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Life Effectiveness and Attitude Towards The Psy4life Programme

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Abstract

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This study examines differences across gender in eight components of life effectiveness in pre- and post-studies. This study also measures differences in rural youths' attitudes toward positive youth development (Psy4life) programme across three demographic factors (gender, educational level, and past involvement in youth programmes). We predicted that there would be differences between male and female in life effectiveness and its components and that there would be differences in youths' attitudes toward Psy4life programme according to the three demographic factors. Twenty rural youths participated in Psy4Life programme (9 male, 45%; 11 female, 55%; mean age: 15.3, SD=1.81). In the post-study, Mann-Whitney U Test results showed significant differences between males and females in life effectiveness and three of its components (achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, and leadership). In the pre-study, only intellectual flexibility was associated with significant gender differences. There were no significant differences in attitudes toward Psy4life programme across gender, education level, and past involvement in youth programmes. We assumed that female participants might be more motivated, open to new ideas, and capable of leading a group than male youth. Attitudes towards youth programmes might differ based on other factors, such as extrinsic and intrinsic motives, which need to be examined in the future.

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Keywords: Attitude; Psy4Life Programme; achievement motivation; intellectual flexibility; leadership; life effectiveness.

1. Introduction

In the modern world, youth are exposed to a variety of social problems, such as violence, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and school dropout. This situation demands implementation of systematic, positive youth development programmes to prevent risk behaviors, tackle social problems, and promote positive development among youth. Young people have their own individual strengths which may help them reach optimum development, and Psy4life programme are designed to engage them in



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constructive, productive ways to enhance their strengths. Positive youth development refers to the building of the personal skills or assets, including cognitive, social, emotional, and intellectual qualities, necessary for youth to successfully function as members of society (Weiss & Wiese-Bjorns, 2009). Access to programmes and activities that support positive development, helps guide young people towards successful lives as contributing members of society (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006).

Youths are considered important human capital which plays a major role in enabling and enhancing national growth (Economic Planning Unit, 2010). Accordingly, under the Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011–2015, many youth programmes have been implemented to equip youths with specific leadership and entrepreneurial skills or to promote social unity and integration. In all, 2,400 programmes involving more than half a million multi-ethnic participants were conducted, focusing on instilling leadership, patriotism, and volunteerism (Economic Planning Unit, 2010). Therefore, there is a need to design and implement programmes that focus specifically on positive youth development, including life effectiveness and its components (time management, achievement motivation, emotional control, intellectual flexibility, self-confidence, leadership, social competence, and active initiative) and to develop positive attitudes towards youth programmes. Increased positive youth development could improve life satisfaction (Mohamad, Mohamad & Mat Ali, 2014).

Considering the growing number of youth affected by social problems, there is a need for government and non-governmental agencies to design and implement various programmes to promote positive development for youth, increase their well-being and life effectiveness, and prepare them to face challenges in the modern world. Although many youth programmes are conducted by government and non government organization in many counties across the globe , however not all young people are interested in participating in these programmes. This lack of interest in youth programmes could be possibly due to various demographic factors, such education level, gender, and previous involvement in youth programmes. Regarding gender, past studies (e.g., Homan, Dick & Hedrick, 2007; Shekhar & Devi, 2012) found that girls perceived youth programmes more positively than boys. Possible explanations of this difference are that girls are generally more perceptive of their environment (Patel & Buiting, 2013) and that women are more likely to be affected by context (Croson & Gneezy, 2009; Miller & Ubeda, 2012). In addition, many researchers have discussed gender differences pertaining to participation in youth development programmes and its effect on youth (e.g., Bartoszuk & Randall, 2011; Patel & Buiting, 2013). Compared to male participants, females tend to exhibit better life satisfaction and fewer behavior problems. Malaysian female youths have expressed higher satisfaction with life than male youths (Mohamad, Mohamad, & Mat Ali, 2014). This issue, however, need to be explored further to understand the reasons why female participants gain more positive effects from involvement in positive development youth programmes than males.

In addition to gender, education level might affect attitudes toward youth programmes. For instance, high-school students may show high interest in participating in youth programmes because they have the intrinsic motivation to develop skills and strengths in preparation to enter college or the workforce (Hansen & Larson, 2007). Finally, youths frequently involved in youth programmes and activities might hold more positive attitudes towards them. For example, in past studies, youth

participants gave positive feedback about programmes (Gobeli, 1995; Strawczynski, Baumgold, & Dolev, 1999). Participation in these programmes may help youths increase their life effectiveness, including their self-confidence, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, and leadership skills. These components may help youths adapt to and deal with challenging social environments and prepare them to succeed in life and work.

The effectiveness of involvement in youth development programmes have been demonstrated by many researches. However it is also suggested that many demographic factors such as age, gender, culture and prior positive or negative experiences with youth development programme can play role in determining whether a programme will be effective or not. Therefore, the program Psy4life was designed specifically for Malaysian rural youth. It was assumed that programme can address the needs of young people growing up in these peripheries. The programme was based on the three dimensions of positive youth development suggested by Neil (2008) and Ryff (1989). All the 13 activities in this programme was designed based on the Yale attitude change model (Hovland, Janis & Kelly, 1953). The activities in programme focused on enhancing youth life effectiveness skills and psychological well-being. Furthermore, it was assumed in the present study that effect of demographic factors affecting programme implementation and efficacy need to be explored to accommodate it with needs of youth across age, gender and prior experience with any youth development programme.

2. Problem Statement

Past studies found demographic differences in attitudes toward youth programmes (e.g., Bartoszuk, & Randall, 2011) and positive self-concepts (e.g., Mohamad et al., 2014; Shekari & Devi, 2012). Regarding gender, girls perceived youth programmes more positively than boys (e.g., Bartoszuk, & Randall, 2011; Homan et al., 2007). However, other past studies have not found any gender differences (e.g., Jones, 2009). Regarding education level, Hansen and Larson (2007) showed that high school students indicated that they gained intrinsic motivation and experienced positive development from youth programmes, in part because the experience they acquired could be used as a preparation to enter higher education or the workforce.

Rayfield, Compton, Doerfet, and Akers (2008) found that access to on-campus activities is one factor that affects students' level of involvement in youth organizations. Participation gives young people opportunities to assume significant roles in a safe, supportive environment where they can experiment with roles, tasks, and responsibilities (Gobeli, 1995). Strawczynski, Baumgold, and Dolev (1999) found that most participants in youth programmes expressed positive feedback, such as feeling higher confidence and self-esteem, developing their personalities, and acquiring life experience. Participants in leadership programmes exhibited more positive attitudes toward military service and emphasized the importance of helping others.

To understand these findings, an empirical study examining gender differences in the eight components of life effectiveness needs to be conducted. In addition, rural youths' attitudes toward Psy4life programme and any differences by three demographic factors (gender, educational level, and past involvement in youth programmes) need to be investigated.

3. Research Questions

Are there significant differences between male and female participants in life effectiveness and its eight components in the pre- and post-studies (before and after participants were involved in Psy4life programme)? In addition, are there any differences by demographic factors (gender, education level, past involvement in youth programmes) in attitudes toward Psy4life programme?

4. Purpose of the Study

The objective of this study is to examine differences between male and female youths' life effectiveness and its eight components in pre- and post-studies. Differences in attitudes toward the three-day programme based on three demographic factors (male vs. female, lower secondary school vs. higher secondary school education, involved vs. never involved in youth programmes) are also investigated.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Research Participants

Twenty rural youths from the remote Sulit village, Paitan, and socio-economically and educationally challenged backgrounds participated in this study. Participants gave responses following instructions provided in the pre-study questionnaire, which consisted of two sections (demographic profile, life effectiveness scale). For the post-study, a questionnaire with three sections (demographic profile, life effectiveness scale, attitude towards the Psy4life programme scale) was given to participants after they completed three-day Psy4life programme.

5.2. Instruments

The questionnaire survey had three sections.

Section A: Demographic information (age, location, sex)

The demographic profile had 18 items which measure age, gender, ethnicity, education level, and involvement in youth programmes.

Section B: Life effectiveness Questionnaire (LEQ)

The life effectiveness Questionnaire (Neil, 2008) consists of 24 items measuring the eight components of life effectiveness (time management, social competency, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, leadership, emotional control, active initiative, and self-confidence). Each component was assessed with three items on a scale of 1 (false, not like me) to 8 (true, like me). Higher overall scores indicated positive elements of soft skills. The items representing soft skills were time management ("I plan and use my time efficiently"), social competence ("I am competent in social situations"), achievement motivation ("I try to get the best results when I do things"), intellectual flexibility ("I am open to new ideas"), leadership ("I am a good leader when a task needs to be done"),

emotional control (“I can stay calm in stressful situations”), and self-confidence (“When I apply myself to something, I am confident I will succeed”).

Section E: Attitudes toward Psy4Life Programme

This scale consisted of 15 items reflecting the three components of attitude (i.e., cognition, emotion and behavior). The response scale provided ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly Agree). There were seven negative items (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 13, 14). The items measuring cognitive were items no. 5–8, 12, and 10; affective items no. 1–3, 14 and behavior items no. 4, 9, 11, 13, 15.

5.3. Data Analysis

The data were analysed by using IBM SPSS Statistics 20.0. (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) and descriptive and inference analyses. The hypotheses were analysed using a Mann-Whitney U Test to examine the differences between male and female participants in life effectiveness and its eight components in the pre and post-studies. Mann-Whitney U test was also used to examine the differences in attitude towards the Psy4Life Programme according to gender, education level and past involvement in youth programmes.

6. Findings

6.1 Reliability of the Scales and Subscales

The results show that the effectiveness scale had a reliability of 0.95 for the pre-study and 0.92 for the post-study. All subscales in the pre- and post-studies had acceptable reliability. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.63 to 0.86, excluding the emotional control subscale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.31) and active initiative subscale (Cronbach's alpha = .38) which showed low reliability in the post-study. In the final analysis, these two subscales were excluded, and only six subscales were included (time management, social competency, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, leadership, and self-confidence) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Reliability of Life Effectiveness and Attitudes toward Psy4Life Programme Scales and Subscales

Scale and subscales	N items	Pre-study	Post-study
Life effectiveness	24	0.95	0.92
Time management	1, 9, 17	0.80	0.78
Social competency	2, 10, 18	0.68	0.62
Achievement motivation	3, 11, 19	0.81	0.83
Intellectual flexibility	4, 12, 20	0.86	0.74
Leadership	5, 13, 21	0.63	0.82
Emotional control	6, 14, 22	0.56	0.31
Active initiative	7, 15, 23	0.68	0.38
Self-confidence	8, 16, 24	0.86	0.76
Attitudes towards Psy4Life programme	14		0.90
Affective	1, 2, 3, 4, 5		0.61
Cognitive	6, 7, 8, 9, 10		0.85
Psychomotor	11, 12, 13, 14		0.79

The attitude toward the Psy4Life scale and each subscale measuring the three components of attitude (affective, cognitive, and psychomotor) also had acceptable Cronbach's alpha coefficients, ranging from 0.61 to 0.86. Twenty participants completed the pre- and post-studies: 9 male (45%), 11 female (55%), mean age of 15.3 (SD=1.81).

6.2 Demographic Profile

Table 2 shows participants' demographic profile. All participants had completed the three-day Psy4life programme and were asked whether they had participated in any other organized programmes, clubs, or activities. Eleven participants had been involved in youth programmes, such as Islamic and spiritual youth camps, sports programmes, and a National Training Youth Programme. As well, most participants were Christian and of Dusun Sungai ethnicity.

Table 2. Demographic Profile

Variables	N	Percentage
Number of siblings	1-9	70
	10-15	30
Location		
Sulit village, Paitan	18	90
Pinggan-Pinggan village, Pitas	2	10
Religion		
Christian	15	75
Muslim	5	25
Ethnicity		
Dusun Sungai	18	90
Melayu Brunei	1	5
Others	1	5
Household income		
Below RM1000	16	80
RM1001-1500	3	15
Higher than RM3001	1	5
Father's occupation		
Private sector	1	5
Government worker	14	70
Not working	2	10
Not relevant (father deceased)	2	2
Missing	1	5
Past involvement in youth programmes		
Yes	11	55
No	9	45
Education level		
Form 1-3 (low secondary school)	11	55
Form 4-6 (high secondary school)	9	45
Programme types		
Islamic youth camp	1	5
National service training	1	5
Spiritual camp	2	10
Youth Programmes	1	5
Sports (e.g., volleyball, football)	6	30

In the post-study, Mann-Whitney U Test results presented in Table 3 show significant differences between male and female participants in three components of life effectiveness: achievement motivation ($z = -2.25$, $p < 0.05$), intellectual flexibility ($z = -2.79$, $p < 0.05$), and leadership ($z = -2.25$,

$p < 0.05$). However, in the pre-study, only one component showed significant gender differences (intellectual flexibility, $z = -2.05$, $p < 0.05$). In our study, female youths displayed better life effectiveness, particularly in their achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, and leadership, than male youths after participating in the Psy4life programme.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U Test Results for Components in the Life Effectiveness for Male and Female Participants in the Pre-study and Post-study

Variables	Group (<i>N</i>)	Pre-study			Post-study		
		Mean Rank	Z	Sig	Mean Rank	Z	Sig
Time management	Male (9)	8.39	-1.19	0.23	8.33	-1.50	0.15
	Female (11)	11.45			12.27		
Social competence	Male (9)	7.67	-1.95	0.05	9.44	-.73	0.47
	Female (11)	12.82			11.36		
Achievement motivation	Male (9)	8.06	-1.68	0.09	7.22	-2.25	0.03
	Female (11)	12.05			13.18		
Intellectual flexibility	Male (9)	6.94	-2.05	0.04	6.44	-2.79	0.00
	Female (11)	12.32			13.82		
Leadership	Male (9)	8.06	-1.68	0.09	7.22	-2.25	0.03
	Female (11)	12.50			13.36		
Self-confidence	Male (9)	7.72	-1.91	0.06	8.28	-1.55	0.12
	Female (11)	12.77			12.32		
Life effectiveness	Male (9)	7.19	-1.65	0.10	7.39	-2.13	0.03
	Female (11)	11.35			13.05		

Note: The number of male and female participants was similar in the pre-and post-studies.

Mann-Whitney U Test results showed no significant differences in male and female participants' attitude towards the Psy4life programme and its components. The Mann-Whitney U Test also found no differences in attitude toward the Psy4life programme according to education level or past involvement in youth programmes.

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U Test Results for Components of Attitude towards Psy4Life Programme Based on Gender, Education Level, and Involvement in Youth Programmes

Variable	Group	<i>N</i>	Mean Rank	Z	Sig
Attitude	Male	9	11.50	-.069	.049
	Female		9.60		
Psychomotor	Male	11	11.11	-.043	.067
	Female		10.00		
Affective	Male	9	10.89	-.027	.079
	Female		10.18		
Cognitive	Male	11	11.11	-.043	.067
	Female		10.00		
Education level	Form 1–3	11	10.91	-.034	.073
	Form 4–6	9	10.00		
Involvement in youth programmes	Male	9	10.83	-.023	.082
	Female	11	10.23		

7. Discussion

7.1 Life Effectiveness

In this study, female participants earned higher scores for three components of life effectiveness (achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, & leadership) in the post-study. These findings conflict with those of the pre-study when only intellectual flexibility exhibited significant differences between males and females. Our findings related to achievement motivation are in line with those of past studies demonstrating significant differences between male and female college students (Martin, 2004; Salili, 1996; Shekhar & Devi, 2012). Female students scored significantly higher than males in the area of achievement motivation, possibly because females tended to view themselves as achieving in academics and having a good attitude toward school. Male students might be more susceptible to underachievement and were less likely to perceive achievement in general as valued outcome (Shekhar & Devi, 2012). In this study, achievement motivation refers to participants' intention to do their best and get the best results if given a project.

Similar results concerning gender differences have also been found for intellectual flexibility (Patel & Buiting, 2013). In this study, intellectual flexibility refers to the willingness to be open towards new ideas and to change one's way of thinking and opinions if there is a better idea. Male participants might be less affected by new stimuli (the message in each activity) than females as, according to Patel and Buiting (2013), women react to their environment in a more emotional manner and are generally more perceptive to the environment. In addition, women are more likely to be affected by context (Croson & Gneezy, 2009; Miller & Ubeda, 2012).

In addition, we found that female participants had higher leadership scores than males. In this study, leadership refers to the ability to accomplish any task and motivate other people to work together. We believe that girls might have scored higher in leadership because they like to learn in a new environment which gives them opportunities to lead. Similarly, Hansen, Walker, and Flom (1995) claimed that girls are more likely to thrive in a learning environment that provides opportunities for leadership, exploration of new ideas, and active, intelligent engagement with concerned adults and other students. In addition, we believe that girls scored higher in leadership because they are more mature than males and more likely to have some responsibilities. During the three-day Psy4life programme, we observed that female participants were more proactive at giving volunteers feedback during each activity.

Lal's (2014) study of 200 senior secondary school students from urban and rural backgrounds in Chandigarh, India, found that female youth exhibited significantly higher emotional maturity and self-confidence than male students. Urban and rural youth displayed similar levels of emotional maturity, but rural youth were found to have higher self-confidence. However, Singh, Pant, and Valentina (2013), working with 277 adolescents in Pantnagar, India, found that no gender differences on the composite social maturity and emotional maturity scores but a significant difference in social adequacy: Female youths were observed to be more socially adequate than males. Singh et al. (2013) suggested that this difference might arise because girls were raised to be submissive, nurturing,

sensitive, and expressive and to act like more mature adults, whereas boys were expected to be active and aggressive.

7.2 Attitudes towards the Psy4Life Programme and Differences by Demographic Factor

Past studies (e.g., Bartoszuk, & Randall, 2011; Homan et al., 2007) demonstrated that girls perceived youth programmes more positively and reported receiving a higher level of encouragement to participate in these programmes than boys. Our study, however, did not reveal any significant differences toward Psy4Life programme across gender, education level, or past involvement in youth programmes.

We believe that other demographic factors, such as social motives (intrinsic and extrinsic motives), might affect attitudes toward youth programmes. Some youths, for instance, join youth programmes because they are attracted by the content of the activities (i.e., personal enjoyment). Other youths may want to be affiliated with friends (e.g., Patrick et al., 1999; Persson, Kerr, & Stattin, 2007), while incentives, such as stipends and school service requirements, might also be factors (Herrera & Arbreton, 2003; McLellan & Youniss, 2003). These phenomena should be examined rather than relying only on demographic factors for understanding.

In addition, some youths are less likely to be engaged in and, consequently, less likely to benefit from programme activities (Deschenes et al., 2010; Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005). Our study showed that past involvement in youth programmes did not make a significant difference in attitudes towards them. Participants' demographic profiles showed that 11 of 20 youths had joined and experienced youth programmes previously.

Regarding education level (lower secondary-school vs. higher secondary-school education), our study found no significant difference in participants' attitudes toward Psy4life programme, perhaps because all participants came from similar backgrounds and were raised in the same community. In addition, the content of Psy4life programme might meet the interests and needs of male and female participants because there is a lack of youth programmes in Sulit village, as mentioned by one participant at the end of the programme. In addition, most programmes in the village organized by a non-governmental organization focused on school-age children (Dorothy Laudi, kindergarten coordinator in Paitan, personal communication, August 14, 2014).

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, we believe that the gender differences we found in three life-effectiveness components (achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, & leadership) in the pre and post-studies confirm the effectiveness of the three-day Psy4life programme. However, other components of activities should be re-examined to determine how they can also benefit male youth. As stated by Jones (2009), youth service providers must strategically create opportunities that stimulate and maintain the interest of males. In the future, challenging, adventurous activities could be added to the programmes to attract and achieve positive outcomes for male participants. Regarding attitudes toward Psy4life programmes, our study found no significant differences across three demographic factors (gender, education level, involvement in youth programmes). This result contrasts with the findings of past that

girls perceived youth programmes more positively than boys studies (e.g., Bartoszuk, & Randall, 2011; Homan et al., 2007). We believe that attitudes towards programmes might be more affected by other factors, such as extrinsic motives (e.g., incentives, affiliating with friends) and intrinsic motives (e.g. personal enjoyment), than demographic factors. In addition, Dawes and Larson (2011) stated that, for youth to gain positive benefits from organized programmes, they need to not merely attend programmes but also be psychologically engaged in activities. All these factors need to be further explored in future research to be better understood.

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