

The Mediating Effect of Emerging Adulthood Experiences on The Relationship Between Parental Attachment and Social Adjustment in The University

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A mediation model was proposed to analyse the relationship between parental attachment and social adjustment. Specifically, this study aims to contribute and fill a gap in the emerging adulthood literature by analysing the mediating role of emerging adulthood dimensions (identity exploration, instability/negativity, self-focused, possibilities/experimentation, feeling “in-between”). Thus, a variance-based structural modelling via partial least squares was employed to analyse the hypothesized relationships. Data was gathered from 568 freshmen from a public university in the Western region of Malaysia. The results show that only self-focused is a significant mediator in the relationship between parental attachment and social adjustment. Practical contribution was discussed particularly among counsellors and academicians who work with emerging adult clients.

Keywords: Emerging Adulthood Experience, Parental Attachment, Social Adjustment, Emerging Adult

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Introduction

The transition to university is a period full of challenges and demands faced by first year students. Entering university for the first time is an important period in testing an individual's ability to adjust to a new and foreign environment (Dyson & Renk, 2006). A research conducted in Malaysia public universities found that adjustment problem is related to difficulties in course registration, understanding English textbooks, attending early lecturers, health-related problems, financial constraints, lack of sleep, and family problems (Ahmad, Fauziah, Azemi, Shari, & Zaini, 2002; Redhwan, Sami, Karim, Chan, & Zaleha, 2009). With the growing interest in recognizing factors that could influence student's social adjustment in the university, the current study aims to develop the most appropriate coping strategies for university students particularly the first year students. Previous literatures agreed that one of the key factors of social adjustment is by establishing a good parental attachment (Trapani, 2015). As asserted by Kenny & Rice (1995), the separation from parents and identity exploration are taking place actively during their first year studies in university. Thus, identity exploration is one mechanism which could influence the relationship between parental attachment and social adjustment amongst first year students.

Theoretically, the extent to which the first year students are able to adjust socially in the university is strongly influenced by their attachment to their parents (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1982; Erikson, 1968). Previous researches have empirically proven this theoretical framework (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991; Kenny & Sirin, 2006; Larose & Boivin, 1998). Based on Howes & Spieker (2008) argument, attachment theory and emerging adulthood theory serve as an alternative attachment bond during the emerging adulthood period. Therefore, the focus of the current study is to verify the link between attachment theory and emerging adulthood theory by examining the mediating effect of emerging adulthood experiences on the relationship between parental attachment and social adjustment.

Even though several studies have been done in analysing the mediating role of identity exploration between the relationship of parental attachment and social adjustment (see Trapani, 2015; Lapsley & Edgerton, 2002; Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004; Schultheiss & Bluestein, 1994), the advanced literatures did not consider identity exploration as a separate construct that is comprised of different categories and consists both positive and negative meanings. Simultaneously, another main struggle of the emerging adults living in the university is engaging in identity exploration (Arnett, 2012). Emerging adulthood can be characterized by five distinct experiences, which are the age of instability/negativity, self-focused, feeling in-between, possibilities/experimentation, and identity exploration (Arnett, 2014). However, based on the studies related to emerging adulthood experiences, the identity exploration is the only dimension that is widely studied (Skulborstad & Hermann, 2015). This is because all the other four emerging adulthood dimensions can be characterized by the identity exploration dimension (Arnett, 2014; Syed & Mitchell, 2013). Hence, this research explores a new direction on the mediating role of emerging adulthood experiences on the relationship between parental attachment and social adjustment among first year students in Malaysia.

Social Adjustment

Social adjustment in the university is defined as a process of which students integrate themselves into the campus community, building a support system, and negotiating a new freedom that emerges during the university life (Berardi, 2012; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Several aspects are said to be related to social adjustment, such as satisfaction and quality of relationship with peers, faculty staffs, and lecturers. During the transition to university, freshmen often encounter new personal and interpersonal challenges which include exploring new relationships, developing learning skills, as well as modifying the existing relationship with parents and family members (Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004).

A good social adjustment refers to the student's capability in developing new relationships, especially with classmates and other campus residents. Failure to adjust socially in the university environment leads to maladaptive functioning amongst the students (Trapani, 2015). The difficulty to adjust socially in the university is largely due to the instability of this life stage (Nelson & Barry, 2005). The development period while in the university could enhance the emerging adulthood experience such as the opportunity to explore several different contexts of learning, social activities, and interaction with people. Although Arnett (2007) argued that the level of well-being is increased during university life, these emerging adults still experience doubt and anxiety. Additionally, the transition to university symbolizes autonomy from family and leaving the house for the first time for emerging adults (Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013). The separation from parents and engaging in identity exploration both contributes to a stressful time in the university (Kenny & Rice, 1995).

Consequently, a strategy emerged in order to improve the social adjustment among freshman by emphasizing on parental attachment and emerging adulthood experiences. If the

freshmen have a good parental attachment, they will associate themselves with the five distinct emerging adulthood experiences and as a result, the degree of social adjustment increases. Accordingly, the current study examines how the emerging adulthood experiences mediate the relationship between parental attachment and social adjustment.

Emerging Adulthood Dimensions

The period of emerging adulthood is marked by five distinct experiences of young people aged 18 to 29 (Arnett, 2014). Firstly, Arnett postulated that emerging adult is in the identity exploration period because they are actively engaged in exploring identity in terms of love, work, and worldview. They are at a liberty to identify the similarity and dissimilarity of values and beliefs which they have learned previously mostly from their parents without the influence of other people. Secondly, an emerging adult is in the age of instability/negativity. This is due to the change in landscape or living place, romantic partner, education, and jobs that often lead to an unstable life among emerging adults. On the other hand, the self-focused age is perceived as a time of full of responsibilities among emerging adults in which they experience few obligations and commitments towards other people. Emerging adults during this period need an extra time and space to develop themselves and achieve self-sufficiency before they could take care of other people (Patterson, 2012). The dimension of feeling "in-between" is the least complex of emerging adulthood experiences (Syed & Mitchell, 2013). Emerging adults perceive themselves as no longer adolescent but not yet an adult. Therefore, they are in the period of becoming an adult. Last but not least, emerging adulthood experience is a time of possibilities and experimentation. These two aspects allow them to be optimistic for their future especially for those who grew up in a poor family that they can hope for a better future compared to their parents. Generally, emerging adults believe that they are optimistic that they will have a bright and good life in the future (Arnett & Schwab, 2012).

The Mediating Role of Emerging Adulthood Experiences

Schnyders (2012) conducted the first study in examining the relationship between parental attachment and emerging adulthood experiences. However, Schnyders (2012) found that parental attachment did not have a significant influence on emerging adulthood experiences. But still, Schynders (2012) asserted the importance of parental attachment role in an emerging adult's life and urged for further empirical researches to be conducted. Mattanah, Lopez, & Govern (2011) conducted a meta-analysis research which involved 156 studies on parental attachment and university adjustment; they reported a small to average relationship between parental attachment and university adjustment constructs. The findings proposed that other constructs could also influence the relationship between attachment and adjustment.

During the transition to university, the relationship between parental attachment and identity development comes to fore (Trapani, 2015). This shows that identity exploration is indeed influenced by parental attachment (Beyers & Goossens, 2008). All the more, literatures consistently discussed the potential role of identity exploration as a mediator between attachment and social adjustment (see Trapani, 2015; Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002; Lopez & Gormley, 2002; Mattanah et al., 2004). Syed & Mitchell (2013) postulated that emerging adulthood experiences is perceived as an identity exploration experience because it encompasses all four dimensions which are instability/negativity, possibilities/experimentation, self-focused, and the feeling of being "in-between". To date, there is no research conducted to examine the role of all five emerging adulthood dimensions as the mediator of the relationship between parental attachment and university adjustment. The recent study conducted by Trapani (2015) is the closest literature that examines the mediating role of identity between

parental attachment and social adjustment. Trapani (2015) reported that identity partially mediates the relationship between parental attachment and social adjustment to college. Older literatures such as Lapsley, Rice, & Fitzgerald (1990) and Mattanah et al. (2004) also reported that attachment is associated with identity, which subsequently influences college adjustment. All the more, additional research is required to support these relationships (Trapani, 2015).

- H1.** Identity exploration mediates the relationship between parental attachment and social adjustment.
- H2.** Instability/negativity mediates the relationship between parental attachment and social adjustment.
- H3.** Self-focus mediates the relationship between parental attachment and social adjustment.
- H4.** Possibilities/experimentations mediate the relationship between parental attachment and social adjustment.
- H5.** Feeling "in-between" mediates the relationship between parental attachment and social adjustment.

Method

Sample

The current study employed Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) students, particularly the first year students, as the target respondents. To determine the minimum sample required, the Gpower software was used. The maximum predictor of the current research model is five, by using medium effect size and 0.95 power needed, the minimum sample required is 138. Through purposive sampling, 700 potential respondents were recruited by contacting lecturers, tutors, and lab demonstrators that teach first year students. A total of 568 response is qualified to be used with the response rate of 81.1%. The majority of the respondents are female (N=359, 63.2%) with the mean age of 20.81 and a standard deviation of 0.903.

Measures

The modelling of parental attachment construct is adapted from Armsden and Greenberg (2009). The parental attachment construct used in this research is a superordinate multidimensional construct design which involves 25 indicators under three reflective first-order dimensions (trust, communication, and alienation) and reflective second-order dimensions. Five-point Likert scales was used, ranging from (1) almost never true to (5) almost true. Items in the alienation dimension were reversed coded, therefore "alienation" was changed to "connectedness". The current study also adapted the scale by Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell (2007) in measuring five dimensions of emerging adulthood experiences that involves 28 reflective items. Four-point Likert scales was used ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (4) strongly agree. Meanwhile, to measure social adjustment, this study employed the Bakers & Siyrk (1989) model. The modelling of social adjustment is a unidimensional construct that involves 20 reflective items. Five-point Likert scales was used ranging from (1) does not apply to me at all to (5) applies very closely to me.

Data Analysis

Smart PLS 2.0 M3 software (Ringle, Wende, & Will, 2005) was used to test the hypothesized relationships. Confirmatory Factor Analysis was first performed to confirm the dimensionality of

the first-order dimensions, followed by applying a repeated indicators approach (Wold, 1982) in order to operationalize the multidimensional construct.

Results

Measurement Model

Reliability and validity were tested in order to examine the reflective measurement model (Henseler et al., 2009). Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt (2014) suggested that in order to have a sufficient convergent validity, the factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE) must be greater than 0.5. Meanwhile, composite reliability (CR) with the threshold value of 0.7 is used to confirm the construct reliability. AVE of less than 0.50 has been identified in each variables except for possibilities. For parent trust, PA_TRUST5 has the lowest loading of -0.205 and the AVE value of parent trust is more than 0.50 after its deletion. Meanwhile, for parent communication, PA_COMM2 (-0.153) has the lowest loading, followed by PA_COMM4 (-0.045). The AVE for parent communication is higher than 0.50 after deletion of two of its indicators. For parent connectedness variable, PA_CON3 (0.652) is deleted, thus the AVE value is more than 0.50. For dimensions of emerging adulthood experience, IE2 (0.135) was deleted. INSTA6 (0.507), SF1 (0.458), and FIB3 (0.339) were also deleted to increase the AVE value to more than 0.50. Last but not least, for social adjustment variable, these particular items were deleted: SOC8 (-0.125), SOC (0.148), SOC18 (0.120), SOC17 (0.215), SOC16 (0.327), SOC13 (0.321), SOC15 (0.304), SOC3 (0.376), SOC9 (0.462), SOC7 (0.483), SOC14 (0.487), SOC10 (0.490), SOC12 (0.537), SOC19 (0.550), and SOC20 (0.612). After deleting these 15 indicators, the AVE for social adjustment became higher than 0.50.

Next, to differentiate items among constructs, discriminant validity was assessed by examining the cross loadings and the Fornel & Larcker's (1981) criterion. The cross loadings for all items must be more than the threshold value of 0.100. The factor loading value for PA_COMM5 is 0.791, but this item also shows a high loading (0.729) at the parent trust variable, thus PA_COMM5 was deleted. Next, the factor loading for PA_COMM1 is 0.783, but this item also shows a high loading (0.690) at the parent trust variable, thus PA_COMM is also deleted. The factor loading for IE1 is 0.537, but this item also shows a high loading (0.447) at the possibilities variable, thus IE1 is deleted. The factor loading for POSS4 is 0.724, but this item also shows a high loading (0.636) at the self-focus variable, thus this item is deleted. For the Fornel & Larcker (1981) criterion shown in Table 2, it is confirmed that each reflective constructs correlates more strongly to its own measures compared to the other constructs. Based on Table 1, all reflective indicators, AVE, and CR were above the threshold value therefore satisfy the requirement of validity and reliability.

Table 1: Results of Measurement Model

First Order Reflective	Second Order Reflective	Item	Convergent Validity			Total Item Deleted
			Factor Loadings	AVE	Composite Reliability	
Parent Trust		PA_TRUST1	0.804	0.538	0.912	3
		PA_TRUST2	0.822			
		PA_TRUST3	0.513			
		PA_TRUST4	0.763			
		PA_TRUST6	0.695			

	PA_TRUST7	0.749			
	PA_TRUST10	0.787			
Parent Communication	PA_COMM3	0.781	0.571	0.869	4
	PA_COMM6	0.692			
	PA_COMM7	0.667			
	PA_COMM8	0.817			
	PA_COMM9	0.808			
Parent connectedness	PA_CON1	0.689	0.504	0.835	1
	PA_CON2	0.652			
	PA_CON4	0.768			
	PA_CON5	0.775			
	PA_CON6	0.655			
Identity Exploration	IE3	0.701	0.612	0.887	2
	IE4	0.835			
	IE5	0.765			
	IE6	0.822			
	IE7	0.782			
Instability/Negativity	INSTA1	0.715	0.503	0.858	1
	INSTA2	0.616			
	INSTA3	0.771			
	INSTA4	0.722			
	INSTA5	0.755			
	INSTA7	0.666			
Self-Focused	SF2	0.761	0.546	0.857	1
	SF3	0.693			
	SF4	0.816			
	SF5	0.727			
	SF6	0.690			
Possibilities/Experimentation	POSS1	0.816	0.577	0.843	1
	POSS2	0.825			
	POSS3	0.771			
	POSS5	0.605			
Feeling "In-between"	FIB1	0.878	0.785	0.879	1
	FIB2	0.893			
Social Adjustment	SOC1	0.758	0.509	0.837	15
	SOC2	0.642			
	SOC4	0.771			
	SOC6	0.758			
	SOC11	0.626			

Notes: PA_TRUST5, PA_TRUST8, PA_TRUST9, PA_COMM1, PA_COMM2, PA_COMM4, PA_COMM5, PA_CON3, IE1, IE2, INSTA2, SF1, POSS4, FIB3, SOC3, SOC5, SOC7, SOC8, SOC9, SOC10, SOC12, SOC13, SOC14, SOC15, SOC16, SOC17, SOC18, SOC19, SOC20 were deleted due to low factor loadings.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity

No.	Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.	PA_CON	0.710								
2.	PA_COMM	0.412	0.756							
3.	FIB	0.122	0.228	0.886						
4.	IDE	0.142	0.231	0.638	0.782					
5.	INS	-0.238	0.041	0.227	0.253	0.709				
6.	POS	-0.027	0.194	0.451	0.589	0.451	0.760			
7.	SAD	0.215	0.311	0.312	0.338	-0.002	0.304	0.713		
8.	SEF	0.172	0.272	0.577	0.725	0.232	0.635	0.387	0.739	
9.	PA_TRUST	0.543	0.701	0.260	0.286	-0.029	0.241	0.397	0.328	0.733

Notes: Diagonals (bolded) represent the square root of the average variance extracted while the off-diagonals are correlations among constructs.

FIB=Feeling "In-between", IDE=Identity Exploration, INS=Negativity/Instability, POS=Possibilities/Experimentation, SAD=Social Adjustment, SEF=Self-Focus, PA_TRUST=Parent Trust, PA_COMM=Parent Communication, PA_CON=Parent Connectedness.

Parental Attachment as Second Order Construct

Before conducting the structural model analysis, the last procedure of measurement modelling is to conceptualize parental attachment (PAT) construct as a second-order construct. Parental attachment is a second order reflective construct which consists of three first-order reflective constructs namely parental trust, parental communication, and parental connectedness. The modeling of the second-order construct with PLS-SEM is estimated using repeated indicators approach suggested by Wold (1982). The second-order factor is measured directly by all first-order constructs (Wetzels, Odekerken-Schröder, & Van Oppen, 2009). All indicators in the three first-order constructs were repeated in the second-order construct. The convergent validity of parental attachment as the second-order construct is presented in the Table 3. The AVE and CR show substantial values as suggested by Hair et al. (2014).

Table 3: Convergent validity of parental attachment as second-order construct

Second Order Reflective	Item	Convergent Validity		
		Factor Loadings	AVE	Composite Reliability
PAT	PA_TRUST	0.954	0.701	0.874
	PA_COMM	0.853		
	PA_CON	0.683		

Note: PAT=Parental Attachment, PA_TRUST=Parental Trust, PA_COMM=Parental Communication, PA_CON=Parental Connectedness

Structural Model

Before testing the indirect effect of parental attachment towards social adjustment and the direct effect of parental attachment on emerging adulthood experiences, the emerging adulthood experiences on social adjustment was first assessed. In order to test the mediating effect, two steps of mediation analysis by Preacher and Hayes (2008) was adopted. The direct effect of the independent variable on mediator ($X \rightarrow M$), and mediator on dependent variable

(M→Y) must be both significant to determine whether the mediating effect is present. If one of the relationship is not significant, further mediation analysis is not necessary. The assessment of the structural model used the bootstrapping of 500 resamples to evaluate the significant paths. According to Sullivan & Feinn (2012), reporting both effect size and p value is compulsory to determine an acceptable estimation. Table 4 shows the results of all direct effects. Following Cohen (1988), the required minimum value of R² and f² is at least at 0.02. After the assessment of the t, R², and f² values of all direct relationships was done, it shows that only the mediating effect of self-focus is qualified for further investigation because the direct relationships of X→M and M→Y are both significant.

The results of the mediating effects are shown in Table 5. The results concluded that the effects of parental attachment and social adjustment (t-value= 2.511) were significantly mediated by self-focus as the t-value exceeded the critical value of 1.645 at the 95% significance value. As also indicated by Preacher & Hayes (2008), the indirect effect 0.094, Boot CI:[LL=0.024, UL=0.164] did not straddle a 0 in between indicating that there is mediation. Therefore, it was confirmed that self-focus mediates the relationship between parental attachment and social adjustment. Therefore H3 was supported. Table 6 shows the confidence interval calculation.

Table 4: Direct Relationships

Relationship	Std Beta	Std Error	T Value	R ²	f ²	Decision
PAT → FIB	0.251	0.047	5.416	0.06	-	Significant
PAT → IDE	0.275	0.045	6.106	0.08	-	Significant
PAT → INS	-0.077	0.066	1.052	None	-	Significant
PAT → POS	0.202	0.049	4.084	0.04	-	Significant
PAT → SEF	0.326	0.046	6.987	0.10	-	Significant
FIB → SAD	0.114	0.057	2.036	-	None	Significant
IDE → SAD	0.057	0.067	0.786	-	None	Significant
INS → SAD	-0.158	0.075	2.316	-	0.03	Significant
POS → SAD	0.144	0.059	2.542	-	None	Significant
SEF → SAD	0.219	0.076	2.865	-	0.02	Significant

Note: FIB=Feeling "In-between", IDE=Identity Exploration, INS=Negativity/Instability, PAT=Parental Attachment, POS=Possibilities/Experimentation, SAD=Social Adjustment, SEF=Self-Focus

Table 5: Indirect Effect

Hypothesis	Indirect Effect		Mediating Effect		Results	
	Path	Beta	Path	Beta		
H3	PAT → SEF	0.326**	SEF → SAD	0.219**	0.071**	Supported

Note: PAT=Parental Attachment, SAD=Social Adjustment, SEF=Self-Focus

Table 6: Confidence Interval Calculation

Hypothesis	Indirect Effect (Beta Coefficient)	S.E	T Value	Confidence Interval	Decision
Parental Attachment→ Self-Focused→ Social Adjustment	0.094	0.028	2.511	LL = 0.024 UL = 0.164	Have Mediation

Note LL=Lower Level; UL=Upper Level

Discussions

The transition to university offers many challenges and demands that encourages freshmen to be able to adjust socially. The adjustment to the university life is a crucial aspect in predicting the success of completing the bachelor's degree studies. This study aims to investigate freshmen's social adjustment in depth, by examining the factors that influence this concept. Specifically, this study proposed an approach to put parental attachment as the main antecedent of social adjustment, whereas emerging adulthood experiences as the mediator between parental attachment and social adjustment. The findings indicate that only self-focus mediate the effect of parental attachment on social adjustment. Meanwhile, identity exploration, instability/negativity, possibilities/experimentations, and feeling in-between do not mediate the effect of parental attachment on social adjustment.

Parental attachment has a positive and significant influence on self-focus (beta=0.326); correspondingly, self-focus have a positive and significant influence on social adjustment (beta=0.219). With this regard, students should wittingly increase their self-focus, as this boosts the relationship and enhance social adjustment. Past literatures had reported a positive and significant relationship between self-focus with other psychosocial aspects such as life satisfaction (Negru, 2012), wellbeing (Huisman, Sheldon, Yashar, Amburgey, Dowling, & Petty, 2012), and mindfulness (Peer & McAuslan, 2015). At the same time, it also has a negative and significant relationship with self-doubt (Peer & McAuslan, 2015). Therefore some pertinent strategies to enhance self-focus are: give the students the opportunity to take responsibility of their life and give them freedom to make decisions without being influenced. But it is important to not misconceive the period of self-focus; in the collectivistic society, being self-focused is no mere autonomy and being less committed towards parents but rather a period of negotiating between their relationships with parents and social responsibilities (Katsiaficas, Suárez-Orozco, & Dias, 2014).

With respect to practical implications, the curriculum makers should develop a youth development program which comprises counselling intervention programs targeting the freshmen. The intervention could be done during the freshmen orientation week in which they could be taught how to maximize their attachment with parents in relation to being self-focused. The intervention program can be implemented gradually or at the residential college level so that adjustment level can be monitored from time to time.

Conclusion

There are several limitations seen from the research findings. First, the respondents were not instructed to rate their parental attachment separately for both mother and father. Therefore a suitable idea would be for future research to adopt a separate attachment response for mother and father. Second, the current study only employed a single higher learning institution. Therefore, the researcher is advised to be cautious when it comes to the generalizing of the results. Lastly, this study used a cross-sectional design, therefore a lengthy process of the association between variables could not be examined. Nevertheless, the current study has contributed to the expansion of emerging adulthood literatures by examining the predictive factor of emerging adulthood experiences by examining its mediating role on the relationship between parental attachment and social adjustment among the freshmen.

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