

## THE EFFECT OF HAPPINESS AND RELIGIOUS FAITH ON CHRISTIAN YOUTH'S RESILIENCY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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### Abstract

Youths with happy emotions and strong religious faith, it can be assumed, experience increased resiliency when dealing with unexpected and challenging events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. To examine this assumption, a study involving 229 Christian youths, all students at public and private universities in Sabah, Malaysia, was conducted. Participants had a mean age of 22.09 years (SD = 4.34) and were predominantly female (179; male = 49; undisclosed = 1). The study found that happiness contributed 4.7% of the variance of the participant's resiliency, while their religious faith contributed 4.1%. Furthermore, the Christian faith showed a moderation effect on the effect of happiness on resiliency. To wit, youths with high levels of happiness and strong Christian faith demonstrated high resiliency, and this finding supports the abovementioned research assumption. Therefore, it is suggested that when facing life challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, young adults ought to create a positive ambience, e.g., promoting happiness, enhancing religious faith via daily prayer, perceiving faith as a source of comfort and life's purpose, and engaging in faith-based/church activities as a way to strengthen resiliency.

**Keywords:** *Happiness, religious faith, resilience, youths, COVID-19 pandemic.*

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### 1. Introduction

Youths in this post-modern era, in contrast to previous generations, generally live immersed in a technologically sophisticated milieu. With ever-advancing computer software and 'smart' devices, such technological tools might assist the youth of today in adapting and coping with various challenges, including academic, social, and economic. In the academic setting, nowadays youth can readily access a wealth of online educational and scholarly resources while undertaking academic assignments. Moreover, students can – as has been particularly the case during the COVID-19 pandemic – arrange online study or discussion groups and operate online programs on electronic learning platforms. Therefore, it may be assumed that with the aid of modern technology, youths can easily adapt to the 'new normal' of online distance learning, and other social norms associated with the pandemic. Past studies (e.g., Cosmas, 2020; OECD, 2020; Selvanathan et al., 2020), however, have found that many youths are struggling to deal with academic and life challenges faced as a direct or indirect consequence of the pandemic. Although equipped with modern devices to access the internet, many youths showed concerns and worries regarding their academic challenges irrespective of their educational level. First-year students, for instance, reported lower psychological well-being and motivation in their studies amid the pandemic as revealed in Ah Gang's (2022) study. Previous research (e.g., Quirk & Quirk, 2020; Schnieders & Moore, 2021) have also shown the academic challenges experienced by first-year university students. Many factors contribute to their lack of psychological well-being and motivation. These include the feeling of isolation from campus life and the inaccessibility of in-person interactions with fellow students and instructors. Learning from home, as experienced by most first-year students during the pandemic, may lead to the accumulation of elevated stress levels and other difficulties. Although most young adults are continuing with their post-secondary education, such challenges and concerns have been linked with increased uncertainty of their ongoing education, e.g., re-enrolment, thus potentially becoming a barrier to course persistence and completion (Schieder & Moore, 2021). These factors are likely impacting first-year students' psychological well-being and motivation in learning, and in turn, contributing to certain decisions to suspend study.

Final-year students similarly face their share of worries and concerns, not least regarding missing out on opportunities for professional placement to consolidate learnt skills and build confidence, as well as potentially improving job prospects after graduation. For instance, Choi et al. (2020) have indicated that a majority (59.3%) of final-year medical students in the UK felt less prepared to commence Foundation Year training owing to a lack of clinical practicum consequent to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ensuring that students are better able to recover and ‘bounce back’ from academic and life difficulties experienced during the pandemic may require boosting their inner strengths. This can derive from various sources that help improve one’s sense of happiness or positivity and thereby increase resilience. To better understand this phenomenon, a study – presented in this paper – was conducted to examine the effects of happiness and religious faith on resilience among Christian students. These two elements are highlighted because, during the pandemic, students likely experience more negative emotions than positive ones. Moreover, many youths today, if they hold a religious faith, may not perceive it as a source of resiliency, particularly when facing unexpected circumstances such as the pandemic. Indeed, secularization theory suggests that with the advancement of knowledge in modern societies, the importance of religion will continue to weaken, resulting in increasingly secular societies (Gjelten, 2017). This is already observable in modernistic, as opposed to merely modern, societies where the role of religion is increasingly questioned. Additionally, although modern technology is good and its progress encouraged, there seems to be an obsession with technology, particularly among today’s youth. As a consequence, there is a discernible detachment from concrete familial and community interaction in preference to virtual contact.

Among youths, particularly those deemed vulnerable, the COVID-19 pandemic has fomented a crisis that poses considerable risks in terms of education, employment, mental health, and disposable income. Young people born between 1990 and 2005 have already lived through two major international upheavals within their first 15-30 years, namely the 2008/09 Global Financial Crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Undoubtedly, many young adults have been disproportionately impacted by these unprecedented events, either directly (say, as students or job seekers with dwindling opportunities) or indirectly (through the repercussions of these crises upon families and the wider community). Therefore, building resilience and the anti-fragility of public institutions should be pursued in tandem with the empowerment of young people (OECD, 2020). Despite experiencing various unexpected and testing events, some youths are able to regain resiliency by understanding their inner strengths. Previous studies (e.g., Cosmas, 2020; Ah Gang et al., 2021) have shown that the promotion of happy emotions and the strengthening of religious faith can be of help in youths to become more resilient when facing challenges posed by today’s world. Indeed, certain students have started adopting new methods for practising their faith in the wake of COVID-19, including attending reduced-capacity services, convening for religious discussions over Zoom, and seeking support from Harvard chaplains (Koller & Peterman, 2021). Such strategies can lessen the pandemic’s impact on academic performance and increase student resiliency.

Yet, it must be asked, *what is resilience?* Resilience has been addressed in terms of a psychological, social, emotional, and physical capacity or competence (Titus, 2011). Although resilience comes from within the person, sometimes it can be fortified via tangible and intangible supports from outside. However, although well-intentioned, external assistance from family, one’s university, and other relevant authorities may not always be adequate for coping with academic and life challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. As Mahmud (2021) suggests, in addition to social support (an external factor), a person’s resilience (an internal factor) ought to be strengthened as this will affect how the individual fares when experiencing difficulties and hardships. For example, university students have realized that modern technology cannot fully help them to overcome the several challenges emerging from the pandemic (Cosmas, 2020). Consequently, many youths find themselves limited in how to build their resilience as they navigate academic and social challenges in the era of COVID-19.

During the ongoing pandemic, many young adults have realized the importance of identifying and rebuilding their inner strengths which, in turn, can facilitate their adaptation to new challenges. According to Ream (n.d.), researchers and policymakers generally underestimate the prevalence of religiosity among American youth, the significance of religion in their lives, and their self-agency in religio-spiritual development. Furthermore, it is known that religion can benefit health, including mental health. For instance, Koenig (2012) in a comprehensive systematic review, among other things, showed a positive correlation between religion and increased happiness and hope, in addition to better coping with adversities and finding meaning. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that religion may enhance and be a source of resilience by providing an adaptive alternative to maladaptive actions. By participating in community-based religious activities, youths can acquire a sense of belonging and develop positive relationships with peers and adults, not to mention form a connection with God, or higher powers, thereby providing a sense of meaning and purpose in life (Ream, n.d.). This is no different to previous generations. For example, among the ‘baby boomer’ generation, Roof (1999) found that they sought religious involvement that helped address the complexities faced in their inner lives, which, in turn, facilitated finding personal meaning in life. Indeed, religious believers claim greater social self-esteem and psychological adjustment than non-religious individuals (Gebauer et al., 2012). Growing up in today’s world can be complicated. Parents often worry about how their children will navigate the social, behavioural, and developmental challenges of life, especially during adolescence (Vanderweele, 2018). These challenges only intensify when entering another developmental stage, e.g., young adulthood, and all the more when facing globally unsettling events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Study design

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in limited opportunities for researchers to conduct face-to-face studies. Hence, it was deemed that online methods were the safest and most practical means to collect data from university students. Potential participants were invited to join this study via a Google Form survey link circulated on various online platforms (e.g., WhatsApp and email). This strategy may have helped broaden the dissemination of the survey invitation leading to a wider array of students being approached from both public and private universities. Participants were recruited based on purposive and snowball sampling. As suggested by Crossman (2020), purposive sampling was employed to match population-specific characteristics required to meet the study's objective. Snowballing sampling was later used by encouraging students who already participated in the study to invite fellow students who likewise fulfilled the required characteristics by sharing the survey link. All participants were university students and Christians from a range of denominations, including Catholic, Methodist, the Evangelical Church of Sabah (SIB), the Protestant Church of Sabah (PCS), Basel Church of Sabah, among others.

### 2.2. Objectives

Based on previous research and recent events, this study was conducted with the aim of examining the effects of happiness and religious faith on the resiliency of Christian youths. In addition, the study also examined the moderation effect of religious faith on the relationship between happiness and resiliency among Christian youths. This study focused on Christian youths because it seeks to provide further insight into how the Christian faith can lift the resiliency of Christian youths, particularly in Sabah, Malaysia, during the pandemic. Although Christianity is the third most practised religion in Malaysia, it is the second in Sabah state. According to the Institute of Ethnic Studies (2018), 26.6% of Sabah's population are Christians and are majority from Bahasa speaking native indigenous community.

### 2.3. Research instrument

A questionnaire consisting of a demographic profile section and three measurement scales (i.e., happiness, religious faith, and resiliency) was used for the data collection. The **Demographic Profile** was employed to gather data about the participants' gender, religion, as well as their university, academic year/level, and campus residency. The **Brief Resilient Coping Scale** (Sinclair & Wallston, 2004) was used to measure the students' resiliency coping skills, with their responses ranging from 1- 'does not describe me at all' to 5- 'does describe me very well.' The two sample items for this scale were 'I look for creative ways to alter difficult situations,' and 'I actively look for ways to replace the losses I encounter in life.' A higher score was defined as a higher resiliency. The **Subjective Happiness Scale** (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) was used to measure students' happiness during the Movement Control Order, i.e. 'coronavirus lockdown', that lasted from 18 March to 28 April 2020. The two sample items were 'In general I consider myself ...' and 'Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself...'. The response scale ranged from 1- 'not a very happy person' to 7- 'a very happy person.' A higher score indicated greater happiness. The **Religious Faith Scale** (Plante & Boccaccini, 2007) was used to measure participants' religious faith by asking them to rate their level of agreement with three items based on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree'). The three items were 'praying daily,' 'I look to my faith as the source of inspiration,' and 'I look to my faith as a source of comfort.'

## 3. Results

A total of 229 Christian youths from various denominations participated in the study. A majority of participants were females, 179 (78.20%), with 49 (21.40%) males, and one did not disclose their gender. Participants' mean age was 22.09 years (SD = 4.34). The study found that happiness contributed 4.7% to the variance of resilience among the Christian youth participants, while their religious faith contributed 4.1%. In addition, the Christian faith showed a moderation effect on the effect of happiness on resiliency, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Hierarchical Regression Analyses of the Moderation Effects of Religious Faith on the Relationships Between Happiness and Christian Youths' Resiliency.

Variables	B	R square	R square change	Sig.
Step 1		.047	.047	.00
Happiness	.216			
Religious faith	.213	.088	.041	.00
Happiness x religious faith	1.33	.137	.049	.00

#### 4. Future research directions

Suggested further research should examine distinct Christian denominations individually (e.g., Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, etc.). In this current study, Christianity was taken collectively, without differentiating between denominations. This is because the study sought to understand broadly how Christian youths apply their religious faith in coping with academic and life challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, owing to each denomination's distinct approach to religious teachings, practices, and community activities, it is reasonable that each would have a different level of impact upon resilience among youths. It is not unusual for Catholic youth, for instance, to partake in retreats and specific events focused on young people, including World Youth Day. Such activities may help how youth face challenges and changes in life. As has been remarked: "When a strong wind blows people can do one of two things: build windbreaks or set up windmills." (Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn, n.d.) That is, one can avoid change or make the most of it, utilising and building up resilience.

#### 5. Discussion

This study found that both elements – happiness and religious faith – can increase resilience among Christian youth. The findings indicate that the inner strength of Christian youths can benefit from positive feelings and faith, as demonstrated by increased resilience when facing academic and life stress amidst the COVID19 pandemic. Nelson-Becker and Thomas (2020) define resilience as the ability to access one's inner wisdom and strength enhanced by time and experience. People are resilient because often there are few other choices, besides despairing and to isolate. One's tenacity in claiming a personal sense of spirituality and finding meaning in adversity is a testament to such resilience, as per the experience of Christian youths during the pandemic. According to Edara et al. (2021), when facing uncertainty due to unexpected events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, people increasingly tend to put their trust and hope in God or the Divine. In the wake of devastating experiences, certain people feel a need to trust in God and have hope that the testing times will pass. Indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many people seem to be relying on the power of the Divine for intercession and intervention. Belief in the existence of God or the Divine signifies pleasant valence leading to resiliency and promoting overall wellness (Edara et al., 2021). Vanderweele and Ying Chen (2018) highlight how a religious upbringing can profoundly help adolescents navigate life challenges as well as contribute to a wide range of health and well-being outcomes later in life. Their study involved a large sample of over 5,000 adolescents, with over eight years of follow up, and controlled for many variables to try to isolate the effect of religious upbringing. Vanderweele and Ying Chen found that those raised in a religious or spiritual environment were subsequently better protected from various challenges during adolescence, thereby leading to a happier life, and were more likely to engage in voluntary work, have a greater sense of mission and purpose, and higher levels of forgiveness. Religious observance, prayer, and meditation can be vital resources for adolescents navigating the challenges of a busy modern life. A strong commitment, however, is often required to establish such practices. The psychological and social impact students are facing during the pandemic can produce dysfunction in daily activities and, if prolonged, will undoubtedly increase their anxiety and fears. Therefore, one way to overcome these negative effects is by strengthening resilience through happiness and religious faith. All these may help students manage their stress and anxiety, aid in resolving the complexities encounter during a crisis, and shield them from traumatic situations (Mahmud, 2021).

#### 6. Conclusion

This study of young Christian university students supports the original assumption that resilience can be enhanced through increasing happiness and faith. Both of these elements – happiness and faith – can be found through practising Christianity and their combination can synergistically boost resiliency among youth facing academic and life challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### *Acknowledgements*

We wish to extend my special thanks to all participants who joined in this study.

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