

**Family Expressiveness and Relation to Birth Order among Chinese Young Adults  
in Universiti Malaysia Sabah: A Preliminary Analysis**

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*A small number of research has examined the links between the degree of family expressiveness and its relation to birth order. In this preliminary study, 45 Chinese young adults were examined and grouped into three different birth orders (15 first-born, 15 middle-born, and 15 later-born). The respondents completed the Family Expressiveness Questionnaire (FEQ) which contains 40-item that assesses the emotional expressiveness towards one's family of origin. The expressiveness subscale measures the extent to which family members openly and directly express their emotions. Results indicated that Chinese young adults in Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) have greater frequency and intensity of positive submissive. Furthermore, the family expressiveness among the first-borns and later-borns scored highest on the positive submissive, whereas the middle-borns scored highest on the positive dominant.*

**Keywords:** Family Expressiveness, Birth Order, Chinese Young Adult  
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## **Introduction**

One of the most important elements in a family environment is the expressiveness within the family. Family expressiveness can be distinguished in terms of quantity, affective valence and power. Additionally, in terms of positive and negative expressiveness, positive expressiveness may be dominant or submissive, a different entity depending on negative dominant or negative submissive. Family expressiveness is a quality of the family structure that is related to a child's personality characteristics, expression of emotions and social competence (Machado, Laishram, Bhalla, Bollamma, & Maiya, 2011).

Halberstadt (1991) has suggested that one influence on young adult emotions is the emotional expressiveness of one's family of origin. Some families tend to promote a great deal of emotional expression, while others discourage it. The differences have been linked to young adults' differentiated self-expression, attitudes surrounding emotional expression, and abilities in sending and interpreting emotional messages (Levenbach, 1997).

Social scientists agree that emotional expression customs differ greatly across cultures. They demonstrated that culture and family environment influence young adults' expressivity towards family and create differences among young adults of different countries (Munsey, 2006). Researchers have supported these theoretical claims, and empirical links have been found between family expressiveness and culture context. As there are culture differences on how frequently they express emotions, preliminary literatures have been linked to negative emotional expressiveness (negative dominance and negative submissive) and young adults' emotion dysregulation in European-American samples (Manzeske, & Stright, 2009). It was found that European-American girls were more negative expressive than Chinese-American and mainland Chinese girls (Chen, Zhou, Eisenberg, Valiente, & Wang, 2011). This may due to Chinese parents' strictness, including their attitude towards

the appropriateness of children's emotional expressiveness versus restraint, strongly predicted children's expressiveness, leading them to conclude that family life is a stronger influence than ethnicity on children's expressiveness. However, in United States samples compared to the Western cultures, Eastern cultures showed more positive emotion (positive dominance and positive submissive). The sample in the United States reported greater emphases on collectivism, hierarchy, and embeddedness. These values are believed to come from Eastern countries that tend to promote a general restraint, or control of emotions in the interest of maintaining group harmony and avoid the growth of negative emotion within a family context (Chen et al., 2011).

Besides, the birth order and expressivity towards their family might vary. In terms of expressiveness, studies found that first-born children need affection and approval (Murphy, 2012); while middle-born children tend to focus on the internal, emotional life in the family, are sensitive to what people say and how people feel as well as appearing distant and non-expressive emotionally (Murphy, 2012); Later-born children tend to be expressive and loving, respond to any family's pain because they just want everyone to get along and happy (Murphy, 2012).

However, some non-supportive researchers disagree with the research findings. They reported that first-born children tend to show more concern for others and do not need any approval from their parents; later-born children are spoiled in the family and always showing undesirable behaviour towards their family (Murphy, 2012).

Despite some empirical supports documenting the comparison between Western or China cultures and family expressiveness, little is known about young adults from Chinese families in UMS; whether positive or negative emotion is susceptible to family expressiveness. Furthermore, prior research has determined that family expressiveness influences personality characteristics. However, the shortcoming of the literature is that outcomes were studied by using birth order as predictors to examine the differences among first-born, middle-born and later-born children to express their emotions within the family context. In addition, the non-supportive argued that birth order is weakly related to emotion expressiveness and theories in past researches are inconsistent with each other.

### **Research Model**

A number of theoretical frameworks have been offered to account on family expressiveness, such as cognitive theory, ecology theory, evolutionary theory and birth order theory.

Family expressiveness schemata are "uniquely shared worldviews that provide individual family members with value and belief systems" (Burns & Pearson, 2011). As cognitive frameworks, they guide individuals' perceptions and understandings of relationships and emotions. There are also studies of how and why human beings develop expression towards their family over the course of their life.

Development occurs in context. Family expressiveness also can be defined by ecology theory. In this theoretical framework, expressiveness of family members is influenced by each other as well as the environment. Scores of cross-cultural research on emotions have focused on the universal and biological aspects of emotions. Emotional development, in particular, occurs largely in the context of the parent-child relationship, siblings' relationship, which in turn is embedded within the broader context of culture (Suveg, Raley, Morelen, Wang, Han, & Campion, 2013). Undoubtedly, cultural norms influence emotional development directly and indirectly through emotion, parenting behaviours and through prescribing which, when, and how emotions should be displayed (Suveg, et.al, 2013).

Charles Darwin's (1872) book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* has been highly influential for research on emotions. Darwin's basic message was that emotion expressions evolve and (at least at some point in the past) are adaptive (Hess & Thibault, 2009). A cross-cultural emotion recognition studies found that universal language

of emotions could have dialects that differ subtly from each other (Hess & Thibault, 2009). The differences emerged most clearly for serenity, shame, contempt, anger, sadness, surprise, and happiness, but not for fear, disgust, or embarrassment. In other words, the variation between culture and family expressiveness, such as Western culture and Eastern culture make a greater difference in family expressiveness.

In birth order theory, Adler (1918) suggested that birth order influences personality. A different personality might have different family expressiveness towards their family member. Birth order can often leave an ineradicable impression on the individuals' lifestyles (Halberstadt, 1991), which is a habitual way of an individual expressing the emotion towards family members.

### **Family Expressiveness in Chinese Family**

Prior research has been published on the family expressiveness that refers to the predominant style of exhibiting non-verbal and verbal expressions within a family that also have links with the emotional expressiveness. Research has found that American families had greater emotional expressiveness than the Chinese families (Suveg, Sood, Comer, & Kendall, 2009). Hence, these findings were consistent and fully supported by the strong history of research on previous work by Lewis, Takai-Kawakami, Kawakami, & Sullivan (2009) which has also been considered as a cultural framework.

Furthermore, Hofstede (1980) has proposed that the individualism and collectivism dimensions facilitate in describing the primary differences among cultures. Oyserman & Lee (2008) revealed that people from China tend to be more collectivist and less individualistic compared to people from the United States. For example, the evidence of collectivists showed that Chinese mothers have reported that they tend to encourage modesty in their children more than American mothers. In addition, past research has reported that mothers from the United States have higher levels of acceptance and warmth than the Chinese mothers. Therefore, according to Matsumoto, Yoo, & Fontaine (2008) from prior research, it was found that people from individualistic cultures seem to express more emotions, whereas people from collectivistic cultures are more likely to suppress their emotions.

Researchers have examined that the family expressiveness in China has emotional expressiveness which is positive-submissive that parents in China tend to encourage the suppression of emotions such as anger for the sake of interpersonal harmony and encourage the expression of group-oriented emotions like sympathy (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For example, expressing sympathy for someone's trouble may be stated as positive-submissive.

Moreover, children born in Western culture have shown more negative-dominant in emotional expressiveness. For instances, children from the United States showed more anger and disorganized or incoherent of emotions than Asian children (Suveg et al., 2014). For example, the negative-dominant from the FEQ includes expressing momentary anger over a trivial irritation and expressing anger at someone else's carelessness.

### **Birth order and family expressiveness**

Prior research has shown that the birth order influences children's actions in emotional expressiveness. The pioneer of birth order research, Adler (1918) had theorised that each birth position has a set of personality traits that may link to the children's expression through their emotions. In general, Sulloway (2010) stated that older children are more responsible, always seen as leaders, and are more emotionally intense. Thus, the older children have higher positive-dominant of emotional expressiveness. According to the FEQ, there are some examples of positive-dominant such as expressing concern for the success of the other family members.

The middle-born children may experience difficulty in finding privileged positions in the family and also difficulty in attracting parents' attention (Schuster, 2011). Therefore, the

middle-born children in emotional expressiveness showed that they are more positive-submissive. These are because middle-born children often offer to do somebody a favour and this situation shows that they are trying to get attention from others, especially from their parents.

Furthermore, the later-born children are frequently viewed as the spoiled kid of the family. Hence, later-born children will seek for alternative strategies to stand out from their siblings, especially aware of first-born's higher status in the family (Schuster, 2011). In the emotional expressiveness, later-born children have higher negative dominant because they are always spoiled in the family and always showing undesirable behaviour. For example, the descriptions of the negative-dominant include a situation where the children will express dissatisfaction, crying after an unpleasant disagreement and quarrelling with the family member. This shows that there is a link between birth order and emotional expressiveness.

The inclusion of family expressiveness in the Chinese families in this study was relevant for a number of reasons. First, it became possible to provide the first empirical test that proves positive dominance variable is the most significant among Chinese young adults in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Second, relations between birth order and family expressiveness among Chinese young adults could be investigated, giving us some ideas about the incremental value of birth order variable as a well-known predictor. If these links are indeed confirmed by the present data, it would be interesting to place them in a theoretical model. Lastly, it contributes to the field of lifespan developmental psychology, while enforcing previous research in the area by finding significant differences and relationships between the chosen variables.

Therefore, the goal of the present study is to investigate prospective relations between Chinese young adults' expressivity within the family (positive, negative dominant, and negative submissive expressivity) in UMS. Specifically, the study also investigates the effects of birth order on family expressiveness among Chinese young adults in UMS.

### **Research Questions**

As stated in the problem statement above, the following research questions will be explored in this study:

1. What is the dominant component of significant emotion expressiveness showed by the Chinese young adults in UMS?
2. What is the relationship between birth order and emotion expressiveness among the Chinese young adults in UMS?

### **Research Hypothesis**

Based on the empirical and theoretical literature, it is hypothesised that generally, family expression of positive and negative emotions are expected to be associated with birth order. Specifically: (1) The Chinese young adults in UMS have greater frequency and intensity of positive submissive emotion. (2) The first-born and middle-born Chinese young adults score higher on positive submissive, whereas later-born Chinese young adults will score higher on positive dominance.

### **Methodology**

#### **Sampling and Data Collection**

This research uses quantitative design and it focuses on the sample of students in UMS. First, the authors applied for approval by sending letter to the lecturer in Marriage and Family course seeking the consent to conduct this research. The survey was conducted at the UMS library and the Faculty of Psychology and Education, UMS. Research purposes were briefly explained to the respondents. Then, respondents were required to read the questions carefully and respond to all questions. Each respondent were given approximately 5 to 10

minutes to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed by using convenience sampling to 45 respondents in UMS. All questionnaires were fully returned with a 100 % response rate. This survey recruited 15 first-born, 15 middle-born and 15 later-born young adults in UMS. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 35 years.

### **Research Instruments**

The questionnaire is divided into 2 sections:

Section A - demography section: This section is related to the age groups, gender, faculty and the course taken by the students.

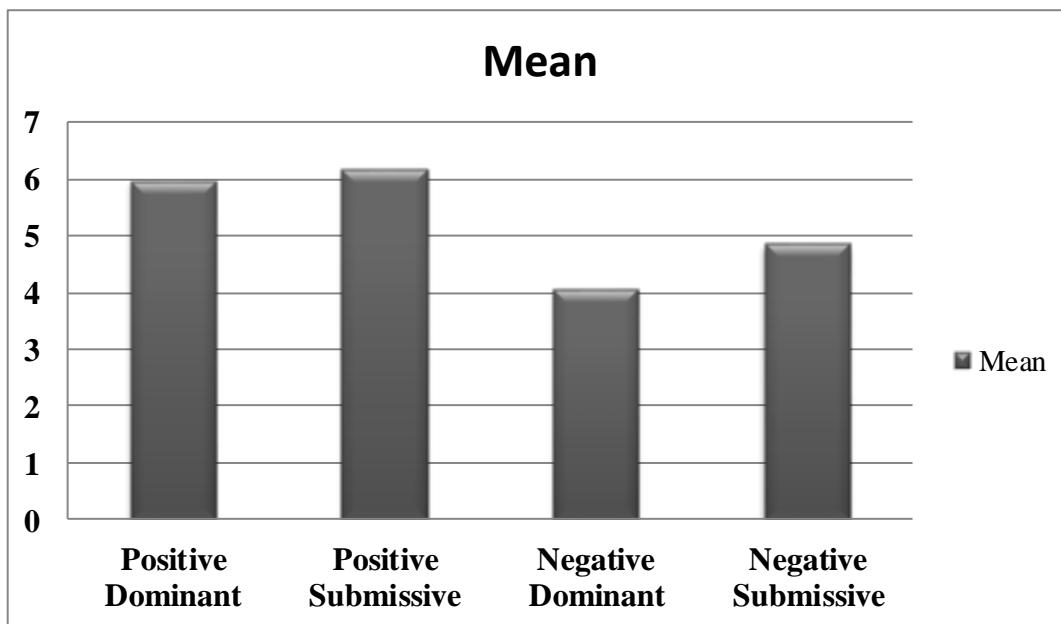
Section B - Family Expressiveness Questionnaire (FEQ): The FEQ contains 40-item that assesses emotional expressiveness in one's family of origin that was created by Halberstadt (1986). The scale includes a 10-item subscale on positive dominant family expressiveness (question 1, 6, 17, 18, 23, 26, 28, 33, and 39), 10-item subscale on positive submissive family expressiveness (question 2, 3, 13, 21, 22, 30, 31, 35, 38, and 40), 10-item subscale on negative submissive expressiveness (question 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 24, 27, 36, and 37) and a 10-item subscale on negative dominant expressiveness (question 8, 10, 14, 15, 19, 20, 25, 18, 33, and 34). Respondents answer each question in terms of frequency of occurrence in their family, relative to other families, on a 9-point Likert scale of 1 (not at all frequently in my family) to 9 (very frequently in my family).The FEQ was originally designed to yield four subscales which are positive dominant, positive submissive, negative dominant and negative submissive.

### **Result**

The result was divided into two sections. The first section contained descriptive analyses of Chinese young adults' emotional expressiveness towards their families. The second section focused on the inferential analysis between the birth order and emotional expressiveness (positive dominant, positive submissive, negative dominant and negative submissive).

### **Mean of the Family Expressiveness Dimension among Chinese Young Adult in UMS**

The mean of the relationship of family expressiveness dimension among Chinese young adults in UMS was tested using descriptive statistics. Figure 1 shows that the Chinese young adults in UMS has the highest score on positive submissive towards their family ( $M=6.18$ ,  $SD=1.29$ ). Meanwhile, the lowest score is the negative dominant ( $M=4.06$ ,  $SD=0.98$ ). The mean score of positive dominant and negative submissive are 5.96 ( $SD=1.36$ ) and 4.86 ( $SD=1.27$ ) respectively.



**Figure 1.** Mean scores of the relationship of family expressiveness dimension among Chinese young adult in UMS

#### Family Expressiveness Dimension and Birth Order

Family expressiveness dimension among birth positions was tested using analysis of variance (ANOVA). A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of birth order on family expressiveness in positive dominant, positive submissive, negative dominant and negative submissive conditions. An analysis of variance shows that the effect of birth order on all dimensions of family expressiveness is not significant [positive dominant  $F(2,42)=2.609$ ,  $p=0.086$ ; positive submissive  $F(2,42)=1.703$ ,  $p=0.409$ ; negative dominant  $F(2,42)=2.235$ ,  $p=0.12$ ; negative submissive  $(2,42)=2.093$ ,  $p=0.136$ ]. Table 1 shows the output of ANOVA analysis.

**Table 1:** The Output of ANOVA Analysis

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Positive Dominant	Between Groups	9.057	2	4.529	2.609	.086
	Within Groups	72.911	42	1.736		
	Total	81.968	44			
Positive Submissive	Between Groups	1.394	2	.697	.409	.667
	Within Groups	71.529	42	1.703		
	Total	72.923	44			
Negative Dominant	Between Groups	4.040	2	2.020	2.235	.120
	Within Groups	37.971	42	.904		
	Total	42.011	44			
Negative Submissive	Between Groups	6.443	2	3.222	2.093	.136
	Within Groups	64.640	42	1.539		
	Total	71.083	44			

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The current study reports that Chinese young adults in UMS have greater frequency and intensity of positive submissive thus, supports the first research hypothesis. The current finding is consistent with previous works (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Saw & Okazaki, 2010). Past studies reported that family expressiveness in China showed a greater emotional expressiveness of positive-submissive, which indicates that parents in China tend to encourage the suppression of emotions such as anger, for the sake of interpersonal harmony and encourage the expression of group-oriented emotions like sympathy (for example, expressing sympathy for someone's trouble may be stated as positive-submissive) (Saw, & Okazaki, 2010). This can be explained by the tendency of Chinese young adults in UMS to seek approval in each decision making. A submissive behaviour becomes regularly associated with the desired response from others and may be followed by pleasant affect (Hacıoğlu, Fistikci, Yosmaoğlu, Keyvan & Yıldırım, 2013). Besides, Chinese young adults in UMS are more likely to conform to others, especially in a family setting. People who behave submissively tend to leave decision-making to and go along with others (Hacıoğlu et al., 2013).

In addition, the current results partially support the second hypothesis. Only the family expressiveness among first-born children was consistent with the hypothesised statement which is positive submissive. This outcome possibly occurred due to the first-borns constant need to regain praise from their parents that they received before their siblings were born (Laing, 1994).

Middle-born children were expected to score higher in positive submissive. However, results show that middle-born children scored highest on positive dominant. These findings provide evidence that middle-born Chinese young adults in UMS are more likely to stand out among their siblings. It is possible that middle-born children have higher tendency to be the mediator than first-born and later-born children. In addition, it has been suggested that middle-born children are more likely to be entrepreneurs (Harrold, 2014). Another possible explanation for the reported results was based on Adler's Theory (1964). Adler's theory of personality stated that middle-born children are often believed to be natural mediators and their innate skills in diplomacy plus their flexibility in ideas make them more successful in entrepreneurship (Damian & Roberts, 2015).

The initial hypothesised statement on later-born Chinese young adults was positive dominance. Conversely, results found were not consistent with the hypothesis. It is reported that Chinese young adults in UMS who were later-born scored highly in positive submissive. However, there is no literature that supports these findings.

Although the research has reached its aims, there were some unavoidable limitations still. Firstly, the research was conducted on a small sample size. Therefore, researchers should be cautious when generalising the current results for larger groups; the study should have involved more participants from different places. Secondly, although it is the best way to obtain quantitative results, there are some weaknesses found in the questionnaire. Questionnaires are standardised so it is impossible to explain the questions that participants might misinterpret. In addition, there might be some respondents who do not wish to reveal the information and might even think that they would be penalised if the real opinion is given. Therefore, respondents should be asked to respond sincerely. Besides that, the questionnaire should be presented in a variety of forms.

These findings provide evidence that there is a difference in family expressiveness in different culture. The approach outlined in this study should be replicated for further investigation in the different expressiveness of different culture. Besides that, it appears that there is a relationship between birth order and family expressiveness. It is recommended

that the approach outlined in this study be replicated for the benefits of professionals, especially professionals involved in child development.

In summary, this study highlights the continuous need to conduct research on young adults in Chinese family expressiveness. There are significant associations between family context and expressiveness, as reported by the Chinese young adults. In addition, for first-born Chinese young adults, significant associations emerged. Furthermore, the assumption and result in middle-born and later-born Chinese young adults in the study were inconsistent. Despite all that, it leads us to believe that there is still a significant relationship between birth order and family expressiveness in Chinese families.

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