------|-----------|----------|-------|-------------------------|-------|------|--------|
| | | | | Lower | Upper | | |
| Indirect | a × b | 0.0758 | 0.023 | 0.0315 | 0.120 | 3.35 | < .001 |
| Direct | C | 0.1723 | 0.034 | 0.1054 | 0.239 | 5.05 | < .001 |
| Total | c + a × b | 0.2480 | 0.029 | 0.1902 | 0.306 | 8.40 | < .001 |

Table 4
Path Estimates

| | | Label | Estimate | SE | 95% Confidence Interval | | Z | P | |
|----------------|---|-----------------------|----------|-------|-------------------------|-------|-------|------|--------|
| | | | | | Lower | Upper | | | |
| Social Support | → | Happiness | a | 0.194 | 0.0268 | 0.142 | 0.247 | 7.25 | < .001 |
| Happiness | → | Subjective well-being | b | 0.390 | 0.1032 | 0.188 | 0.593 | 3.78 | < .001 |
| Social Support | → | Subjective well-being | c | 0.172 | 0.0341 | 0.105 | 0.239 | 5.05 | < .001 |

Discussion

This study set out to inquire the relationship between social support, happiness and subjective well-being in terms of satisfaction with life. Its aim was to demonstrate that the more social support a person receives, be it from family, friends or significant other, an individual will experience more happiness and in turn higher level of life satisfaction (subjective well-being). The study also aimed to see the mediating role of happiness between social support and subjective well-being.

It is important for students studying in university who are faced with several problems related to changing lifestyle, especially due to the worldwide pandemic of COVID-19 and other factors such as academic pressure, apprehension about the course of their future life, being away from home, etc. In such an important time of one's life in general and academics both, support from the people around them can prove to be beneficial.

The first hypothesis of the study was that social support has a positive effect on a person's happiness. Results of this study have proved it to be so and there is evidence from past studies that also support this hypothesis such as in a study on Chilean university students that it was found that tangible family support from family has a positive relationship with life satisfaction while intangible family support was related to happiness (Schnettler et al., 2014). The findings from Argyle & Lu (1990) were also similar to this study's results stating that happiness correlates with number of friends i.e. the greater the number of friends and interactions with them, the happier a person is. Scherer et al., 1986 had similar findings to the results of this research in their study of five European countries revealing the relationships with friends as one of the main causes of joy. The researchers of this study have proven through the results the positive effect of social support on subjective well-being and these results are backed by previous studies which found social support to be one of the consistent predictors of subjective well-being (Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008). A study by Gülaçtı (2010) which was carried out on senior university students had similar findings to this study also revealing

perceived social support to be a predictor of subjective well-being. Kee-Lee Chou (1999) carried out a study to see the association of social support and subjective well-being among 475 young Chinese and the results, consistent with our research findings, showed that satisfaction with relationships with family members and friends is associated with subjective well-being. Social support is also important for a healthy development. Similarly, other studies in line with the current study reinforced that the support from family as well as friends is shown to predict people's psychological well-being (Silbereisen & Todt, 1994) and social support as an environmental factor is an overall predictor of happiness, positive life events as well as life satisfaction (Lu, 1999)

The second hypothesis was that there's a difference between male and females in how they perceive social support, subjective well-being and happiness i.e. their score differs on all variables. Although there are inconsistencies in the findings of studies on which gender performs better in terms of the variables of this study, there are several the findings of which are consistent with the current study's results such as the one by Hori and Kamo (2017) which revealed that social support is positively linked with happiness especially in women. Soman et al. (2016) study showed a significant difference in terms of gender such that males perceived higher social support than females from friends while females perceived higher social support from significant others than males also support the hypothesis of this study. In this study the results showed females scoring higher on happiness and were similar to the results of a study on Iranian students which disclosed that in terms of happiness, female students showed higher results as compared to males as well as more health (Namazi, 2022).

The third hypothesis stated that happiness mediates the relationship between social support and subjective well-being and this was proved by the results which revealed a partial mediation by happiness between social support and subjective well-being. There isn't enough previous literature on this specific hypothesis which is why this study was carried out. However, a sizable number of researchers hold up the importance of social support as

an essential factor in influencing one's subjective well-being such that happiness is often followed by increased life satisfaction, mental and physical health and quality of life, as suggested in a study by Ahmadi et al. (2019). In addition, the same study revealed an association between increased social support and increased happiness. Mai et al. (2021) disclosed the likelihood of students having improved mental health with a higher degree of perceived social support which is comparable to the current study. Conforming to the present results, Diener (2022) wrote in his book that happy individuals are expected to be much healthier and able to function effectively meaning they have higher subjective well-being.

Limitations, Recommendations and Implications

Firstly the limited sample size i.e. $n=200$ and the fact that the study was carried out in a single city i.e. Peshawar and the sample included only university students. Hence, the results may not be generalized to a larger population as it may influence the reliability and validity of the results. Another notable limitation of the study is that factors such as study major, socio-economic status, family structure, home environment, etc. of the students were not taken into account which might have given slightly different results. Therefore, comparable research, for instance between different age groups with an extended sample size might be worth considering.

This research itself has significance as it dives deeper into the importance of social support in people's lives. The study results can also be used as evidence in future research and has implications in daily life as well as academic settings. In short despite the limitations, this study will prove valuable in adding to the vast body of knowledge.

Conclusion

With the purpose of investigating the relationship between social support with happiness and subjective well-being of individuals i.e. university students, our study affirms that the existence of support especially in the time of need, which in our case was during the hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic, from one's family, friends and significant

other has a significant positive impact on one's happiness and subjective well-being and that happiness also has a significant positive impact on student's well-being. It was also evident that there are significant differences between males and females on these three variables and that happiness plays a mediating role in the relationship between social support and subjective well-being. To conclude, social support plays an important role in the lives of university students. Regardless, there is a need for further and more comprehensive studies to be carried out to support the hypothesis and objectives of this study.

Data Availability Statement

Any inquiries about this study can be directed to the original contributing authors included in the article.

Ethics Statement

Informed consent for study participation was provided to the participants.

Funding

Authors received no funding for this study from any profit or nonprofit organizations.

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