



Developing Subjective Well-Being Framework to Address Local University Students' Withdrawal Intention during Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Under the background of pandemic of Covid-19, the world over has reached to an inconceivable state of chaos. Therefore, partaking in United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is an imperative obligation. This study's framework involving subjective well-being and withdrawal intention among university students, harmonizes with at least six (good health, education, economic growth, no poverty, no inequality, and peace and justice) (SDGs). Moving along UN's initiatives, Malaysia's Malaysia Education Blueprint (2015-2025), acknowledged the issues of support for the disadvantaged students, implemented initiatives to provide greater education accessibilities as part of development of socio-economic capital. However, university students' compromised health and escalating withdrawal from universities continue to be apparent. The impact from Covid-19, causing job losses and reduced income, consequently affecting the psychological state and livelihood of university students. Therefore, identifying the subjective well-being and withdrawal intention specific to university students is crucial. This study aims to investigate the antecedents of university students' subjective well-being, as well as the consequences of their subjective well-being. The main aim is to develop a framework to understand the students' withdrawal intention in managing their reduced subjective well-being affected by the infamous Covid-19. Management of public and private universities will be able to develop fitting strategies to mitigate withdrawal intention specific to university students.

Key Words: Subjective Well-being, Withdrawal Intention, Covid-19, University Students.

DOI Number: 10.14704/nq.2022.20.6.NQ22002

NeuroQuantology 2022; 20(6):11-18

Introduction

The consequential effect of Covid-19 leading to job losses and amplified vulnerabilities especially to those with lower socio-economic status, from low-paid workers, young people, women, ethnic minorities, to the self-employed (ILO-OECD, 2020). University students who are at the young age group from 18-25 (Low, 2020) are among those affected. While various efforts have been implemented, such as students' equitable accessibility to continuous learning which has been one of the five core thrusts of the Ministry of Higher Education (StudyMalaysia.com, 2021). Ministry of Higher Education's initiatives are also ongoing in democratizing tertiary education by increasing the

number of Malaysians gaining access to the highest level of education through choice and capability (MOHE, 2012). Capitalizing from the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 that recognized the high rate of semi & low skilled workers of 72.8%, and the rise in the median monthly income disparity between T20-B40 groups, which had prompted this study to highlight the plight of university students in current condition. Exacerbated by the unanticipated Covid-19 pandemic, this age group were found to be struggling with online learning (Chung, 2020).

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While many bold initiatives were being implemented, the nation is still witnessing the rise in students' withdrawal from studies and their poor state of mental health (Malay Mail, 2020), the vulnerabilities within their own home (The Star, 2020), and the acute suicidal cases (The Star, 2021). The focus on these behavioral outcomes is consistent with four strategic thrusts of Shared Prosperity Vision 2030. Through the third, fourth, fifth, and seventh Strategic Thrust, which are human capital, labour market and compensation of employees, social well-being, and social capital respectively, this study is in parallel with government's initiatives to reduce the nation's number of semi and low skilled workers; to address acts of economic sabotage and discrimination, to improve rakyat's health index, and to reduce inequality and poverty. In fact, youth is among the nine vulnerable groups that will be given priority under polarity management. This study is also in line with the 10 Shifts as outlined by Malaysia Education Blueprint, Higher Education (2015 to 2025) that focuses specifically on quality and efficiency of education system, which covers not only students' academic pathway, their accessibility to lifelong learning, online learning, and quality of delivery (MEB, 2020). While the launch of movement control order (MCO) is mandatory to combat the merciless pandemic, it also breeds emotional upheaval among those confined within their own home. Current initiatives are concentrated in the battling with the rise of covid-19 positive cases (KKM, 2021), compounded by shortages of medical personnel (CDC, 2020) and fatigued frontliners (NST, 2020). Therefore, to focus on the emotional states of those confined at home may not be placed on priority list. Thus, this study attempt to offer a holistic explanation on how a negative events such as Covid-19 that not merely affect the emotional state but consequently influencing university students' decision to quit their studies. The introduction of subjective well-being is therefore one approach to holistically measure the emotional states of the university students. Despite the abundant of research that has been conducted on withdrawal intention, studies that focuses on withdrawal intentions specific to university students are still under-researched. Echoing Triventi and Trivellato (2009) and OECD (2010), not all students enrolled in higher education were able to complete their academic obligation, with some taking longer in completing their degree program, due to evidences of

amplified social inequalities (Facchini, 2020). Thus, understanding withdrawal intentions specific to university students will help to navigate decision makers in providing customized support and attention specific to university students.

Hypothesis

The research hypothesis can be summarized in the following points.

- Hypothesis 1: There is a significant relationship between negative events perceived as Covid-19 pandemic and university students' Withdrawal Intention
- Hypothesis 2: There is a significant relationship between negative events perceived as Covid-19 pandemic and university students' Subjective well-being.
- Hypothesis 3: There is a significant relationship between Subjective well-being and university students' Withdrawal Intention.
- Hypothesis 4: To explain the mediating role of Subjective Well-being between negative events perceived as Covid 19 pandemic and university students' Withdrawal Intention.

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Research Objectives

1. To explain the relationship between negative events perceived as Covid-19 pandemic on university students' Withdrawal Intention.
2. To explain the relationship between negative events perceived as Covid-19 pandemic on university students' Subjective Well-being.
3. To explain the relationship between Subjective Well-being and university students' Withdrawal Intention.
4. To explain the mediating role of Subjective well-being between negative events perceived as Covid-19 pandemic and university students' Withdrawal Intention.



Research Questions

1. Does negative event perceived as Covid-19 pandemic directly increase university students' Withdrawal Intention
2. Does negative event perceived as Covid-19 pandemic directly decrease university students' Subjective Well-being?
3. Does Subjective Well-being directly decrease university students' Withdrawal Intention
4. Does Subjective Well-being mediate the relationship between negative event perceived as Covid-19 pandemic and university students' Withdrawal Intention.

Literature Review

Negative Events of Covid-19

Citing Park et al (2020) and Wilson et al (2020), the negative event of COVID-19 pandemic had led to compromised health, financial worries, job loss, and disruption to social routines (Wilson, Lee, and Shook, 2021). COVID-19 pandemic, which was discovered on 31st December 2019 in Wuhan, People's Republic of China, is the disease caused by a new coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2 (WHO, 2020). Unfortunately, no signs of cessation from the spread of this disease, given the discovery of a new SARS-CoV-2 mutant Variant of Concern named Omicron (Bhagavathula, 2022). The immeasurable global disorderliness this unsympathetic disease had caused, can be witnessed from economic shockwaves to massive job loss (Pew Research Centre, 2020), long standing social disruption (Prime, 2020), global upsurge of anti-lockdown protest (WPR, 2020), and psychological issues (APA, 2020). Empirical evidence had suggested that younger adults are more vulnerable as compared to older adults in coping with stressor triggered by COVID-19 (Wilson, Lee, and Shook, 2021). Through a national survey conducted in China, Zhang et al (2020) highlights study results, denoting the society's perception of Covid-19 as dangerous, and more than half had greater perceived risk of contracting COVID-19 (Qian and Li, 2020). The past occurrences of health crisis had shown an increase in public's fear and anxiety (Qian and Li, 2020). A study in Germany had shown a negative effect of the COVID-19 lockdown on satisfaction with work and family (Möhring, et al., 2021). Based on these findings, this study upholds the notion on how emotion plays a vital role in risk assessment (Qian

and Li, 2020), which brings to the following discussion on the impact of negative event of Covid-19 on Subjective Well-being.

Subjective Well-Being (SWB)

A study in United States had indicated the positive association between perceived likelihood of contracting COVID-19 and higher anxiety particularly among those between 19 to 49 years (Wilson, Lee, and Shook, 2021). It was argued the involvement in a risk event such as Covid-19 pandemic is related to risk perception through heightened negative emotion (Qian and Li, 2020).

Loewenstein et al (2001) and Slovic et al (2004) featured "risk as feelings" hypothesis, providing the conception of individuals' appraisal of danger that does not hinge on the actual probability of event and the gravity of the occurrence, but their judgement is based on the subjective and emotional feeling at that point of time (Qian and Li, 2020). Negative events results in a negative emotional experience that in turn motivates acts of counterproductive behavior (Mindy, 2010).¹³ Pandemics can induce high levels of stress (Linlin, 2021). Covid-19 generated stressors, such as financial hardship, job insecurity, escalated health risk, living in isolation due to lockdowns are suggested to influence the low subjective well-being experienced (Möhring et al, 2021).

Citing Kuppens and Verduyn (2017), emotions are fleeting in nature and contrast dynamically with the fluctuations that people encounter at different juncture (Qian and Li, 2020). Therefore, subjective well-being is the preferred proxy for emotion frequently used as an overall assessment of one's life (Dolan, Peasgood, and White, 2008). Citing Diener et al (1999), subjective well-being is commonly defined as a broad phrase to define the manner we feel and reflect about our own lives (Dolan, Peasgood, and White, 2008). The use of subjective well-being as overall assessment of one's life is suggested to be timely and relevant, given university management's challenge in capturing students' genuine emotional states, especially during this critical time of observing strict compliance of standard operating procedures in combating the globally gruesome Covid-19, as students were either confined to dormitories or at home.



Withdrawal Intention

This study further offers an explanation on the impact of negative events such as Covid-19 on affective states, leading to judgement-driven behavior (Weiss and Beal, 2005). The negative events of Covid-19 consequently lead to university students' emotional reaction. Ultimately, university students may resort to quitting their studies as manifestation from decreased subjective well-being. Thus far, a study focusing on university students' withdrawal intention using subjective well-being framework have yet to be researched. The indiscriminate nature of Covid-19 had not spared Malaysians from the Covid-19-prompted adversities. From job loss (The Edge Markets, 2021), rising suicidal cases (The Malaysian Reserve, 2021), domestic violence (NST, 2020), particularly university student's withdrawal from academics (Malay Mail, 2020). It was suggested that the reduction of household resources will pressure the young family member to leave school and seek employment (Guio, Choi, Escardíbul, 2018).

Citing Thomas (2002) and Tinto (1975), issue of low retention rates in academic institutions has been a persistent debate in numerous academic studies (Haverila, 2020). In fact, two categories of dropping out were defined by Tinto (1973) which are leaving the college of registration, and failing to obtain any degree (Sandoval-Palis, 2020). It was reported from a study that students with the highest risk of dropping out derived from those invulnerable situations, with low application grades (Sandoval-Palis, 2020).

Extensive studies were done in predicting students' dropout rate through classification techniques (Nor S.S., 2020), providing support in highlighting B40 university students as the group at risk of dropout. However, in Malaysia, classification techniques that were applied in education domain were focused on student's performance rather than attrition (Nor S.S., 2020). Among variables considered influencing the dropout rate were demographic, student engagement in virtual learning, academic performance, transcripts, financial, and sociodemographic (Nor S.S., 2020).

B40 group students were claimed to be among those vulnerable groups that are highly responsive to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (Michiko, 2020). The long-standing difficulties caused by Covid-19 had made these vulnerable groups being

least shielded from social disruption such as financial insecurity, caregiving burden, and confinement-related stress such as overcrowded domiciles, and disordered routines (Prime, 2020). Citing Bernardo et al (2016), dropouts have a negative effect not only on the students, the prestige of the institutions, the economic growth, and society as a whole (Víctor, 2020). As highlighted by Willcoxson et al (2011), there is a strong association between first-year students' expectations of the institution and intention to leave (Carroll, 2020). In fact, the implication of dropouts included delinquency in student loans, limited chances in securing high-paying job, and the huge opportunity loss to the nation as the initiatives to elevate the B40 group to professionals and expertise level seemed futile (Nor S.S., 2020). Given the countless accounts on the impact of Covid-19 on the propensity of students leaving the academic journey, little was explained on the emotional well-being of the students, that are suggested to be driving the decision to forego their dreams in completing their academic dream. Understanding how the university students' perception of negative events such as Covid-19, and the ensuing effect on their subjective well-being can help to navigate policymakers to identify the attitude and to propose measures to mitigate the university students' inclination to withdraw from their scholarly aspiration.

Methodology

Research Methodology

This research proposal adopted positivist as the broader underpinning philosophy, paired with realist ontology, and "objectivism" as its epistemological stance, given this study's intention to test theory using quantitative data. Based on the positivist stance, the following are the details of the suggested research method for the study:

Research Design

In anticipation of the uncertainties brought on by Covid-19, with foreseen extended movement control order (MCO) as a risk measure, quantitative cross-sectional survey-based studies is the opted research design. A cross-sectional study allows the researcher to examine groups of people at one



point in time (Wysocki, 2008).

Population and Sampling

Based on multiple cluster sampling, the population targeted for this study are undergraduate students studying in public and private universities of Malaysia from various disciplines and areas of studies. For the purpose of obtaining samples, the research will focus on undergraduate students in each state in Malaysia. A sample size of more than 500 is considered, guided by Hair et al (2010) that suggest a minimum of 100 samples when a research model considers five or fewer constructs, 150 to 300 for a research model with seven or fewer constructs, and more than 500 for a research model with many constructs.

Data Collection Procedure

For this research, a survey method is considered as it allows a researcher to collect a large amount of data (Saunders et al., 2009; Cooper & Schindler, 2014). Moreover, one of the popular and common data collection methods in business and management studies (Saunders et al., 2009), which is easy to administer because people are familiar with the survey mechanism (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). This research proposal involves classification questions (sociological-demographic variables), which include age, gender, race, marital status, number of dependents, course taken, degree level, and university, as well as three constructs which will be measured using 7-point Likert Scale. The investigative nature of questions in this study are measured using Structured Questions format which are closed and predetermined set of question choices. In response to the demanding academic schedule of university students, therefore a time frame of less than 30 minutes is suggested to enable timely completion of survey.

Data Analysis

All returned responses will be numbered for easy identification for the purpose of data analysis. Data in the questionnaires will be coded and entered in the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 22.0 for analysis. Missing responses will be identified (if any) and coded from non-usable responses to increase the reliability of the data analysis. PLS-SEM method will be used to

analyze the compiled data with SmartPLS (Henseler, Hubona, & Pauline, 2016; Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017).

Descriptive Analysis

This analysis performs to explore to describe the scenario of this research (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). The descriptive information analyzes, such as frequency, average score, mean, and standard deviations. The sample characteristics and all the constructs used in the research utilized in the descriptive analysis. Partial Least Squares (PLS) Technique The PLS-SEM technique expressed by Wold (1982) as a second-generation structural equation modelling that functions with structural equation models involving latent variables and an array-and-effect relationship (Latan & Ramli, 2013; Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins, & Kuppelwieser, 2014).

The present research will be using the SmartPLS path modelling to confirm measurement and structural models. A measurement model revealed the reliability and validity of the constructs, while a structural model used to carry out the bivariate correlation analysis and regressions analysis to clarify relations and their effects among constructs under research (Latan & Ramli, 2013; Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). The PLS algorithm and bootstrapping method (Preacher & Hayes, 2004; 2008), determined the mediating effects of learning orientation on the organisational characteristics-graduates entrepreneurial orientation relationship.

Evaluation of PLS Models

Hair et al. (2013) propose two primary methodological elements test PLS Models, which are evaluation of measurement model and evaluation of structural model. Evaluation of Measurement Model is an evaluation of reflective measurement models based on their internal consistency; construct unidimensional, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Evaluation of the Structural Model, on the other hand is the primary criteria for testing the structural model, which included determining the squared, effect size, predictive relevance of the model, the goodness of fit, their predictive performance, and hypothesis testing (Henseler & Sarstedt, 2013).

Conclusion

Subjective well-



being frameworks that have been developed previously have not focused on the consequences of subjective well-being on university students' withdrawal intention. Therefore, this study will be able to expand the knowledge in the areas of management and organizational behavior as it serves to develop a comprehensive framework of subjective well-being, incorporating the antecedents as well as consequences of reduced subjective well-being. This study further expands by focusing on university students' withdrawal intention, motivated by their reduced subjective well-being, triggered by Covid-19 pandemic. This will help to offer some insights for university managements, the Ministry of Higher Education as well as Ministry of Health in terms of university students' overall health including emotional and mental health.

In line with Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, this study serves to offer a framework that will bring about benefit to the following category. By focusing on university students' subjective well-being as well as their withdrawal intention, university management will be able to identify the potential behaviors which could lead them to go astray from their academic aspiration. University management will be guided to develop effective mitigation and intervention program to ensure the vulnerable groups are not being excluded from getting access to quality education and healthy well-being due to aggravated financial limitation and the worsening of social disruption resultant from Covid-19 pandemic. Data collected from this study will provide valuable insights to Malaysia government, and corresponds with Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, by ensuring continued initiatives in producing quality human capital, and to reduce the number of semi-low skilled workers. Reduction of low-skilled workers will then help in addressing the economic discrimination due to academic qualification issues. Successively, industry layers will not only benefit from recruiting quality human capital, and the society at large will benefit through elevation from poverty and improved health index.

This study offers an integrated framework, offering a practical reasoning on the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on one's subjective well-being, which subsequently influence individual's judgement driven behavior that could disadvantage them in their academic journey, and potentially compromising their safety and their overall well-being. Given the economic and social impact of Covid-19 that anticipated to be long standing, this subjective well-being framework is fundamentally critical and timely to be applied by academic institutions in supporting undergraduate students in coping with Covid-19-triggered challenges as they acclimatize into university life. Further, the findings from this study, particularly on the university students' state of neglect, conceptualized as one of the four CWBs is one subtle attempt to capture university students' mental well-being. This study serves to offer valuable input to the Health Ministry in supporting its initiative in reviving the National Suicidal Registry of Malaysia, with its website that was ceased to exist in 2009 (The Star, 2019).

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