

Social and spiritual factors in building community happiness and well-being: The moderating role of education



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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian government aims to transform Malaysia into a high-income, fair, and sustainable economy, maintaining strong economic growth for nearly fifty years. Developing indicators to guide society towards a sustainable and desirable future is crucial for promoting welfare. This research seeks to understand people's perspectives on the social, cultural, spiritual, and governance factors that impact happiness and well-being in Malaysia. A survey of 732 participants from various regions of Peninsular Malaysia was conducted using a structured questionnaire, and the data was analyzed through Partial Least Square (PLS) and regression analysis. The findings indicate that factors such as social security, job satisfaction, national prosperity, education, and spiritual values significantly influence Malaysia's development. The study suggests that integrating these key indicators into policy-making is vital for achieving sustainable development in Malaysia. Furthermore, these findings can assist policymakers, businesses, and other organizations in developing strategies for sustainable growth and offer useful insights for achieving sustainability goals.

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1. Introduction

Social well-being is an influential policy agenda of social scientists and economists; in the national and societal context, it is still unclear how to measure people's well-being. Most countries use their gross domestic product (GDP) to measure social well-being and account for national income. Several scholars disagree with the GDP; it does not measure the nation's wealth and economic state. Previous studies explored that income (money) is happiness, but more income (money) does not mean more happiness; still, there is a connection between happiness (subjective well-being and life satisfaction) and income (Haq et al., 2021). To measure the country's social well-being, it is necessary to use subjective and objective quality of life (Ariffin et al., 2021).

People try to improve and maintain their living standards through non-income (well-being), and

income components are the accepted view in economic literature. The happiness-income paradox formulated by Easterlin (2001) explained that happiness does not increase when a country's income increases. The evidence in the existing literature shows that there is a significant relationship between well-being and low-income people compared to high-income; also, an increase in income will diminish well-being (Masuda et al., 2021). According to Killingsworth (2021), rich people's increase in income will increase satisfaction but at a decreasing rate. On the other hand, scholars widely accept that money can't buy happiness in society.

Numerous authors explored happiness and well-being (subjective well-being) connected with people's emotional components. The main research question is still unexplored: Is material well-being linked with subjective well-being or happiness? Malaysia is an emerging economy under the middle-income category; by 2030, the Malaysian government wants to improve the citizens' living standards as one of its primary developmental goals (Musa et al., 2019). There are several studies available on happiness and well-being, but studies in developing countries and Malaysia are limited. Several researchers exposed the well-being and quality of life variables such as population, culture

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and entertainment, social participation, environment, housing, health, transportation, education, and public security (Hassan et al., 2013). According to Koen et al. (2017), the growth of social well-being in Malaysia has been slower than the growth of GDP over the past few decades.

The Malaysia Quality of Life Index (MQLI) was formed by the prime minister's department under the economic planning unit to measure the well-being of Malaysian citizens. There are 11 components in the MQLI index: Public safety, leisure, culture, social participation, family life, environment, housing, education, health, working conditions, transportation, and income and distribution to measure the progress in people's well-being. Other well-being indices like the Malaysian Syariah Index (MSI), Malaysian Youth Index (MYI), Family Well-being Index Survey (FWIS), and Malaysian Well-being Indices (MyWI) measure the social indicators. Therefore, the traditional well-being measure was replaced with subjective well-being (Dinsuhaimi et al., 2022), and the new indicators are essential to measure the happiness and well-being of a multicultural and multi-ethnic society like Malaysia (Bakar et al., 2015).

There are no reliable and comprehensive indicators to measure happiness and well-being subjectively. In order to attain developed country status, Malaysia needs to ensure inclusive growth, clean energy, education, and social protection, which are the pathways to achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Koen et al., 2017).

The study aims to examine Malaysian citizens' perceptions of governance and the spiritual, cultural, and social factors that influence happiness and well-being. The study's outcome will be about the material and psychological factors that drive people's well-being in Malaysia, along with suggestions to the policymakers on improving the quality of life and well-being of households. The article deals with the theoretical framework, conceptual framework, and research hypothesis in section 2, methodology and data source in section 3, data analysis and results in section 4, discussion in section 5, implications in section 6, limitations and future research in section 7, and conclusion in section 8.

2. Theoretical framework, conceptual framework, and research hypothesis

The terms mutually interchangeable with well-being are life satisfaction, happiness, and quality of life, which have been popular research areas for over half a century (Ruggeri et al., 2020). There are two categories under conceptual well-being: Subjective well-being (SWB) and objective well-being (OWB). A person's income, consumption, and material resources are the OWB (Alatartseva and Barysheva, 2015). There are two distinct features in SWB: negative and positive affect, which is fluctuating emotional experiences, and life satisfaction, which is a stable cognitive evaluation (Headey and Muffels,

2018). SWB is influenced by internal factors like intrinsic motivation and self-evaluation as a subjective evaluation of life (Chen et al., 2022b).

It is difficult to understand how happiness and SWB are affected by emotions. In the social and cultural context, the external well-being factors are economic circumstances, social support, cultural dimensions, social trust, demographic conditions, environmental context, and spiritual well-being (Diener et al., 2018). According to emotion theories, direct, intermediate, and indirect factors are equally important to the negative and positive emotions of SWB (Das et al., 2020). Jovanović (2016) revealed love, contentment, curiosity, and joy are the subset of pleasant emotions in framing the theory of positive emotions. In the research on emotional well-being, hedonistic culture is valuable (McCallum and Price, 2015). The study's hypothesis through emotional wellness includes life satisfaction and general happiness of SWB.

Several researchers agreed that multidimensional concepts could be better understood through well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2000); it is much beyond the traditional measuring scale, like GDP and income (Fitoussi and Stiglitz, 2013). International organizations like the Organization for the Economic Corporation and Development (OECD) started infusing well-being initiatives in their policies, which is clear evidence that a multidimensional approach is in practice. In measuring economic and social development, GDP is an indicator widely accepted, but there are different views that the GDP has limitations in measuring welfare. Aitken (2019) insisted that welfare aspects cannot be measured through GDP; it is good for measuring the country's economic growth. Some studies stress the correlation between individual happiness and household income (Kollamparambil, 2020; Sujarwoto et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2020); at the same time, there is a positive correlation between subjective well-being and economic condition of both societal and individual level (Yu et al., 2020). It is clear that income alone is not enough to measure well-being.

The Gross National Happiness Index (GNHI) was used to measure the happiness of Bhutan's people with dimensions including living standards, environmental diversity, education, health, cultural vitality, time use, and governance. According to Yang et al. (2022), wellness is a human activity that denotes a condition of existence that a person has acquired and experienced. People can fulfill their wants and satisfy their contentment with an increase in money, leading to high-quality well-being. Stiglitz (2013) established the reciprocal relationship between economic growth and well-being. A person's ability to experience pleasure, happiness, and significance in life is all related to their level of well-being. The main goal of life is to enhance people's quality of life, help them overcome obstacles, and achieve physical, social, and psychological safety and comfort. In literature, subjective and objective quality of life measures

social well-being. While the subjective quality of life refers to self-actualization and fulfillment, the objective quality of life is related to basic needs like wealth, health, and education. For instance, people are content when they enjoy a career, appreciate their children's accomplishments, and have a happy family (Ariffin et al., 2021). The body of literature demonstrates that the relationship between material and emotional well-being and a country's development is complicated and changes depending on the circumstances of the individual, the nation, the region, and the climate. Despite significant increases in per capita wealth throughout the observation period, according to research by FitzRoy and Nolan (2020), the average subjective well-being for many countries has remained relatively stable.

Several scholars emphasize the psychological and behavioral aspects of satisfaction. Some previous studies expressed that satisfaction with their way of life, living, and social standing are considered social well-being (Ivankina and Ivanova, 2016). According to D'Ambrosio et al. (2020), social welfare is a subjective measurement of the total utility that people receive from the use of commodities and services. Other research showed that well-being is a multifaceted concept that has been understood to be more expansive than welfare (Yang et al., 2022). Life satisfaction and happiness are the two components of subjective well-being; these terms are similarly used in the research (Sujarwoto et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2020). Jebb et al. (2018) mentioned that expectations for the future, emotions, and sentiments are the components of life satisfaction. Education, ethnicity, and marital status extensively influence people's happiness (Cheah and Tang, 2013).

Various authors established that social capital factors could well determine subjective well-being, including network, social norms, and trust, which are crucial in boosting social and economic development (Kollamparambil, 2020). Several studies recently exhibited that social capital positively impacts subjective well-being (Sarracino, 2010). Yip et al. (2007) have found that individual and societal happiness increased due to the people's trust in the Chinese village. In some countries, the social indicator is used as a criterion to chase the changes in inhabitants' welfare (Nelson et al., 2020). In Malaysia, individuals with access to high social capital enjoy a better quality of life (Ariffin et al., 2021). Social capital also plays a significant role in improving the livelihoods of poor communities in the country (Islam et al., 2023).

Churchill and Mishra (2017) revealed the relationship between subjective well-being, social trust, and individual trust in the study. There is a positive correlation between subjective well-being and life satisfaction based on studies conducted in Japan and Taiwan (Matsushima and Matsunaga, 2015). Also, a positive correlation exists between subjective well-being and trust based on a survey made in more than 80 nations. Yip et al. (2007) indicated in the study based on the Chinese village

individual and societal happiness increased due to the people's trust. No relationship between social capital components and social well-being (Diener et al., 2010) expressed that the effect of social capital on happiness is visible across the globe. Islam et al. (2023) reported that an individual's experience moderates the relationship between trust and livelihoods in rural areas in Malaysia.

Subjective well-being and spirituality are closely correlated; religiousness and spirituality positively correlate to happiness (Kor et al., 2019). In several countries, people living in difficult conditions are more religious than those in prosperous states; difficult conditions include short life expectancy and widespread hunger (Villani et al., 2019). According to Kim-Prieto and Miller (2018), religion will increase happiness by reducing psychological distress in society. In a study conducted in 79 nations, people with religious beliefs got higher life satisfaction than non-religious people (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2010).

The relationship between spirituality and subjective well-being in Malaysia is a product of the country's multireligious and culturally diverse population. Malaysians rely heavily on their spirituality to give them a sense of direction, a sense of belonging, and emotional support—especially during difficult times. Regular prayer, fasting, and group worship are examples of religious practices that strengthen Malaysians' sense of connectedness to the community and to a greater power (Rahman et al., 2019). These elements have a major role in general well-being in a multicultural setting in Malaysia, where religious and spiritual beliefs are deeply ingrained in daily life (Yeoh et al., 2017).

In Malaysian spirituality, accepting pain as part of a higher purpose or divine will is a common belief. This perspective helps reduce psychological distress by providing a framework to make sense of life's challenges. This aligns with research by Kim-Prieto and Miller (2018), which shows that religion can alleviate psychological discomfort. Furthermore, religious celebrations and traditions like Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Thaipusam, and Wesak Day in Malaysia foster social links and offer chances for happiness and contentment, all of which increase life satisfaction (Dali et al., 2017). The Malaysian setting emphasizes the importance of spirituality in building resilience as well. Religious beliefs offer consolation and hope in more rural or economically deprived areas, reflecting the global trend where people who are experiencing tough circumstances frequently turn to spirituality for solace (Villani et al., 2019). Consequently, spirituality is important for preserving social peace and the general well-being of Malaysian society, in addition to having an impact on individual happiness.

Stress, family violence, and social problems increase pressure and challenge people. The Malaysian government introduced well-framed strategic policies to achieve social development and rapid economic growth. The metrics like the index of Social Progress (ISP), Quality of Life Index (QOL),

Index of Social Health (ISH), Human Development Index (HDI), Index of Economic Well-being (IEQB), and Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) can be used as an alternative economic activity to GDP for sustainable economic welfare.

Subjective well-being is determined based on Malaysians' sustainable development, happiness, and social welfare through non-monetary metrics. Few studies of Malaysia support understanding the measurement of happiness and social well-being, with a set of happiness and well-being indicators to measure social and economic well-being in Malaysia. Ariffin et al. (2021) developed a set of indicators of family well-being index to measure household well-being in the multicultural society of Malaysia. The study to measure the social well-being criteria includes money, physical environment, social stability, safety and security, leisure, education, health, protection, and nutrition. The findings suggested developing an indicator for periodic review and evaluating family well-being to achieve the goals (Ariffin et al., 2021).

The study's findings indicate that while well-being (MWI) has grown, economic growth has increased done so more slowly. It is understood that social and economic components must be evaluated to enhance the index credibility and well-being; MWI must include relevant factors (Baqutayan et al., 2017). The social features must have spirituality, economy, family-institution relationship, social capital, corruption, health, and housing. Economic components include distribution and income to ensure equitable possibility.

In Malaysia, based on the study, Kamarudin et al. (2020) investigated the connection between subjective well-being and social capital variables. The study correlated happiness, religious elements, and positive life satisfaction. According to life satisfaction, the study employed subjective well-being to measure people's happiness. Noor et al. (2014) created an index to gauge the well-being of Malaysian individuals and discovered the significance of religiosity for happiness and family wellness. In Malaysia, religion is fundamental to building a peaceful and united society. Nevertheless, extensive previous studies supported the idea that religious factors can also be considered a welfare measurement index. Jaafar et al. (2012) included several variables in their study that affect happiness in Indonesia and Malaysia. The study included 12 happiness indicators in both nations, which were comprised of community, social, family, and personal contexts. The study's findings revealed that in Malaysia, social well-being is deficient. The comprehensive and appropriate social indicators may bring out the demographic, cultural, and social diversity in Malaysia; along with this, the best practices for Malaysia's social well-being are to be included (Chen et al., 2022a; Jaafar et al., 2012).

Economists and social scientists have recently become interested in happiness studies. Well-being and happiness are used in this work as a stand-in for well-being, which psychologists have extensively

explored. Happiness, life satisfaction, and subjective well-being are all used interchangeably in the literature on happiness. The literature has not yet provided a complete explanation of what causes happiness. The study will outline the significant social and cultural aspects of Malaysians for their happiness and well-being. The study will support Malaysia's Vision 2030 by assisting policymakers in successfully implementing the development model. The conceptual framework and hypothesis were created using the literature review as a guide, as shown in Fig. 1.

H1: Community welfare significantly affects the level of happiness and well-being.

H2: Level of education significantly affects happiness and well-being.

H3: Security at home significantly affects happiness and well-being.

H4: Job satisfaction significantly affects happiness and well-being.

H5: National well-being significantly affects happiness and well-being.

H6: Unhappiness and insecurity significantly affect happiness and well-being.

H7: Religious practice significantly affects happiness and well-being.

H8: Spirituality and peace significantly affect happiness and well-being.

H9: Level of education significantly moderates the effect of spirituality and peace on happiness and well-being.

3. Materials and methods

In Peninsular Malaysia, a survey was carried out to find out how various stakeholders perceived the components of social welfare and happiness. A quantitative methodology was applied to gather primary data for this study. The survey was carried out in Peninsular Malaysia's five different zones: South, West, East Coast, Central and North. These regions are different in terms of ethnic diversity, cultural, social, resource conditions, and geographical locations. The data used in this research was gathered through face-to-face interviews with a standardized questionnaire to cover the various facets of social well-being. Focus group discussions (FGD) were held before data collection to refine the questionnaire and collect data on the key problems regarding social well-being and happiness.

The pre-testing feedback and extra data were added to the final questionnaire. In order to ensure the study's validity, the researcher provided a clear explanation of the research objectives and definitions to enable respondents to fully respond to the questionnaire. The study comprised participants from diverse backgrounds, including employees from various industries, households, retirees, entrepreneurs, and both undergraduate and postgraduate students. The respondents were approached in various locations, including their

homes, workplaces, public areas such as markets and shopping centers, and academic institutions. Quota sampling was employed to select the participants, and a total of 1000 questionnaires were distributed through both postal and manual delivery methods. In this study, 732 responses were received and analyzed out of a total of participants. The survey

was designed to cater to the needs of the responders and was available in both English and Bahasa Melayu. A total of 688 participants were employees from diverse industries, while the remaining respondents included students, housewives, and retirees. The survey had equal participation rates for both genders.

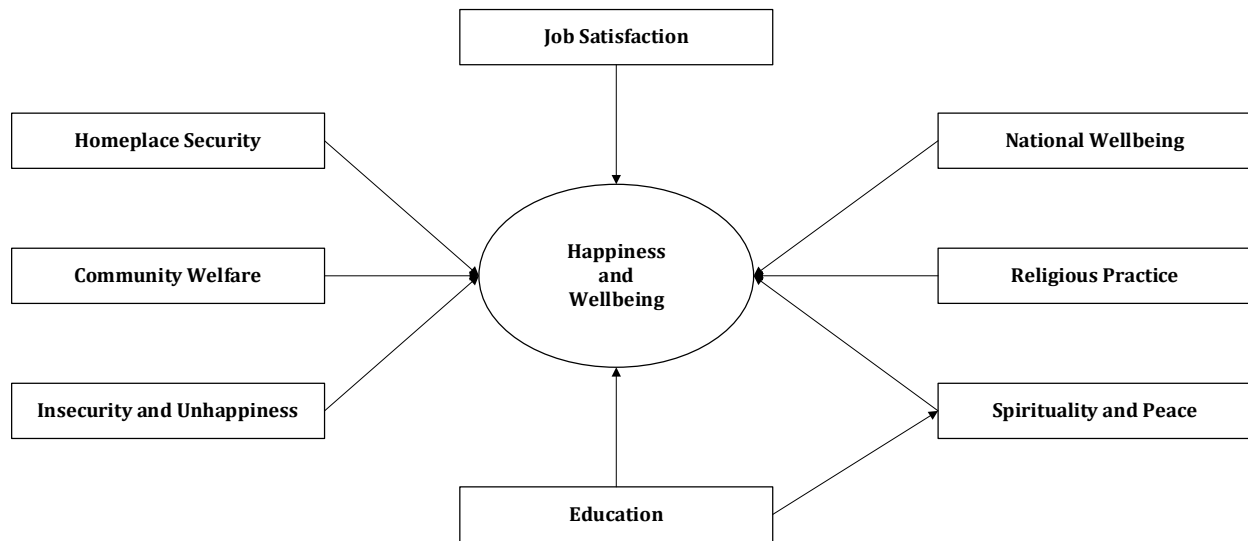


Fig. 1: Conceptual framework

The survey comprised two sections, each focusing on different aspects. Section A collected information on respondents' household demographics, while Section B evaluated eight dimensions related to happiness and well-being. The respondents' perceptions of social well-being were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Descriptive analysis was utilized to provide an overview of the characteristics of the participants. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the data, with the Smart PLS tool being the chosen software for evaluation. In the initial phase of PLS-SEM analysis, several assessments were performed to evaluate the model's suitability, reliability, and validity. This included verifying the reliability and consistency of the indicators, as well as examining convergent and discriminant validity. Additionally, the collinearity method was employed to check for multicollinearity in the data. To evaluate the hypothesis testing, the structural model was assessed using the R^2 value, as well as the path coefficients, T-value, and overall effect of the data.

Considering the specific circumstances of the study, a soft modeling approach to SEM called Partial Least Squares (PLS) was deemed more appropriate than traditional SEM approaches. PLS was selected as it does not make any assumptions about data distribution, which is particularly useful when 1) ensuring model specification is not possible, 2) predictive accuracy is crucial, 3) limited theory is available for the application, or 4) the sample size is small (although it can also perform well with larger sample sizes). This decision was based on previous studies (Henseler et al., 2014; Sarstedt et al., 2019; 2020).

3.1. Measurements of the variables

As a measure of happiness and well-being, the researchers utilized a set of questions adapted from the Subjective Well-being Life Satisfaction Scale developed by Diener (2021). The assessment of happiness and well-being was based on individuals' perceptions of their life satisfaction, encompassing their emotions, feelings, and perspectives on future directions and options (Johri and Anand, 2022). The survey questionnaire employed in this study aimed to evaluate individuals' life satisfaction by assessing their cognitive and judgmental processes and personal accomplishments. Specifically, the questionnaire was designed to measure happiness and well-being, which were assessed using a set of seven items. The survey instrument was constructed with the goal of capturing a broad range of factors that contribute to an individual's sense of well-being. By examining both cognitive and achievement-based aspects of life satisfaction, the questionnaire sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of an individual's overall happiness and well-being. The seven items were carefully selected to evaluate various dimensions of well-being, including individuals' feelings about their quality of life, sense of accomplishment, satisfaction with their health, financial stability, work-life balance, and personal relationships with family members or partners. Participants were asked to rate their responses using a seven-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of happiness and well-being.

Differences in social capital factors, such as social networks, relationships, and trust, have been shown to be linked to community well-being (Islam et al., 2023; 2011). Research has consistently shown that

communities with higher levels of trust among their members generally have a better quality of life. This correlation has been demonstrated by [Yoshida et al. \(2022\)](#), who found that a community's level of trust is a significant predictor of its well-being. [Hommerich and Tiefenbach \(2018\)](#) further highlighted the importance of social capital factors, which encompass a community's social relationships, networks, and norms. They found that social capital can significantly impact life satisfaction among Asians. To measure community well-being, a set of questions was adapted from the Second Gross National Happiness Survey Questionnaire of Bhutan conducted in April 2010. The questionnaire focuses on the relationships among family members, friends, and neighbors, recognizing the crucial role of social connections in fostering well-being. Overall, these findings emphasize the significance of social capital and trust in promoting community well-being and happiness. By nurturing positive relationships and networks, communities can enhance their quality of life and promote a sense of belonging and social cohesion.

The survey instrument utilized in this research comprised a range of items to assess various aspects of community well-being. These items included statements such as "I can count on my family for support during times of difficulty and illness," "I am content with the social support I receive from close friends or family outside my household," "I actively engage in social events within my community," and "The people in my community are helpful, and I can rely on them." Participants were requested to rate their responses on a seven-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater levels of community well-being. This survey instrument aimed to provide a comprehensive assessment of the different factors that contribute to a thriving and cohesive community. By gathering data on participants' perceptions of social support, community engagement, and trust, the study sought to shed light on the various elements that promote well-being at the community level.

The security and safety of one's home environment can be influenced by various factors such as locality, housing conditions, and access to amenities. For this survey, the researchers aimed to measure the level of homeplace security through questions adapted from the Measuring Subjective Well-being for Public Policy study by [Yin and Liu \(2020\)](#). Homeplace security was assessed using a set of questions, including the condition of respondents' homes and their surrounding areas, the quality of local infrastructure and amenities, and the level of safety and security in their locality. The questions asked whether respondents were satisfied with their homes and surroundings, had good access to transportation, lived in areas with good road conditions, had access to clean water and amenities such as schools, hospitals, and markets, and felt safe walking alone at night. Additionally, the survey asked about the frequency of garbage collection and the availability of security and police in their area.

Job satisfaction is a crucial factor that contributes to the well-being and happiness of individuals and their families. In Malaysia, job availability and safety are crucial determinants of well-being. To assess job satisfaction in this study, we adapted the Job Satisfaction Survey developed by [Spector \(2022\)](#). The survey comprises a set of questions that measure various aspects of job satisfaction, including recognition for a job well done, feelings of job security and satisfaction, the perceived worth of one's salary, the utilization of one's skills and talents, workplace relationships, management concern, loyalty to the company, supervisor/manager relationships, and the belief that work is beneficial for physical health.

The inclusion of well-being metrics is a valuable approach to showcasing the interconnectedness of sustainability's diverse facets, namely environmental, economic, social, and urban governance aspects. This integration has been widely acknowledged by researchers, including [Nardo and Saisana \(2008\)](#), [Noda \(2020\)](#), and [Ribes-Giner et al. \(2019\)](#), for their effectiveness in demonstrating the interdependence of these factors. Furthermore, informed decision-making at the local, national, and regional levels is essential to establish and promote a resilient social-environmental system. [Helliwell et al. \(2018\)](#) emphasized the importance of incorporating well-being metrics into policy development. Integrating these metrics is essential for effectively demonstrating the connections between different dimensions of sustainability. Informed decision-making at various levels can help build and sustain a strong social-environmental system. The questions in this section aim to assess respondents' satisfaction with several aspects, including availability of job opportunities, information technology (IT) infrastructure, the life expectancy of Malaysians (currently 75 years), equal access to education, gender equality, freedom of speech, public healthcare, national security (against war threats and illegal immigration), law enforcement, the transportation system, the education system, ethnic relations, environmental conditions, political stability, and the general price level in Malaysia.

Spirituality and peace have been linked to a higher quality of life and subjective well-being. However, studies on spirituality and peace in Malaysia have shown mixed and inconclusive results. This section aims to explore the spirituality factor and its relation to peace in Malaysia. The questions were adapted from previous studies and included: "Do you regularly pray or meditate? Do you make time to visit your place of worship (mosque, temple, church)? Do you engage in discussions on religious teachings and values with your family members? Do you actively help others through personal efforts or through religious institutions (such as zakat, donation, or alms)? Do you strive to adhere to your religion's teachings (such as fasting, praying, pilgrimage, etc.)? The increase in psychological distress, which is linked to emotional suffering, has

become a prevalent issue in Malaysia (Chan et al., 2021). Economic and social factors have been identified as the primary contributors to unhappiness (Arvidsdotter et al., 2016). Studies conducted in various regions of Malaysia have shown that business owners experience more unhappiness than professionals (Yeoh et al., 2017). To measure insecurity, the following questions were used: "Do you find it difficult to sleep well at night? Do you often feel unmotivated or uninterested in doing things? Do you feel constantly under stress? Do you find it hard to solve problems or make decisions? Do you worry a lot? Do you easily become agitated and angry? Do you generally feel depressed or unhappy?"

In Malaysia, with its diverse mix of ethnicities and cultures, religion holds significant importance in social, cultural, and economic aspects. Islam is the official religion of the federation, although there are other major religions as well. To measure the religious aspect, a set of questions adapted from Pearce et al. (2017) was used, which included: Do you have faith in a higher power? Do you believe in the existence of malevolent spirits or demons? Do you believe that divine miracles are possible? Do you believe in the concept of life after death? How important is religion in shaping your daily life? Do you believe that judgment day will come when God rewards some and punishes others? Finally, how frequently do you attend religious services?

Education plays a crucial role in human well-being, and research has shown that it is linked to improved health outcomes. However, the relationship between education and job satisfaction is complex and varies from person to person. In Malaysia, the impact of education on well-being and happiness is not fully understood. To enhance educational outcomes and institutional excellence, the Malaysian government has committed to improving the quality of education through the 11th Malaysia Plan (2016-2020). This study aims to explore how different levels of education affect social well-being, as this information is valuable for policymakers in their efforts toward development.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Socioeconomic and demographic characteristics

The characteristics of the survey respondents are described in this section. The average number of households among the respondents, as shown in Table 1, is four. In the research areas, 72% of respondents have households with one to five persons.

In terms of age, the majority of respondents were young workers, with 88% being under the age of 45. This is not surprising given the diverse study areas that the respondents came from. The ethnic composition of the respondents showed that Malays/Bumiputra made up the largest group, accounting for 88% of responses, followed by

Chinese (7%) and Indians (5%) (Table 1). In terms of educational attainment, 18% of respondents had postgraduate education, while 63% had completed undergraduate or diploma studies, and the remaining 18% had only completed secondary education. Looking at the respondents' employment status, 81% were full-time employees, followed by 7% who were self-employed, and 4% who were employed elsewhere. The respondents worked in various fields, with 27% being employed in government positions or government-affiliated businesses. Other notable occupations included housewives and retirees (4.4%), mining and agriculture (3.7%), finance and insurance (6.1%), hotel and restaurant (6.1%), transport and communication (8.3%), real estate (10%), wholesale and retail (10.5%), and education and health sectors (12.8%) as shown in Table 1.

The survey data presents a diverse range of professionals from various sectors across different Malaysian states. The respondents have significant work experience in their current occupation, with 49.1% reporting three to ten years of experience. About 25% of respondents have up to three years of work experience, while 20% claim to have over 10 years of experience (Table 1). Regarding their monthly income, 42% of respondents earn between RM2,501 and RM5,000, while a quarter of the respondents have a monthly salary of RM5,000 or more, which is considered high income. A total of 33% of respondents have a monthly income of RM2,500 or less.

4.2. Measurement model: PLS-SEM analysis

Cronbach's alpha was utilized to evaluate the consistency of the data and determine the degree to which a set of items is interrelated. It is a measure of the scale's reliability. A reliability coefficient of 0.7 or higher is generally deemed "acceptable" in most social science research (Hair et al., 2014). The results of this study show that Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.918 to 0.812, indicating that all factors are dependable and consistent. Additionally, Table 2 illustrates that the average variance extracted (AVE) was above the threshold level of 0.50, indicating convergent reliability, and Table 3 shows discriminant validity results. Sarstedt et al. (2019) proposed a distinct approach to assess discriminant validity through the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). The HTMT measures the similarity between latent variables. Discriminant validity is deemed to be demonstrated if the HTMT value is below one (1). Table 4 presents all computed HTMT values, which were found to be below 1, confirming the discriminant validity.

Validity is the extent to which a measure accurately reflects the construct being measured, according to Malhotra et al. (2017). The goal of the validity test is to assess whether the responses given by the respondents accurately reflect the construct being measured. Convergent validity requires that the AVE score be 0.5 or higher, according to Fornell

and Larcker (1984), to be considered acceptable. Additionally, a VIF rule of thumb that is frequently

applied in practice is that a model has significant multicollinearity if it is more than 10.

Table 1: Socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the respondents

Characteristics	N	Percentage	
Size of household	1-5 members	527	72.0
	6 and above members	151	20.6
	18 – 30 Years	275	37.6
Age	31 – 45	366	50.0
	46 – 55	77	10.5
	56 and above	14	1.9
Education	Secondary school	133	18.2
	Undergraduate degree	331	45.2
	Certificate/diploma	128	17.5
	Postgraduate degree	132	18.0
Employment status	Fulltime	594	81.1
	Part-time	31	4.2
	Own business	48	6.6
Occupation (sector)	Wholesale/retail	77	10.5
	Transport/logistics/ICT	61	8.3
	Real estate	73	10.0
	Mining/quarrying	27	3.7
	Hotel/restaurants/tourism	45	6.1
	Government/government-linked companies	199	27.2
	Finance/insurance/consultation	45	6.1
	Construction and manufacturing	34	4.6
	Agriculture	32	4.4
	Working experience	Up to 3 years	176
3 - 5 years		207	28.3
5 - 10 years		152	20.8
> 10 years		154	21.0
Income (RM/month)	Up to 2,500	240	32.8
	2,501 - 5,000	306	41.8
	5,001 - 10,000	110	15.0
	>10,001	70	10.0

Table 2: Reliability and validity

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	Composite reliability	AVE	Collinearity statistics (inner-VIF)
Community welfare	0.857	0.859	0.894	0.584	1.697
Homeplace security	0.812	0.820	0.864	0.515	1.736
Job satisfaction	0.918	0.924	0.934	0.639	1.531
National well-being	0.909	0.914	0.923	0.501	1.335
Religious matters	0.848	0.871	0.907	0.766	1.230
Spirituality and Peace	0.926	0.930	0.944	0.771	1.669
Unhappiness and insecurity	0.905	0.911	0.924	0.604	1.351
Happiness and well-being	0.863	0.863	0.896	0.554	-

Table 3: Discriminant validity

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	0.764							
2	0.504	0.744						
3	0.542	0.525	0.718					
4	0.365	0.525	0.425	0.799				
5	0.391	0.380	0.418	0.327	0.708			
6	0.330	0.294	0.259	0.261	0.271	0.875		
7	0.485	0.460	0.477	0.447	0.245	0.324	0.878	
8	-0.307	-0.511	-0.264	-0.436	-0.193	-0.295	-0.383	0.777

1: Community welfare; 2: Happiness and well-being; 3: Home security; 4: Job satisfaction; 5: National well-being; 6: Religious practice; 7: Spirituality and peace; 8: Unhappiness and insecurity

Table 4: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	-								
2	0.085	-							
3	0.120	0.246	-						
4	0.087	0.143	0.613	-					
5	0.032	0.082	0.583	0.479	-				
6	0.064	0.052	0.417	0.468	0.349	-			
7	0.048	0.052	0.336	0.304	0.291	0.300	-		
8	0.107	0.150	0.512	0.540	0.478	0.254	0.366	-	
9	0.047	0.087	0.576	0.300	0.475	0.203	0.335	0.416	-

1: Community welfare; 2: Level of education; 3: Happiness and well-being; 4: Home security; 5: Job satisfaction; 6: National well-being; 7:Religious practice; 8: Spirituality and peace; 9: Unhappiness and insecurity

The Collinearity Statistics (inner VIF values) for all variables are below five, indicating no multicollinearity among them. Specifically, the VIF values are as follows: welfare (1.697), homeplace security (1.736), job satisfaction (1.531), national well-being (1.335), religious matters (1.230), spirituality and peace (1.669), unhappiness and insecurity (1.351), and education (1.043). The values of the Rho A dependability coefficients are all over 0.7, which is under the recommendations made by Dijkstra and Henseler (2015). Fornell-Larcker Cross-loadings can also be used to test the validity of a test using the test of discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2014). The calculated values are less than 0.9, as shown in Table 3, and the discriminant validity was approved. The outcomes demonstrated the validity and dependability of the measuring scales.

4.3. Hypothesis testing

In order to assess the causal impact of the conceptual framework utilized in this research, a partial least squares analysis was conducted. The primary objective of this analysis was to evaluate the correlation between various subjective well-being indicators, such as community welfare, homeplace security, job satisfaction, national well-being, religious matters, spirituality, insecurity, education, and happiness. To achieve this, the bootstrapping technique was employed through the SmartPLS application. The model was constructed using the nine aforementioned variables and their respective interconnections. The diagram in Fig. 2 displays the measurement model, which utilizes reflective constructs.

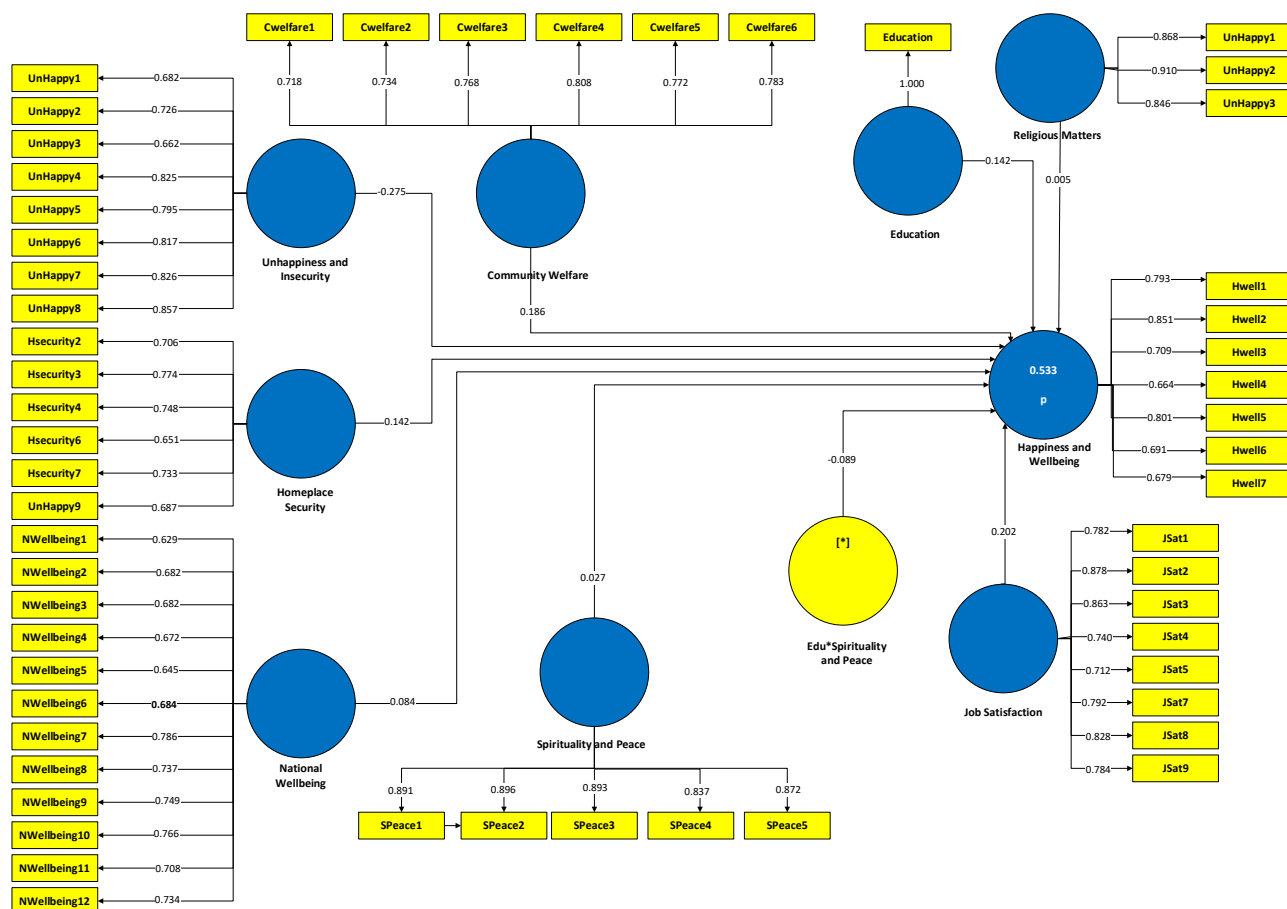


Fig. 2: Path values

The conceptual framework used in this study was evaluated using partial least squares analysis to determine its causal impact. The analysis aimed to assess the relationship between subjective well-being indicators and happiness indicators using the SmartPLS application. The model consisted of nine variables, namely community welfare, homeplace security, job satisfaction, national well-being, religious matters, spirituality, insecurity, and education, which were connected through nine paths. The measurement model for the reflective constructs is illustrated in Fig. 2.

The results of the analysis showed that the subjective well-being components accounted for

53.3% of the variation in the happiness and well-being of Malaysians, as indicated by the model's R² value of 0.533. Hypotheses were tested using the t-statistical test, with the bootstrap resampling method employed to evaluate statistical precision. Each path represented a hypothesis in the structural model connecting two latent variables. The model demonstrated the proposed connections between the standardized path coefficients for the latent constructs and their corresponding constructs, as shown in Table 5.

The path coefficients revealed the magnitude of the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. The findings allowed the

researcher to either support or refute each hypothesis. Table 5 shows the path coefficients, t-statistics, and significance level for each proposed link. The analysis of the nine hypotheses, comprising

eight direct influence hypotheses (H1 to H8) and one moderating effect hypothesis (H9), predicted the relationship between subjective well-being factors and people's happiness.

Table 5: Path coefficients

	Beta coefficient	Standard deviation	T-statistics	P-value	Decision
Community welfare	0.1861	0.0410	4.5870	0.0000	Accepted
Education	0.1420	0.0290	4.8160	0.0000	Accepted
Homeplace security	0.1990	0.0370	5.3860	0.0000	Accepted
Job satisfaction	0.2020	0.0350	5.8380	0.0000	Accepted
National well-being	0.0840	0.0330	2.5060	0.0120	Accepted
Unhappiness and insecurity	-0.2750	0.0330	8.3620	0.0000	Accepted
Community welfare	0.1860	0.0410	4.5870	0.0000	Accepted
Religious matters	0.0050	0.0300	0.1760	0.8610	Not accepted
Spirituality and peace	0.0270	0.0460	0.5780	0.5630	Not accepted
Edu*spirituality and peace	-0.0890	0.0370	2.4330	0.0150	Accepted

Without moderator variable: R²: 0.524; R² adjusted: 0.518; With moderator variable: R²: 0.533; R² adjusted: 0.526; Dependent variable: Happiness and well-being

Hypotheses H1 through H9 were tested to determine the relationship between different subjective well-being indicators and happiness in Malaysians. Hypothesis H1 posits a positive correlation between community welfare and happiness and well-being. The results show that community welfare had a significant positive impact on happiness ($\beta=0.186$; $p=0.000$), supporting H1. Similarly, H2 suggests that homeplace security is positively correlated with well-being and happiness. The findings indicate that having security at home significantly improved happiness and well-being ($\beta=0.199$; $p=0.000$), supporting H2.

The study examined several hypotheses related to factors influencing happiness and well-being in Malaysians. Hypothesis H3 proposed a relationship between job satisfaction and happiness and well-being. The results indicated a significant positive impact ($\beta = 0.202$, $p = 0.000$), supporting H3. Hypothesis H4 suggested a positive correlation between national well-being parameters and happiness and well-being. This was also confirmed by the findings ($\beta = 0.084$, $p = 0.012$), supporting H4. Hypothesis H5 postulated that happiness and well-being are negatively correlated with sadness and insecurity. The data revealed that social uncertainty and stress significantly reduced happiness and well-being ($\beta = -0.275$, $p = 0.000$), supporting H5. Hypothesis H6 suggested that education positively influences happiness and well-being, which was supported by the findings ($\beta = 0.142$, $p = 0.000$).

In contrast, hypothesis H7 proposed that religious matters positively affect happiness and well-being, but the findings showed a negligible positive effect ($\beta = 0.005$, $p = 0.861$), rejecting H7. Similarly, hypothesis H8 suggested that spirituality and peace positively influence happiness and well-being. However, the results showed no significant direct impact ($\beta = 0.027$), failing to support H8.

Further analysis examined the moderating effects of education on the relationship between spirituality, calmness, and happiness and well-being. Hypothesis H9 proposed a negative moderating relationship in this context. The results demonstrated that education significantly moderated the relationship ($\beta = -0.089$, $p = 0.015$), with an effect size greater than 0.08, supporting H9. Overall, the findings

highlight the significant roles of community welfare, homeplace security, job satisfaction, national well-being, social uncertainty, stress, and education in shaping happiness and well-being in Malaysians, while suggesting limited influence from religious matters and spirituality.

4.4. Model fit

The adequacy of the model fit was assessed using the PLS-SEM methodology. A Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value less than 0.1 was considered a good fit. In this study, the SRMR value was found to be 0.063, indicating a good fit. The NFI score, which measures the goodness of fit of the model, was 0.707, slightly below the acceptable score of 0.8 (Table 6). However, since the majority of the tested indicators yielded satisfactory results, it can be concluded that the overall model fits the data well. To assess the fit of the outer model, the residuals, which are the differences between predicted and observed indicator values, were analyzed. The RMS theta value, which indicates the degree of model fit, should be less than 0.12 (Henseler et al., 2015). The RMS theta value for this model was found to be 0.108, indicating an excellent fit (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 6: Goodness of model fit

Model fit	Values
Standardized root mean square residual (SRMR)	0.063
Squared euclidean distanced (dULS)	6.352
Geodesic distance (d_G)	2.085
Chi-square	7085.640
Normed fit index (NFI)	0.707
RMS theta	0.108

5. Discussion

The study's primary findings suggest that happiness is significantly influenced by home and workplace security and job security. These results highlight the significance of security in people's lives and their overall happiness and satisfaction. In addition to investigating security, the study also examined respondents' perceptions of social insecurity, stress, and unhappiness. The results indicate that insecurity and stress have adverse effects on happiness and well-being, which implies

that people are concerned about their safety and security in society due to the absence of adequate security measures and a chaotic law and order situation. Respondents report feeling unsafe while traveling alone at night. Furthermore, respondents' opinions of community service facilities and community well-being are crucial indicators of Malaysia's social and economic growth.

The respondents in this study expressed dissatisfaction with their compensation and the recognition of their efforts in terms of job satisfaction. Consistent with previous research, the study found that essential government services such as security and justice significantly contribute to happiness and life satisfaction in Malaysia (Kamarudin et al., 2020). In Colombia, a study demonstrated a negative correlation between the perception of insecurity and levels of social well-being (Wills-Herrera et al., 2012). According to Ariffin et al. (2021), ensuring the welfare of individuals and society in Malaysia necessitates consideration of safety and social stability. Dali et al. (2017) argued that the well-being of city dwellers in Malaysia is influenced by various factors, including domestic security and stability, socio-cultural and religious conditions, effective public governance, environmental sustainability, and friendliness. Well-functioning communities are critical to community welfare and well-being, and insecurity and lack of safety have an adverse impact on social well-being (Koen et al., 2017). Public safety, education, transportation, health, housing, environment, social involvement, culture, and entertainment, as well as population size, all affect subjective well-being in urban environments (Dinsuhaimi et al., 2022).

The government's primary goal is to enhance the welfare of society and the community by monitoring changes in social well-being and measuring economic development in the economy. Decision-makers and the government rely on specific indicators to evaluate the community's welfare. The study findings reveal that various social capital factors have a significant positive relationship with happiness and well-being. These results are consistent with previous research conducted in rural China, which reported that social capital, particularly trust, had a significant and positive impact on psychological health and subjective well-being. Similarly, cooperative social capital and empowerment positively influence community welfare in Indonesia (Yuliarmi et al., 2020). The indicators of social capital are essential for evaluating a community's sustainability (Zou et al., 2018). Moreover, social networks, social trust, and social norms have positive effects on personal happiness among employees in Korea (Jung, 2020). In Malaysia, the social capital theory supports the relational and cognitive elements as determinants of the effectiveness of community development initiatives (Zainoddin et al., 2020). Furthermore, people participate in social events, provide support to struggling family members, and offer social support through their friends and family, which has

a significant impact on their perception of social aspects. Participation in community support activities and community support during times of crisis are critical factors that contribute to personal happiness and well-being.

Developing the economy with a focus on national well-being is a crucial objective. While Malaysia has made significant strides in reducing poverty, progress in improving living conditions has been relatively slow. According to a majority of respondents, access to adequate housing, clean water, and sanitation facilities is acceptable. However, the rising cost of necessities remains a primary concern. Respondents find the current price levels unbearable. Political instability, a lack of interethnic harmony, environmental pollution, and a deficient educational system are major issues highlighted by the survey participants. The opinions of the respondents are divided on the government's ability to safeguard national security and sovereignty against external threats while ensuring social equity and justice.

The study's findings indicate that religion plays a significant role in predicting happiness and life satisfaction. Individuals who follow religious beliefs tend to engage in regular prayer, frequent attendance at places of worship, participation in religious events and discussions, and assisting those in need. The majority of respondents believe that spiritual values are essential for promoting societal harmony and well-being. People recognize that their religious convictions are the most critical factor for ensuring a secure life. In Malaysia, a diverse nation with multiple ethnicities, religion remains central to people's lives, irrespective of their cultural or ethnic background.

Recent research indicates that religion plays a crucial role in measuring the social health of society as a whole (Ariffin et al., 2021). Previous studies have demonstrated that religious practices, such as prayer and observance, significantly contribute to life satisfaction (Headey and Muffels, 2018) and serve as a powerful tool to reduce stress. The current study also found that spirituality moderates the negative correlation between education and happiness.

Thus, individuals who are relatively less educated and economically disadvantaged are more likely to engage in religious practices than their more educated and well-off counterparts. Malaysia is a diverse country with three major ethnic groups, Muslims, Chinese, and Hindus, coexisting peacefully. However, the study respondents noted a decline in social harmony among these groups over time. Similar findings by Diener (2021) suggested that societies with harsh living conditions, such as high levels of hunger and low life expectancy, tend to be more religious, with a stronger correlation between religion and well-being than societies with easier living conditions. It is imperative for national development policies and implementation to consider these factors carefully.

6. Conclusion

GDP has been criticized as an inadequate measure of social and economic development. To understand the well-being of their citizens, many countries have developed alternative indices. For Malaysia, a multi-ethnic nation, evaluating well-being is essential to assess whether development efforts benefit the broader population. This study aims to explore how Malaysians perceive various social, cultural, spiritual, and governmental factors that influence their happiness and well-being.

Using statistical analysis, the study identifies key factors contributing to societal happiness. The findings reveal that job satisfaction, home security, national well-being, and community welfare significantly enhance happiness among Malaysians. While spiritual and religious factors have a moderate impact, their role remains relevant for societal peace and happiness. The research highlights the importance of social indicators in well-being and suggests incorporating aspects of social capital into government development plans.

Stakeholders expressed positive views about social factors, emphasizing collaboration and trust within communities as vital for happiness and well-being. Respondents reported satisfaction with public services provided by the government, such as water supply and healthcare. However, concerns were raised about community security, inconsistent law enforcement, and economic inequality.

The study concludes that social security and job satisfaction are critical for improving quality of life and happiness. It recommends prioritizing improvements in law and order and ensuring fair employment opportunities as key strategies for Malaysia's development. While spiritual values and religious practices show a positive but limited relationship with happiness, their importance varies across Malaysia's diverse cultural and educational landscape. Future development policies should carefully consider these spiritual and cultural factors to address the unique needs of the country's multi-ethnic and multicultural society.

7. Implications of the study

The findings of this study have important implications for policy-making related to the measurement of social well-being and happiness. Current evaluations of happiness in Malaysia highlight that personal satisfaction, spirituality, and social and emotional perceptions are key factors. Therefore, efforts to enhance emotional well-being and happiness should adopt a comprehensive approach that includes improving living standards, increasing access to religious education, and addressing socio-economic inequalities in society.

It is clear that promoting happiness goes beyond improving material conditions. A holistic approach is necessary, considering people's emotional, social, and spiritual needs. For example, policies that focus on providing religious education and spiritual

support could contribute to greater happiness and emotional well-being. Additionally, reducing socio-economic inequalities is vital for fostering a content and satisfied society. Actions such as improving access to education, healthcare, and essential services can help alleviate poverty and enhance overall well-being.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach to enhancing social well-being and happiness. Addressing not only material needs but also emotional, social, and spiritual aspects is essential for creating a happy and thriving society.

8. Limitations of the study

This study successfully enhanced individuals' levels of happiness, but it had certain limitations. First, only residents from the major areas of Peninsular Malaysia were invited to complete the questionnaire. Therefore, to generalize the findings, future research should include respondents from East Malaysia, particularly the states of Sabah and Sarawak. Second, the study faced a limitation in assessing emotional well-being, as it did not incorporate mental health theories. Using mental health theories and other frameworks of well-being in future studies could provide deeper and more comprehensive insights.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured. Data were used solely for research purposes.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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