

Research Paper

Thriving Together: Understanding Happiness through Resilience, Spirituality, and Family Relationships in Malaysian Emerging Adults

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Abstract: Happiness is a key component of well-being, particularly among emerging adults undergoing significant developmental transitions. Despite growing international research on well-being, limited empirical studies have examined how family relationships, spirituality, and resilience jointly contribute to happiness among Malaysian emerging adults. This study examined the relationships among family relationships, spirituality, resilience, and happiness, and explored the mediating role of resilience. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 175 Malaysian emerging adults using validated self-report measures. Results show that both family relationships and spirituality were positively associated with happiness. Among the dimensions of spirituality, only self-discovery was positively associated with resilience. Mediation analysis, following Baron and Kenny's procedure, indicate that resilience partially mediated the association between self-discovery and happiness but did not mediate the association between family relationships and happiness, suggesting a direct association. These findings highlight the importance of self-discovery and positive family relationships in promoting well-being among Malaysian emerging adults and offer implications for practitioners, educators, and policymakers.

Keywords: Family relationships, happiness, spirituality, resilience, Malaysia

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Introduction

Background

The pursuit of well-being has long been a central focus of psychological studies, with happiness widely recognized as an important component due to its associations with mental, physical, and social health outcomes. The World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2023) offers a cross-national perspective, placing Malaysia 55th among 137 countries, reflecting a moderate level of happiness relative to global benchmarks. This positioning highlights the value of examining factors associated with happiness within the Malaysian context. Previous studies have identified various correlates of happiness, including socioeconomic status, health, social support, family relationships, and spirituality (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Lim & Putnam, 2010). In societies often described as collectivistic, family relationships and spirituality are frequently emphasized as salient aspects of social and moral life that relate to well-being (Saroglou, 2011). At the same time, globalization and social change have contributed to increasingly complex cultural influences on happiness.

Although family relationships and spirituality have been consistently linked to happiness, the ways in which these variables are statistically interconnected with personal strengths such as resilience remain less clearly understood. The present study therefore examines resilience as an intervening variable within the associations between family relationships, spirituality, and happiness among Malaysian emerging adults. By exploring these interrelationships, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of happiness within a multi-ethnic and rapidly evolving society.

Emerging adulthood, typically defined as the transitional phase between the ages of 18 and 29, represents a transitional phase between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood and is characterized by exploration, identity formation, and increasing autonomy (Arnett, 2024). While it is a period of excitement and opportunity, it is also marked by heightened stress arising from multiple life domains, including academic responsibilities, career decisions, financial independence, and interpersonal relationships (Badarudin, 2018). Within the Malaysian context, emerging adults may face additional cultural pressures to conform to familial expectations, uphold religious norms, or navigate multicultural social environments. Empirical evidence highlights the relevance of spirituality in coping with these stressors, though its influence may vary across individuals and contexts. For instance, Goh and Bahari (2022) reported that spirituality exerts a relatively modest influence on Malaysian emerging adults' well-being, potentially due to fluctuations in personal spiritual engagement or differences in religious practices. Family relationships also play a crucial role during this life stage, shaping socialization patterns, communication styles, and problem-solving strategies (Yang & McDonnell, 2023).

Malaysia presents a particularly important context for examining happiness during emerging adulthood due to its rapid socio-economic development and strong collectivist cultural orientation. Although the Malaysian society is characterized by ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, family interdependence, respect for authority, and relational harmony remain central values across groups (Sumari et al., 2020). Emerging adults in Malaysia often navigate the tension between increasing individual autonomy and enduring familial expectations related to education, career choices, and social responsibilities. These competing demands may heighten psychological stress while simultaneously reinforcing the importance of familial and spiritual resources as sources of emotional stability and meaning. Given Malaysia's multi-ethnic and religiously diverse society, understanding how family and spiritual dimensions interact to influence emerging adults' happiness remains an important research endeavour. Expanding this understanding can inform culturally sensitive interventions aimed at fostering resilience and emotional well-being among emerging adults.

Despite the growing body of international research on happiness and well-being, empirical studies focusing on Malaysian emerging adults remain relatively limited. Low levels of happiness or life satisfaction have been associated with adverse outcomes, including negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety (Padmanabhanunni et al., 2023), and poorer performance (David et al., 2022; Hochschild Ovalle et al., 2024), highlighting the importance of identifying factors that promote well-being during this developmental period. Existing studies have often emphasized either family influences or individual psychological factors in isolation, with less attention paid to the mechanisms through which these factors interact to shape happiness. Resilience has been understudied as a potential explanatory pathway linking both relational and spiritual resources to emotional well-being in this population. Addressing this gap is essential, as emerging adulthood represents a formative period during which adaptive coping patterns and emotional regulation strategies are consolidated and may have long-term implications for well-being across the lifespan.

Happiness

Happiness and subjective well-being (SWB) are closely related constructs within the psychological literature. SWB generally refers to individuals' overall evaluation of their lives, encompassing both cognitive judgments such as life satisfaction and affective experiences of positive and negative emotions (Eger & Maridal, 2015). Within this broader framework, happiness is commonly conceptualized as a positive psychological state characterized by frequent positive emotions, satisfaction with life, and a general sense of well-being (Hills & Argyle, 2002). In the context of emerging adults, happiness provides an immediate indicator of emotional adjustment to

the challenges and opportunities associated with this developmental stage. It can be reflected in individuals' self-reported feelings of contentment, optimism, and enjoyment of life.

Prior research has linked higher levels of happiness to a range of beneficial outcomes, including improved mental health (e.g., lower levels of depression and anxiety— Sun, 2023), better physical health (e.g., fewer sick days and stronger immune functioning— Kushlev et al., 2020), and enhanced social functioning. Accordingly, the present study conceptualizes happiness as a positive psychological state encompassing life enjoyment, positive affect, and overall satisfaction with one's life experiences. Therefore, examining happiness among Malaysian emerging adults may provide valuable insights into how relational and spiritual resources contribute to positive emotional well-being during this critical developmental period.

Family Relationships

Positive family relationships have been found to influence happiness both in the short-term and long-term. Supportive family relationships during childhood and adolescence form the foundation of enduring emotional bonds that continue to foster well-being in adulthood (Ramos et al., 2022). These relationships provide essential social and emotional resources, including emotional security, a sense of belonging, and practical support, which in turn promote happiness. Frequent contact with family members and meaningful communication strengthen these bonds, enhancing resilience and overall happiness (Jiang et al., 2022). From a developmental perspective, the family serves as a primary context in which emotional skills, empathy, and social competence are cultivated, influencing individuals' capacity for positive emotional experiences across settings. This suggests that interventions aimed at enhancing family cohesion and communication may indirectly boost happiness among emerging adults.

In contrast, conflictual family relationships are consistently associated with numerous negative outcomes, including psychological distress, loneliness, and impaired social functioning (Heshmati et al., 2021; Jailobaeva et al., 2022). Nonetheless, family dynamics represent only one aspect of the broader ecological context influencing well-being. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, individuals' development and emotional outcomes are shaped by interactions across multiple systems, including family, peers, schools, and cultural institutions (Antony, 2022). Within this framework, resilience emerges as a key personal resource that may mediate the effects of family and spiritual influences on happiness. Supportive family relationships can foster emotional stability and coping skills, thereby promoting resilience, which in turn contributes to higher levels of happiness. Exploring these pathways provides a comprehensive understanding of

how interpersonal and intrapersonal factors jointly influence well-being among Malaysian emerging adults.

Spirituality

Spirituality may arise from the religious values held by individuals, but it is not necessarily confined to formal religious doctrines (Koenig et al., 2012). It can be understood as a broader, more general, unstructured, and personalized phenomenon in which a person seeks closeness to a higher power, life purpose, or transcendent meaning. Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2005) conceptualized spirituality based on four components: “Higher Power or Universal Intelligence” (a belief in the presence of a higher power or universal intelligence that is not necessarily related to any religion), “Self-Discovery” (a spiritual journey that begins with inner reflection and the search for meaning), “Relationships” (an integral connection with others), and “Eco-Awareness” (an integral connection to nature). Individuals with higher levels of spirituality often experience transcendence through inner peace, harmony, and a sense of connection with others, which can positively influence happiness (Amiruddin et al., 2021).

Moreover, spirituality is closely linked to forgiveness and self-acceptance, both of which are associated with well-being. Forgiveness involves letting go of negative emotions toward oneself, others, or past events, thereby reducing psychological distress and enhancing happiness (David et al., 2022). Similarly, self-acceptance, which entails embracing both positive and negative aspects of oneself, is fostered by spiritual engagement and contributes to greater life satisfaction (Komarudin et al., 2022). Together, these findings suggest that spirituality may influence happiness indirectly by promoting adaptive personal processes that enhance emotional and cognitive functioning.

Synthesizing previous research, it is evident that family relationships and spirituality are often associated with happiness, potentially through personal strengths and coping mechanisms. Among these, resilience has emerged as a key construct, recognized for its role in supporting well-being and buffering against stress. However, the potential mediating role of resilience in the associations between family relationships, spirituality, and happiness has received limited attention, particularly among Malaysian emerging adults. Examining resilience as a mediator may provide insights into the relational mechanisms linking social and spiritual factors with positive emotional outcomes.

Resilience

Resilience is defined as the ability to bounce back from adversity and adapt effectively to challenging circumstances (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Individuals with higher

resilience demonstrate improved mental health outcomes, including reduced anxiety and depression, as well as enhanced positive adjustment, such as successful navigation of life transitions (Fullerton et al., 2021; Havnen et al., 2020). Resilient individuals tend to manage negative emotions effectively, maintain positive self-perceptions, and experience greater overall happiness (Kemal & Duran, 2019). Traits associated with resilience, such as adaptability, self-esteem, strong social networks, and a sense of purpose, have been consistently linked to well-being outcomes (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004).

Resiliency Theory provides a strength-based lens for understanding individual development, emphasizing how promotive factors can buffer adversity and enhance life outcomes (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Zimmerman & Brenner, 2010). According to this framework, resilience emerges not only from individual traits but also from interactions with supportive environmental systems, including family, community, and cultural networks (Masten, 2019). These systems provide resources, emotional support, and opportunities for the development of coping skills, which collectively enhance the capacity to adapt and thrive in the face of challenges.

Resilience, Spirituality, and Family Relationships in Relation to Happiness

Although emerging adults gain greater autonomy and freedom, family relationships continue to exert a significant influence. Families characterized by strong cohesion foster positive self-concepts, instil hope, and enhance overall well-being (Archana & Sinha, 2024; Xiang et al., 2020). Supportive family environments contribute to secure attachment, which promotes self-regulation, emotional stability, and self-confidence; essential traits for effective coping with future adversities (Kılınç, 2023). Conversely, inconsistent or conflictual family practices may undermine trust, emotional regulation, and resilience. Research highlights the intergenerational transmission of family patterns and attachment styles (Smrtnik Vitulić et al., 2023), emphasizing the importance of interventions that target family functioning to enhance well-being. By facilitating resilience, positive family relationships indirectly promote happiness, enhancing individuals' capacity for life satisfaction and adaptive functioning (Trong Dam et al., 2023).

The relationship between spirituality and happiness may be associated with resilience. Spirituality has been linked to higher levels of resilience through cognitive, emotional, and behavioural mechanisms. Cognitively, spiritual beliefs encourage individuals to reframe adversity as an opportunity for growth, thereby reducing feelings of helplessness (Bekhet & Sarsour, 2018). Belief in a higher power also enhances confidence in coping with challenges. Emotionally, spiritual practices such

as meditation, prayer, or reflective rituals facilitate emotional regulation, equipping individuals to navigate stress and uncertainty (Ibrahim, 2024; Rahman et al., 2025). Behaviourally, spirituality promotes prosocial acts, such as altruism, gratitude, and community engagement, which strengthen social support networks and reinforce resilience (Kumar et al., 2022). Collectively, these mechanisms illustrate how spirituality can enhance individuals' ability to cope effectively with life adversities, ultimately contributing to sustained happiness (Bajaj et al., 2022; Hatami & Shekarchizadeh, 2022; Mertens et al., 2022).

Happiness is widely regarded as a central pursuit of human life, representing not only a subjective emotional state but also an indicator of broader psychological, social, and physical well-being. However, the determinants of happiness are multifaceted and complex, shaped by an interplay of individual traits, interpersonal relationships, and cultural contexts. Individual factors, such as personality, self-efficacy, and coping strategies, influence the capacity to experience positive emotions, whereas social factors, including family support, peer networks, and community engagement, provide critical resources for emotional regulation and life satisfaction. Cultural norms and values further modulate these influences, determining how individuals perceive, prioritize, and pursue happiness. In collectivist societies like Malaysia, social harmony, family cohesion, and adherence to communal values often play a central role in shaping individuals' well-being, distinguishing the pathways to happiness from those observed in more individualistic cultures. Emerging adults in this context face developmental transitions that present both opportunities and challenges, making protective factors such as supportive family relationships and spiritual engagement particularly important for maintaining well-being. These factors can provide emotional stability, foster adaptive coping mechanisms, and facilitate resilience, which may serve as a key pathway through which happiness is achieved.

This study addresses a gap in the literature by examining how family relationships and spirituality contribute to resilience, which in turn promotes happiness among Malaysian emerging adults. Drawing on theoretical perspectives and prior empirical findings, it is hypothesized that positive family relationships and higher spirituality enhance resilience, which subsequently predicts greater happiness. Accordingly, the present study aims to examine the relationships among family relationships, spirituality, resilience, and happiness among Malaysian emerging adults, and to determine whether resilience mediates these associations. Understanding these mechanisms has important implications for mental health professionals and policymakers, enabling the development of culturally tailored interventions to strengthen resilience and well-being during this critical stage of life.

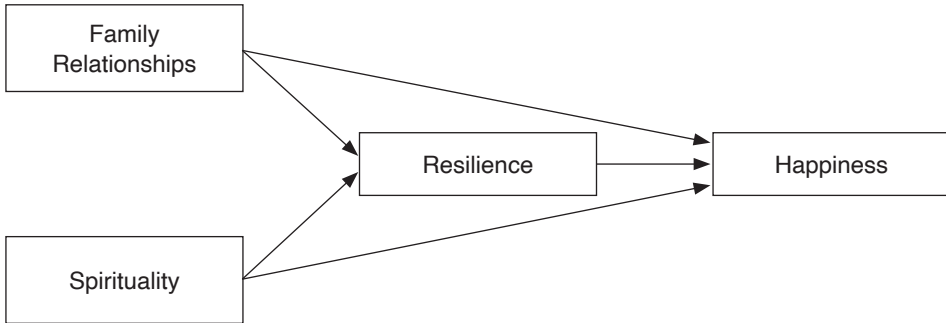


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Guided by Resiliency Theory and Ecological Systems Theory, the proposed framework highlights the associations among personal and environmental resources, resilience, and happiness in emerging adults. Family relationships are considered a key environmental resource within the microsystem, providing emotional support, practical assistance, and relational stability, while spirituality is regarded as an internal personal resource that may facilitate meaning-making and identity development. Both resources are hypothesized to be associated with higher resilience, which is conceptualized as a potential pathway linking social and personal resources to happiness.

In this framework, resilience illustrates how personal strengths and environmental supports are interconnected with emotional well-being, reflecting the ways emerging adults navigate life challenges and developmental transitions. Figure 1 presents these hypothesized associations, integrating individual, social, and cultural factors in understanding well-being among Malaysian emerging adults. While the cross-sectional design prevents causal conclusions, examining these associations provides insights into the relational patterns connecting family relationships, spirituality, resilience, and happiness.

Method

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design to examine the associations among family relationships, spirituality, resilience, and happiness in Malaysian emerging adults, with a focus on the potential mediating role of resilience. A cross-sectional approach was selected as it allows for the assessment of relationships between constructs at a single point in time, providing insights into possible pathways linking social and personal resources with well-being (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data were collected using an online survey methodology, which enabled respondents to complete the questionnaire at their convenience while reflecting on their personal experiences (Nayak & Narayan, 2019). This approach was particularly suitable for

reaching a geographically diverse sample of emerging adults across Malaysia and for efficiently collecting self-reported data on multiple psychological constructs. Overall, the combination of a cross-sectional survey design and validated measures offers a practical and methodologically appropriate approach for exploring the relational patterns among family relationships, spirituality, resilience, and happiness.

Respondents

A total of 175 Malaysian emerging adults participated in the study ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.33$), recruited via convenience sampling. Emerging adulthood is a developmental period characterized by increasing independence, identity exploration, and exposure to various life stressors, with family influences remaining particularly salient (Sakala et al., 2020). The sample included 120 females, 54 males, and 1 respondent who did not specify their gender. Regarding religious affiliation, the majority identified as Buddhist (65.70%), followed by Christian (24%), Hindu (5.1%), Islamic and Taoist (1.7% each), Atheist (0.6%), and those who did not specify their religion (1.2%). In terms of parental marital status, most respondents reported their parents were married (74.3%), with smaller proportions reporting single (11.4%), widowed (6.9%), divorced (4.0%), and unspecified (3.4%) parental status.

Measures

All respondents completed an online questionnaire in English, which included demographic items and standardized psychometric instruments assessing family relationships, spirituality, resilience, and happiness.

Family Relationship Assessment Scale (FRAS) (Kim et al., 2021)

The 15-item Family Relationship Assessment Scale (FRAS) measured individuals' perceptions of family relationships across three dimensions: family support, family conflict, and family togetherness. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), with negatively phrased items from the Family Conflict subscale reverse-coded. Mean scores were computed, with higher scores indicating more positive family relationships. FRAS demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the current sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$), consistent with previous research (Kim et al., 2021), supporting its suitability for Malaysian emerging adults.

Spirituality Scale (SS) (Delaney, 2005)

The 21-item Spirituality Scale (SS) evaluated multiple dimensions of spirituality, including beliefs, lifestyle practices, relationships, and eco-awareness. Responses were recorded on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree),

and mean scores were calculated, with higher scores reflecting greater spirituality. Internal consistency in this study was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.90$), consistent with prior validations.

Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) (Smith et al., 2008)

The 6-item Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) assessed the ability to bounce back from stress. Respondents rated items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), with negatively phrased items (Items 2, 4, 6) reverse-coded. Mean scores were calculated, with higher scores indicating greater resilience. BRS demonstrated acceptable internal consistency in this sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.73$), consistent with prior validation studies (Mat Zin et al., 2025).

Oxford Happiness Scale - Short Form (OHQ-S) (Hills & Argyle, 2002)

The 8-item Oxford Happiness Scale-Short Form (OHQ-S), derived from the original Oxford Happiness Inventory, measured global happiness. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), with negatively phrased items reverse-coded. Higher mean scores reflect greater happiness. OHQ-S demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.73$) in the present study.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected between January 2023 and February 2024 via an online survey distributed across social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Respondents accessed the survey through Google Forms, provided informed consent, and completed the questionnaire in the following order: demographics, Spirituality Scale, Brief Resilience Scale, Family Relationship Assessment Scale, and Oxford Happiness Questionnaire-Short Form. At the end of the survey, respondents were encouraged to share the survey link with other eligible Malaysian emerging adults. The study protocol received ethical approval from the Institutional Ethical Review Committee, ensuring compliance with standards for research involving human participants.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using JASP (Jeffery's Amazing Statistics Program), version 0.16.4. Descriptive statistics summarized respondents' demographic characteristics and main study variables. The internal consistency of each scale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the associations among family relationships, spirituality, resilience, and happiness, and to assess the appropriateness of examining potential mediating effects. The potential

mediating role of resilience was tested using bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals, in line with recommended approaches for robust estimation of indirect effects in mediation analyses (Hayes, 2018).

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, internal consistencies, and Pearson correlation coefficients for family relationships, spirituality, resilience, and happiness. Among the variables, spirituality reported the highest mean score ($M = 4.33$), particularly the Relationship dimension ($M = 4.86$), indicating generally strong perceptions of spiritual connectedness among respondents. Happiness was also relatively high ($M = 3.98$), while family relationships reflected moderate levels ($M = 3.76$). Resilience recorded the lowest mean score ($M = 3.12$), suggesting that respondents perceived room for improvement in adaptive coping and emotional regulation. These descriptive patterns imply that although respondents generally reported positive spiritual and emotional experiences, resilience emerged as a comparatively weaker area.

Correlation analyses indicated that family relationships, spirituality, resilience, and happiness were generally positively associated, except for a non-significant correlation between overall spirituality and resilience. Further examination of the three dimensions of spirituality revealed that Self-Discovery, Relationships, and Eco-Awareness were all positively associated with family relationships and happiness. It is worth noting that, only Self-Discovery showed a significant positive association with resilience, suggesting that this dimension may be particularly relevant to individuals' adaptive functioning.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Family Relationships	3.76	0.79	(0.91)						
Spirituality	4.33	0.69	.36**	(0.90)					
Self-Discovery	4.17	0.88	.35**	.72**	(0.72)				
Relationships	4.86	0.67	.29**	.77**	.45**	(0.75)			
Eco-Awareness	4.11	0.84	.31**	.95**	.55**	.60**	(0.87)		
Resilience	3.12	0.68	.16*	.12	.37**	.002	.05	(0.73)	
Happiness	3.98	0.75	.50**	.58**	.66**	.47**	.45**	.40**	(0.73)

Note. $N = 175$. SD = standard deviation. Cronbach's alpha is shown in the diagonal line.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Mediating Effects

The mediation model was examined following the Baron and Kenny (1986) framework, which recommends assessing the associations between (i) independent variable and mediator, (ii) mediator and dependent variable, and (iii) independent and dependent variables. In this study, resilience was tested as a potential mediator of the associations between family relationships and self-discovery with happiness.

Results indicate that resilience partially mediated the association between Self-Discovery and happiness (Table 2). In contrast, resilience did not mediate the association between family relationships and happiness. These findings suggest that the positive link between Self-Discovery and happiness is associated, in part, with higher resilience, whereas the association between family relationships and happiness appears to be independent of resilience.

Table 2. Results of mediation analysis on happiness (N = 175)

	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Family Relationships → Resilience	0.032	0.064	.620	[-0.094, 0.158]
Self-Discovery → Resilience	0.273	0.058	<.001	[0.160, 0.386]
Resilience → Happiness	0.193	0.061	.001	[0.074, 0.312]
Family Relationships → Happiness	0.281	0.052	<.001	[0.180, 0.382]
Direct effect				
Family Relationships → Happiness	0.281	0.052	<.001	[0.180, 0.382]
Self-Discovery → Happiness	0.426	0.049	<.001	[0.330, 0.523]
Total effect				
Family Relationships → Happiness	0.287	0.053	<.001	[0.184, 0.391]
Self-Discovery → Happiness	0.479	0.048	<.001	[0.385, 0.572]
Indirect effect				
Family Relationships → Resilience → Happiness	0.006	0.013	.625	[-0.018, 0.031]

Discussion

The present study examined the associations of family relationships and spirituality with happiness among Malaysian emerging adults, with resilience evaluated as a potential mediating mechanism. Guided by Resiliency Theory and Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, the findings provide insights into how interpersonal and intrapersonal resources relate to happiness during emerging adulthood. Overall, the results indicate that Self-Discovery, a dimension of spirituality, is positively associated with happiness, with resilience partially explaining this relationship, whereas family relationships are associated with happiness independently of resilience. Collectively,

these findings suggest that protective factors may operate through distinct psychological pathways depending on whether they function primarily as internal personal assets or external relational resources.

The positive association between Self-Discovery and happiness, partially explained by resilience, highlights the psychological relevance of meaning-making and identity exploration during emerging adulthood. Self-Discovery involves reflecting on one's values, purpose, and identity, processes that are linked with greater self-awareness and emotional clarity (Hosseini-Motlagh et al., 2022). During a developmental stage characterized by exploration, instability, and uncertainty, individuals who engage in self-reflective practices tend to report higher resilience and adaptive coping, which are in turn associated with greater happiness.

From the perspective of Resiliency Theory, Self-Discovery can be viewed as a promotive personal asset that is associated with the enhanced capacity to manage stress. Through reflection and meaning-making, individuals may interpret challenges in ways that reduce helplessness and emotional distress (Bekhet & Sarsour, 2018). These processes are linked with emotional regulation, psychological flexibility, and a sense of agency, which are core components of resilience. Consistent with prior research, higher self-awareness and emotional regulation are associated with improved well-being and happiness (Bajaj et al., 2022; Hatami & Shekarchizadeh, 2022; Mertens et al., 2022). The partial mediation observed in this study indicates that resilience may partially account for the association between Self-Discovery and happiness, rather than implying a causal effect.

An important contribution of this study lies in differentiating the dimensions of spirituality, rather than treating spirituality as a unitary construct. Although overall spirituality was not significantly associated with resilience, Self-Discovery emerged as uniquely relevant. Other dimensions, including relational connectedness and eco-awareness, were associated with happiness but not with resilience. These findings suggest that internally oriented aspects of spirituality, such as Self-Discovery, are more closely linked with resilience-related processes, including introspection, self-regulation, and meaning construction. Conversely, externally oriented dimensions may relate to well-being through social harmony, moral alignment, or a sense of connectedness, rather than through resilience or adaptive coping.

Within the Malaysian context, spirituality is often embedded in cultural and religious traditions, and for some emerging adults, engagement in spiritual practices may reflect social expectations rather than deeply internalized beliefs. As a result, only those aspects of spirituality that are associated with personal reflection, identity consolidation, and autonomous meaning-making appear linked with higher resilience and greater happiness. This highlights the importance of examining how spirituality is experienced, rather than assuming uniform benefits across all spiritual dimensions. Theoretically, these findings refine existing models of spirituality and

well-being by demonstrating that the psychological functions of spirituality—rather than its mere presence—are associated with adaptive outcomes.

The results also indicate that family relationships are positively associated with happiness, while resilience does not appear to account for this relationship. This pattern aligns with Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes the central role of the family as a microsystem influencing emotional development and well-being. In collectivist cultures such as Malaysia, family relationships are deeply embedded in individuals' daily lives and identity formation, providing emotional security, social support, and a sense of belonging (Archana & Sinha, 2024; Ramos et al., 2022; Xiang et al., 2020). Rather than operating through stress-buffering mechanisms, positive family relationships may be directly associated with happiness by fostering attachment security, perceived support, emotional safety, and self-esteem. Prior research supports this perspective, showing that close family bonds are linked with trust, stability, and a positive self-concept, which are directly associated with well-being (Ramos et al., 2022; Xiang et al., 2020).

The coexistence of direct and indirect associations with happiness reflects the developmental and cultural realities of Malaysian emerging adults. Although emerging adulthood involves increasing autonomy and identity exploration, strong family ties continue to play a critical role. Together, internal psychological processes, such as self-discovery and resilience, and external relational supports, such as family relationships, appear linked with happiness. These findings support culturally grounded models of well-being that recognize the dynamic interplay between interdependence and personal growth, rather than prioritizing one pathway over the other.

The differential pathways observed in this study contribute to a more nuanced understanding of happiness by showing that resilience does not serve as a universal mechanism linking all protective factors to well-being. Instead, resilience appears particularly relevant in the context of internally oriented processes, such as meaning making and identity exploration, rather than in stable relational environments. This distinction extends existing models of well-being, which often assume a uniform mediating role of resilience across contexts and resources.

Within collectivist societies, relational security may function as a foundational condition for happiness rather than as a mechanism that buffers against stress. When family relationships are characterized by cohesion and emotional support, individuals may experience lower levels of stress, reducing reliance on resilience-related coping. Conversely, when individuals engage in internal processes such as self-discovery to navigate uncertainty and life transitions, resilience is associated with the ability to adapt and maintain well-being. These findings highlight the importance of contextualizing resilience within cultural and developmental contexts, suggesting

that its role may vary depending on the source of psychological support and the nature of the challenges faced.

Implications for Research and Practice

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends Resiliency Theory by indicating that resilience is associated with internally oriented spiritual processes, such as self-discovery, but not with relational factors like family relationships. This finding challenges the assumption that resilience uniformly mediates the associations between all protective factors and well-being. The results also contribute to Ecological Systems Theory by suggesting that microsystem-level family relationships are linked with happiness through direct emotional pathways, rather than through mechanisms related to stress recovery.

Practically, the findings offer important implications for mental health practitioners, educators, and policymakers. The observed association between family relationships and happiness highlights the potential value of family-based approaches in interventions aimed at supporting emerging adults' well-being, such as programs that foster family communication, cohesion, and emotional support. At the same time, the association of resilience with internally oriented spiritual processes highlights the importance of resilience-building strategies that cultivate self-awareness, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping. Educational institutions and community organizations may consider integrating self-discovery-focused activities, such as reflective exercises, values clarification, and meaning-centred programs, to support resilience and overall well-being among emerging adults.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of self-report measures may introduce response biases, such as social desirability. Future studies could incorporate mixed-method or multi-informant approaches to strengthen validity. Second, the cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretation. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how family relationships, spirituality, and resilience are associated with happiness over time. Third, the sample was predominantly Chinese, which may limit generalizability. Given Malaysia's multi-ethnic composition, future research should explore potential ethnic or religious differences in these relationships. Additionally, future studies could investigate alternative mediators, such as self-esteem, attachment security, or social support, to better understand the pathways linking family relationships with happiness.

Future research may also benefit from qualitative or mixed method approaches to capture the subjective experiences of spirituality, family relationships, and resilience among emerging adults. Such approaches could provide a deeper insight

into how individuals interpret self-discovery and spiritual engagement within their cultural contexts. Additionally, examining cohort-specific factors, such as the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on emerging adults, may further enhance understanding of resilience and happiness in contemporary populations. Future studies could also adopt a broader perspective by examining other possible determinants of happiness, such as involvement in co-curricular activities (Shakil et al., 2024) and technology-mediated communication tools (Nasidi et al., 2025), to enhance understanding of well-being in a more comprehensive manner.

Conclusion

This study highlights the distinct yet complementary associations of family relationships and spirituality with happiness among Malaysian emerging adults. Self-discovery, a dimension of spirituality, is linked with happiness partially through resilience, whereas family relationships is associated with happiness independently of resilience. These findings indicate that happiness during emerging adulthood is shaped by both internal meaning-making processes and external relational supports. By examining these pathways within a collectivist cultural context, the study provides theoretical and practical insights and highlights the importance of culturally sensitive strategies for promoting resilience and well-being during the transition to adulthood.

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