AN INVESTIGATION ON CHARACTER STRENGTHS OF ADOLESCENTS IN PENANG AND KEDAH

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AN INVESTIGATION ON CHARACTER STRENGTHS OF ADOLESCENTS IN PENANG AND KEDAH

by

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ABSTRAK

Kekuatan karakter telah didapati mempunyai hubungan yang signifikan dengan kesejahteraan dan kemakmuran dalam kalangan remaja. Manakala hubungan ibu bapa dan guru-guru boleh memainkan peranan penting dalam membina kekuatan karakter dalam kalangan remaja. Kajian ini menyelidik tentang kekuatan karakter dan tahap kemakmuran dalam kalangan remaja di Penang dan Kedah. Disamping itu, kajian ini juga menyiasat impak hubungan antara ibu bapa-anak dan guru-pelajar terhadap pembinaan kekuatan karakter dan impak kekuatan karakter terhadap tahap kemakmuran dalam kalangan remaja. Peserta dalam kajian ini berjumlah 217 orang pelajar sekolah menengah dari tiga buah sekolah di bahagian utara Malaysia. Kajian ini mengguna methodologi bercampur iaitu pendekatan kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Kajian 1 memfokus kepada kekuatan karakter, hubungan ibu bapa dengan anak, hubungan guru dengan pelajar dan kemakmuran 117 pelajar dengan menggunakan kaji selidik. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan karakter kebaikan mempunyai kedudukan tertinggi di antara 24 kekuatan karakter dalam kalangan remaja manakala kepemimpinan berada di kedudukan terendah. Hubungan ibu bapa dengan anak adalah tinggi dari segi kawalan dan rendah dari segi ambil berat manakala hubungan guru dengan pelajar dalam kajian ini dilaporkan sebagai berkualiti tinggi. Beberapa kekuatan karakter didapati mempunyai kolerasi positif dengan penjagaan ibu bapa, kawalan ibu bapa dan hubungan dengan guru. Karakter ketabahan dan pengadilan merupakan peramal kemakmuran yang signifikan. Kajian 2 menggunakan beberapa

soalan terbuka untuk menyelidik tentang kekuatan karakter, hubungan ibu bapa, hubungan guru dengan pelajar dan kemakmuran dalam kalangan 100 peserta kajian. Dapatan kajian memberikan lebih banyak maklumat berkait dengan kajian 1. Dengan menganalisiskan jawapan kepada soalan terbuka, peserta kajian menggambarkan diri mereka sebagai tinggi dari segi kebaikan, kelucuan, ketabahan, kasih sayang dan pengaturan kendiri. Mereka juga melaporkan hubungan ibu bapa yang tinggi dari segi ambil berat dan kawalan, hubungan guru memberi motivasi dan menyokong, tahap kemakmuran yang sederhana dan tahap kemurungan yang tinggi. Hasil kajian ini menyumbang kepada kekurangan pengetahuan tentang kekuatan karakter dalam kalangan remaja terutamanya dalam konteks Malaysia dan masyarakat negara Timur. Akhirnya, dapatan kajian ini mencadangkan bahawa ibu bapa dan guru-guru amat penting kepada perkembangan kekuatan karakter dalam kalangan remaja di Malaysia. Para pedidik, ibu bapa, pihak berkepentingan dan kerajaan harus menumpukan lebih banyak perhatian dalam usaha untuk meningkatkan kemakmuran para remaja. Kajian pada masa depan disyorkan untuk menyelidik pengaruh perkembangan remaja ke atas pembentukan kekuatan karakter dan pendekatan yang sesuai untuk meningkatkan kemakmuran dalam kalangan para remaja dengan cara meningkatkan kekuatan karakter mereka.

AN INVESTIGATION ON CHARACTER STRENGTHS OF ADOLESCENTS IN PENANG AND KEDAH

ABSTRACT

Character strengths have been found to be significantly associated with adolescents' well-being and flourishing. Meanwhile, parent-child relationship and teacher-student relationship plays an important role in building character strengths of adolescents. The present study examined character strengths and flourishing among adolescents in Penang and Kedah. It also investigated parent-child relationship and teacher-student relationship and how character strengths contribute to flourishing of the adolescents in Penang and Kedah. Participants in the current study included a total of 217 secondary school's students from three schools located in Northern states of Malaysia. Mixed methods were applied, with a quantitative and a qualitative study. Using survey, Study 1 focused on the character strengths, parent-child relationship, teacher-student relationship and flourishing in a sample of 117 students. Results revealed that kindness was ranked as the top character strength, and leadership was ranked as lowest strength among the adolescent. The parent-child relationship reported by adolescence was high in control and low in care while teacher-students relationship reported by the sample in this study was high in quality. Numerous character strengths were positively correlated with parental care, parental control and relationship with teachers. Perseverance and judgement agency were significant predictors of flourishing. Study 2 used a series of open-ended questions to examine character strengths, parent-child relationship, teacher-student relationship and flourishing among 100 participants. The findings provided more details

information related to findings from Study 1. By analysing responses to open-ended questions, partipants described themselves as high kindness, humour, perseverance, love and self-regulation. They also reported caring but high control parent-child relationships, motivating and supportive teacher-student relationships, moderate level of flourishing and high level of depression. The results of this research contribute to a limited body of knowledge on character strength among adolescents especially in the context of Malaysia and Eastern societies. Last but not least, the findings suggest that parents and teacher are essential in development of character strengths among adolescents in Malaysia. Educators, parents, stakeholders, and the government should pay more attention to increase adolescents' flourishing by building their character strenghts. Future studies are recommended to examine the developmental influence on adolescence's character strengths and to explore appropriate approaches that can enhance flourishing among adolescents by bulding their character strengths.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Overview

Positive psychology is the scientific study of prospering in the face of adversity (Grenville-Cleave, 2016). The main objective of the positive psychology movement is to explore the positive features of human existence (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104). Peterson and Seligman (2004) took three years to investigate human positive features and described them as "character strength", the personality traits that are morally valued. There are 24 character strengths under six virtues of wisdom and knowledge (i.e., creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective); courage (i.e., honesty, bravery, persistence, and zest); humanity (i.e., kindness, love, and social intelligence); justice (i.e., fairness, leadership, and teamwork); temperance (i.e., forgiveness, modesty, prudence, and self-regulation); and transcendence (i.e., appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humour, and spirituality) (Park & Peterson, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Csikszentmihalyi first noticed the importance of character strength during World War II (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). He found that a small group of people were able to keep their integrity and believed that their actions held the key to what humans could be like at their best during tough situations (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). He attributed the success to face adversity to character strengths.

According to Erik Erikson's theory, the fifth psychosocial stage takes place during the adolescent developmental process. This stage plays an essential role in developing personal identity, which refers to all of the beliefs, ideals, and values that help shape and guide a person's behavior. It is a stage of character development, and

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good character is at the foundation of positive development among adolescents (Park, 2009). Recent research findings show that character strengths reduced adolescent's problems such as substance abuse, alcohol abuse, smoking, violence, teenage pregnancy, depression, and suicidal ideation (Park, 2004a). Character strengths also has been found to be associated with positive outcomes such as school success, leadership, tolerance, kindness, altruism, the valuing of diversity, and the ability to delay gratification (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). However, studies investigating character strengths profile and its dimension were mostly conducted in Western societies and relatively less is known about Eastern societies. As such, positive psychology researchers have been calling for the examination of cultural-specific character strengths profiles in adolescents from different religious and cultural backgrounds (Steger & Kashdan, 2008; Kubokawa & Ottaway, 2009; Leont'ev & Rasskazova, 2014). This study is part of the effort to examine the profiles of character strengths among adolescents in Malaysian cultural.

Researchers recognise a variety of factors that contribute to cultivating positive characters, such as genetics, family, schooling, peers, and significant life events (Park & Peterson, 2009). These factors are classified as innate (e.g. genetic) and environmental (e.g. family, school, peers, and dramatic events) influences. Studies have revealed that twenty-four character strengths are moderately heritable (Steger, Hicks, Kashdan, Krueger, & Bouchard, 2007). However, the same study also stressed the importance of family environments in influencing character strengths. According to Aristotle, an individual's character can be taught by regulating the activities of youth. In turn, Deci and Ryan (2014) emphasised the significance of a strong relationship between parent and child in developing character strengths, such as responsibility (citizenship), managing emotions (emotional intelligence), and

being concerned for others (kindness). Furthermore, other empirical studies on the environmental influences of character strength development revealed that parent-child relationships and sibling relationships allow for the development of strengths related to love, the love of learning (Pekel, Roehlkepartain, Syvertsen, & Scales, 2015) and kindness (Dunn & Munn, 1986). This research paper examines the dimensions of the relationship between parents with their children, and the character strengths accumulated as the outcome of the relationship.

The perceptions of adolescents regarding teachers as moral agents and the way students actively construct meaning in their interaction with teachers in Malaysian cultural is unclear. Positive teacher-student relationships are strongly correlated with character strength development among adolescents. Effective teachers are different compared to others in terms of their social intelligence, zest, humour, and passion (Park & Peterson, 2008; Park & Peterson, 2009). They provide students with opportunities and alternatives to learn at both surface and deep levels. 459 students from twenty different high schools have expressed their beliefs that their character strengths were acquired and developed through ongoing life experiences at school (Steen, Kachorek, & Peterson, 2003). Furthermore, a study conducted by Yin and Majid (2018) has revealed that positive interpersonal relationships benefit students' well-being. The study highlighted the necessity of studying the relationships between teachers, and how teacher-student relationships can be associated with the development of adolescent character strengths in Malaysia. Altogether, family and schooling could be an effective platform to identify the relationship between environmental influences and character strengths.

According to the principle of positive psychology, people need to feel good about the world, and themselves as they are a part of that world. Flourishing is the

stage of mental health where individuals experience high levels of hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, which is beneficial and desirable to the human condition (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Keyes, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Character strengths are proposed to have important benefits for wellbeing (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Park & Peterson, 2009). In turn, Peterson and Seligman (2004) suggested applying one's character strengths to achieve a flourishing and happier life, as well as to buffer depression. In an experimental study, participants experienced increased wellbeing and decreased depression through their identified VIA (Values in Action) strengths, and applied them in novel ways (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Researchers also revealed that practicing strengths of gratitude, hope, love of learning, perseverance (Kaufman, 2015; Vela, Sparrow, Ikonomopoulos, Gonzalez, & Rodriguez, 2017), zest, hope, and curiosity (Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006) are related to subjective happiness in Japan, American, and Mexico, in studies of both adults and adolescents. There has also been research that suggests that, of the 24 VIA character strengths, forgiveness, kindness, teamwork, self-regulation and persistence are most robustly associated with wellbeing among adolescents (Gillham et al., 2011). Taken together, these studies provide evidence that character strengths are useful in increasing wellbeing across different countries and age groups. As such, this study aims to examine the flourishing levels of adolescents in Malaysia and the potential benefits of character strengths for adolescents' wellbeing in a Malaysian context.

Adolescents represent a large population in Malaysia. Adolescents aged thirteen to seventeen years old in 2019 are born between 1995 and 2009. They make up more than 25% of the Malaysian population and most of them are a part of Generation Z. This generation is born in a society that deals with a challenging

environment in many aspects, including academic, economic, social and technological aspects. Generation Z is known as a generation that is tech-savvy. A survey conducted by INTI International University and Colleges found that one-fourth of 500 Gen Z youth spent an average of eight hours a day on the Internet and felt incomplete whenever they were not connected to the Internet. (Natrah & Rushaizzad, 2016). The influence of globalization has made its impact on adolescent development. In addition, adolescence is defined as the period between childhood and adulthood (10-19 years), which is usually marked by developmental changes in the physical, cognitive, and social-emotional capacities of adolescents ((Dixon, Scheidegger, & Mcwhirter, 2009; Erikson, 1963). It is a demanding period in the life cycle of a young person that may lead to depression (Ollendick et al., 2003). Therefore, there is a need for researchers to further understand the characteristics developed by this generation.

The present research is intended to investigate the character strengths profile of adolescents in Penang and Kedah, and extend information about the distribution of character strengths in Eastern societies. This research explores parents' and teachers' relationships with adolescents and their influence on adolescent character profiles. This research also explores the flourishing levels of adolescents in Malaysia and the impact of character strengths in an Eastern cultural context.

1.2   Problem Statement

The trait-like capacities for adolescent thinking, feeling, and behaviour in Malaysia, especially in ways that benefit oneself and others, are not yet fully understood. Martin Seligman has urged psychologists to pay more attention to personal psychological aspects that make life worth living, and turning the research foci in positive psychology to individual's character strengths and virtues

(Donaldson, Dollwet, & Rao, 2015). Adolescents in Malaysia (age 10 to 19 years old) fall into Generation Z, the latest generation that is currently growing up and will be dominating the world in the next several decades (Wiedmer, 2015). The generation currently represents one fifth or an estimated 5.5 million of the population in Malaysia (Department of Statistics, 2015). However, people were found to have negative perceptions on youth (Park, 2009; Shaw, 2010). Discussions of attitudes towards young people tended to focus on a range of specific behaviours, such as teenage pregnancy (Kirby et al., 1997), smoking and drugs (Isralowitz & Trostler 1996), unemployment (Lackner 1998), alcohol use (Foxcroft & Lowe, 1997), sexuality (Duncan & Bergen, 1997) and recklessness (Bickel & McDonough, 1997). Furthermore, the potential of adolescents in facing challenges and adjusting to the rapid changes of future job markets is unknown (Suhaimi, Arshad, & Yeon, 2018; Fleming's, 2012; Rhodes, 2002). The youth need to be instilled with values and strength of character to face the future with confidence, such as the problem of replacement in human labour by robots in three years (Lee, 2011; Lai & Comeau, 2014; Cann, 2016). This includes values such as bravery, perseverance, leadership and strength of mind that will enable them to deal with challenges (Lee, 2011). Despite Malaysia being in line with the positive psychology movement, there is very little information or literature published about Malaysian adolescents' characteristics, especially their strengths of character.

The impact of adolescents' developmental process on their character profiles is a growing field of study and discussion. Adolescence is characterized by tremendous growth and change. Adolescents undergo the fifth stage of psychosocial development and are in the stage of deciding their identity, recognizing their uniqueness, and searching for their life purpose (Santrock, 2007). The developmental

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process requires the presence of vital social support from family, peers, and society to obtain the appropriate "virtues" (Erwin, 2014). Meanwhile, their pattern of personality development was studied in a longitudinal population-based sample and reported as moderately stable (Zohar et al., 2018). It is to be expected that some character strengths may be consistent while others are inconsistent over the period of adolescence. Character strengths develops rapidly in adolescence, possibly in accord with personally valued goals shaped by the environment. However, empirical data about character strengths and the developmental process in Malaysian cultural are limited. Previous researchers in Malaysia discussed character strengths as a positive personal resource from an educational perspective (Zakaria & Koay, 2013; Duni, 2017; Majid et al., 2014; Yin & Majid, 2018). In connection to this, the question arises on how character strength profiles may form in adolescents with Eastern cultural backgrounds during adolescence.

The contributions of both parent-child and teacher-student relationships in cultivating character strengths in Malaysian adolescents have not yet been discovered. Cultivating good character among children and adolescents is a universal goal for parenting and education. Malaysian parents from the three ethnic groups (i.e., Malay, Chinese and Indian) usually take on an authoritarian parenting style (high demands and low responsiveness) (Keshavarz & Baharudin, 2009; Mofrad & Uba, 2014). This practice is regarded as an unfavorable parenting style in the social context. The research looks further into the effects of parent-child relationship building on adolescents' character strength development in Hong Kong (Ngai, 2015). Study results show that parent-child relationships founded on parental control have an essential negative effect on character strength development in Hong Kong's adolescents (Ngai, 2015). However, the results may not be applied to adolescents

living in other Eastern countries, as Hong Kong is a Chinese community that may also have a more comprehensive orientation towards Western values (Ngai, 2014). Thus, the influence of these two parenting components on character strength development among adolescents in Malaysia is still unknown.

Positive teacher-student relationship refers to teachers who connect well with their students and able to build their trust. Researchers have shown that positive teacher-student relationships result in the development of strengths among students (Orlando, 2013; Gagne, 2008; Majib, Ali, & Alias, 2014). Ghafar, Hamdan, Sihes and Harun (2011) supported the importance of positive teacher-student relationships at school. Teachers play a significant role in carrying our their responsibilities, such as their attitudes towards students and their own character (Orlando, 2013). Previous research was focused on building positive teacher-student relationships, moral dimensions within the relationship (Hamre & Pianta, 2006), contributions of teacher-student relationship in academic achievements (McCormick, O'Connor, Cappella, & McClowry, 2013) and the effects on teenage pro-social behaviour (Obsuth, Murray, & Malti, 2016). The quality of the relationship developed between teachers and students in Malaysia is still unknown. Not many studies have been conducted to examine the teacher-student relationship in Malaysia and its contribution in developing adolescents' character strengths in Malaysia. This represents an important research gap.

Malaysian adolescents' flourishing level is currently under scrutiny (Abdul Kadir et al., 2012). The adolescent period of life between puberty and maturity is associated with dramatic changes and life challenges (Gormly, 1997; Larson & Ham, 1993; Jessor, 1993). Hashim (2007) argues that Malaysian teenagers are commanly faced with various life challenges and experience distress. These problems may lead

to other negative consequences, such as poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and low well-being. Researchers have reported that 77% of youth in Malaysia are unhappy with their lives, and 25% of them classified as at-risk youth in Malaysia (Abdul Kadir et al., 2012). Adolescents between the ages of 15 to 19 years old are identified as being the most vulnerable to suicide attempts and experiencing low basic well-being (Hendin et al., 2008). Malaysia's adolescents also face developmental problems, including numerous on-risk behaviours and online addiction. Studies indicate that Malaysia's adolescents are at risk to pick up habits such as substance abuse, alcohol consumption, suicide contrivance, pre-marital sex, teenage pregnancy, and abortion (Hamid, Ismail, Saad, Ibrahim, & Mansur, 2015; Farid et al., 2018). Conjointly, local researchers have reported that Malaysian parents find their children's lives to be affected by internet addiction. In *the majority* of cases, it has interfered with their home and school responsibilities, with some of them sacrificing their basic social activities (Kapahi, Ramadass, & Abdullah, 2013). Groups that fall into internet addiction in Malaysia include young adults from Klang Valley, Ipoh, or Penang (Cheng, 2016). Thus, there is a critical need to engage with them to promote flourishing.

The influence of character strengths on adolescents' composite well-being remains unexplored in Malaysian context. Previous researchers have discovered the benefits of strengths for wellbeing in Western countries. People who practice their strengths have been found with greater vitality, psychological wellbeing, more progress towards their goals and enhanced resilience after stressful events (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Linley, Nielsen, Wood, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener, 2010; Linley et al., 2010; Peterson & Seligman, 2003). Study also revealed that participants experienced increased well-being and decreased depression after identifying their

VIA strengths and using them in novel ways for six months (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Furthermore, practicing an individual's strengths was found to predict wellbeing, stress, and vitality after a period. In turn, researchers suggested that usage of character strengths has benefits over time (Wood et al., 2011). There has also been research that suggests that of the 24 VIA character strengths, forgiveness, kindness, teamwork, self-regulation and persistence were found to predict fewer depressive symptoms and higher life satisfaction among adolescents (Gillham et al., 2011).

The above discussion highlights how little is known about adolescent's positive traits like character strenghts. Consequently, there is even less information as to how certain variables like parent-child and teacher-student relationship can influence the development of positive traits like character strenghts. Yet, character strengths has the potential to lead to positive development such as flourishing. This leads to significant research gaps and the need to address them by focussing on adolescent's character strengths and how it can be associated with flourishing. It is also important to study how social variables like parent-child and teacher-student relationship can contribute to the development of character strenghts.

1.3   Research Objectives

This research aims to gain an understanding on the character strength profiles of adolescents in Penang and Kedah. The character development process required social support such as family and society to obtain the appropriate "virtue". Therefore, parent-child and teacher-student relationships were included to identify the relationship between environmental influences and character strengths during adolescence. This study also examines the potential character strengths that may increase flourishing among adolescents. The final aim of this study is to get a better

understanding of adolescents as they will be heirs to the leadership and glory of the nation in the future. In addition, validation of the translated Malay version of the questionnaires will be included as one of the objectives in this study. Hence, this study has the following objectives:

1. To investigate the character strengths of adolescents in Penang and Kedah.

2. To asses the parent-child relationship of adolescents in Penang and Kedah and the association of the relationships with adolescents's character strengths.

3. To asses the teacher-student relationships of adolescents in Penang and Kedah and the association of the relationships with adolescents's character strengths.

4. To asses the level of the flourishing of adolescents in Malaysia.

5. To investigate how character strengths predict flourishing of adolescents in Malaysia.

1.4   Research Questions

1. What are the character strengths of adolescents in Penang and Kedah?

2. How are the parent-child relationships of adolescents in Penang and Kedah and what impact they have on the character strengths development?

3. How are the teacher-student relationships of adolescents in Penang and Kedah and what impact they on the character strengths development?

4. What is the level of the flourishing of adolescents in Penang and Kedah?

5. Which character strengths predict flourishing of the adolescents?

1.5　Significance of Study

This study is significant in many ways. Firstly, the findings of this study will provide the profile of character strengths in a collectivist country such as Malaysia. This will be the critical point, as all individuals and educational sectors need to have a more complete understanding of adolescents' character profiles and give more attention to designing and delivering instruction that will suit their personalities. The study will further discuss more effective approaches to assist adolescents in Malaysia to achieve flourishing. Meanwhile, a clearer picture about the possible outcome of the parent's and teacher's relationship on adolescent's character strengths of the generation will help society, educators, and families gain more understanding of the strength developmental process among adolescence. The researcher will gain insight into this uncovered aspect of character strengths in Malaysia through this study.

An understanding of character strengths will enable schools and parents to have a firm knowledge of highly commendable human behaviour. People with strong character strengths are more resilient because they have the ability to return to a set of core values during trying times. Furthermore, they have the best sense of self, form the most secure and healthy relationships, and build the strongest communities. They are also the happiest, and often feel gratified and successful in life. Thus, the character strengths profile would provide an opportunity for adolescents, parents, educators and the rest of society to discover the truth about adolescent character and to build or refine their character into one of resilience. School counsellors, teachers and principals would be interested in learning the knowledge of character strengths in Malaysia. Considering the tenets of positive psychology, this knowledge can be applied in practice as a tool for improving student wellbeing (Park & Peterson, 2006b).

Teachers could benefit by conducting the VIA youth survey at the beginning of an academic year to establish the classes' characteristic strengths. Teachers may refer to the character strengths of other countries performing well, such as Singapore and Japan, to incorporate the strong core virtues within lesson planning, benefiting academic performance. Furthermore, parents will gain benefits by discovering their adolescent's character strengths and helping them commit the right strengths into daily life activities to improve their children's wellbeing. According to previous research, "spirituality" is correlated to addictive behaviour (Selvam, 2015; Luster & Okagaki, 2005). Similarly, strengths such as love of learning, curiosity, prudence, judgement, and leadership were seen to be associated with lower levels of sexual desires, sex-related beliefs and drug use among adolescents (Ma et al., 2008). In turn, a positive psychology approach could potentially be worth pursuing. Parents may also seek professional advice from related fields to reduce adolescent behavioural problems.

The results gained in this study will also provide information about the potential of adolescents in facing challenges such as adjusting to the rapid changes of future job markets. It is important that good character strengths such as zest, teamwork, hope, love, gratitude, leadership, and perseverance exist in adolescents to lead them within a competitive environment with a large cohort and automated issues in the workplace (Harzer, Mubashar, & Dubreuil, 2017). Therefore, this study will benefit the educators and educational policymakers to evaluate the effectiveness of current youth programming approaches in cultivating good character, and propose the requisites for youth programme development. Furthermore, the employers can take this information into account to spot potential talent, sponsor them and and guide them to better carry out their tasks within the company. Therefore, this study

proposes a professional improvement opportunity for employers, policy makers, and educators.

The output of this study will serve as a source of material in the correlation of parent-child relationships and teacher-student relationships with strengths of character. The contribution of both relationships on character strength development during adolescence is significant to the general public, policy makers, educators, and parents (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). Parents will discover the importance of parent-child relationship quality in developing critical character strengths within adolescents. It is significant to have a guideline for parents to be aware of or improve their behaviour, as they are the role model in adolescent development. At the same time, the educators and educational policymakers will be interested in any work that provides evidence that teacher-student relationship quality should be promoted in schools to achieve better well-being (McLeod & Wright, 2015).

This research is also significant to inform the society regarding the current level of flourishing in Malaysian adolescents. Flourishing is the greater good of human exertion and defined as a success element in human beings (Park & Peterson, 2009). Previous research provides evidence that adolescents in Malaysia are at risk of low wellbeing. Precise evidence about current levels of flourishing among adolescents is needed. In addition, this study is important as a low sense of wellbeing in adolescents has been found to be an obstacle to learning (Keeling, 2014), and is associated with behavioural difficulties at school (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012), poor academic performance (Forrest, Bevans, Riley, Crespo, & Louis, 2013), low school attendance (Reid, 2008) and a high rate of school dropouts (e.g. Quiroga, Janosz, Bisset, & Morin, 2013). Therefore, it is important for schools to focus on supporting student wellbeing, such as implementing a whole-school positive psychology

approach to improve behaviour and academic potential (Huebner & McCullough, 2000). For these reasons, identifying the predictors of wellbeing is important to teachers and principals.

1.6   Scope of Study

This study focuses on the character strengths of adolescents in Penang and Kedah. Its aim is to understand the association between character strengths and relationships with both parents and teachers. The study also examine the potential character strengths that may benefits adolescent's flourishing. The overall results from the study will provide brief information about character strengths, the correlation between parent-child and teacher-student relationships to character strengths development, and the contribution of character strengths to increasing the level of flourishing in adolescents. Due to limited resources, the study has only been conducted in Kedah and Penang, two states located in northern Peninsular Malaysia. Research about personality or character is rarely conducted in Alor Setar, while information about the level of flourishing, parent-child and teacher-student relationships of the youth in this city is unknown. Meanwhile, Penang, the second largest urban city in Malaysia, was found to have high levels of internet addiction problems, suicide rates and unhappiness (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2017). Lastly, the research focuses on areas with easier access, lower costs and reduced travel times, as there is a limited time frame for a master's study and a lack of financial support. A total of 217 adolescents were employed as participants in two separate studies, 117 participants from study 1 and 100 participants from study 2. Further information about the methodology is provided in Chapter 3.

1.7   Definition of Terms

This study contains certain key concepts and constructs. Although these constructs are discussed in detail in Chapter 2, they are briefly introduced in this early chapter of the thesis to allow the reader to make sense of what is presented in the subsequent chapters.

I.   Adolescent

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines adolescents as those people in between the ages of 10 to 19 years old (WHO, 2011). Adolescence is a period of gradual transition, accompanied by significant and challenging changes in life. This transition includes biological, physical, emotional, social and economical changes (Ministry of Health, 2012).

II.   Adolescence

Adolescence is the normal, distinct, and expected period of development between childhood and adulthood. In childhood, parents are responsible for regulating the behavior of their children. Adults are responsible for regulating their own behavior (Erikson, 1993).

III.   Character Strengths

Positive traits or positive personalities that can be exercised in daily life activities to achieve an authentic sense of well-being, happiness and flourishing. There are 24 widely-valued character strengths under six virtual groups through the VIS-CS (Value in Action Classification of Strengths) project by Peterson & Seligman (2004), while the top five character strengths practiced most by an individual can be determined by the VIA Inventory of Strengths.

IV. Parent-child relationship

Behaviours, feelings and expectations that are unique to a particular child from a particular parent to extend the child's development (Encyclopedia of Children's Health, n.d).

V. Teacher-student relationship

Secure base environment constructed by teachers in the classroom, and the degree of closeness between the teachers and students to support student adjustment to school environments, promote social skills, academic performance, and to foster students' resiliency in academic performance (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003).

VI. Well-being

There is no consensus on a single definition of well-being, but there is general agreement that at the minimum, well-being includes the presence of positive emotions, satisfaction with life, fulfillment and positive functioning (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Diener, 2000; Frey & Stutzer, 2002).

VII. Flourishing

From a psychosocial perspective, Diener and colleagues (2010) conceptualized flourishing as the fulfilment of the needs of competence, relatedness and self-acceptance as well as the possession of psychological capital such as flow and engagement. Meanwhile, positive psychology defines flourishing as the stage where people experience positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment within optimal human functioning in order to develop rapidly as well as thrive in life (Seligman, 2011).

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Introduction

The objective of the literature review is to provide a comprehensive review and understanding on the background of adolescents in Malaysia. The literature review will focus on the key concepts and theories related to this study namely adolescent development, positive psychology, character strengths, flourishing, interpersonal relationship, positive outcome of character strengths, and strengths intervention. Firstly, this literature review presents the overall review of Malaysian adolescent backgrounds such as Generation Z, adolescent's self-identity, their behaviours, issues in life and social environment. Next, the Erik Erikson's theory of identity development is discussed. Then, a review of the theory of positive psychology is included. Positive psychology is the only theory emphasizing character strengths as a contributor to optimal life-long development and flourishing. Previous studies on the concept of flourishing are also reviewed in order to gain more understanding of the contribution of the twenty-four character strengths to achieving a high level of well-being.

In the following section, the discussion concentrates on the constructs contributing to the development of character strengths. Prior to reviewing this section, it is necessary to provide some background information on the social-cultural aspect of individual development and the development of their character strengths. Then, the review focuses on interpersonal relationships as important elements that can help contribute to the development of character strengths among adolescents, and discusses the concept of cultural transmission through these relationships. Next, the review will move on to the positive outcomes of character strengths. Several positive

outcomes are reviewed, but the main focus is on flourishing and well-being. At the end of this chapter, a conceptual framework that is used as a guide in this study is presented.

2.2 Adolescents in Malaysia

This study focuses on adolescents in Malaysia. Malaysia is a country in Southeast Asia covered by three major ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese and Indian. According to the Central Intelligence Agency (2010), Great Britain established colonies and protectorates in the area of current Malaysia around the late 18th and 19th centuries; these were occupied by Japan from 1942 to 1945. In 1948, the British-ruled territories in the Malay Peninsula, with the exception of Singapore, formed the Federation of Malaya (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010). The Federation of Malaya became an independent country on 31 August 1957. Malaysia is a federation of 13 states; the country's political system is a constitutional monarchy based on the British Westminster parliamentary system. Malaysia turns 62 in 2019, and is facing many challenges as it is currently in a stage of rapid growth. The World Health Organization has defined adolescence as individuals between 10 to 19 years old, which comprises about 25 percent of the world's population (WHO, 2015). Likewise, adolescents represent 23.3 percent of people in Malaysia, out of a population of 32.6 million in 2019 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). Hamzah, Suandi, Ismail and Muda (2019) estimated that by the year 2020, the number of adolescents in Malaysia would have increased to 6 million, as the percentage of adolescents in the country has remained stable from 1970 to 2015 and increased in terms of absolute numbers. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) defined early adolescence as beginning at the average age of 13,

coinciding with entrance into high school, and ending at the age of 17, generally coinciding with graduation from secondary school (UNICEF, 2015).

2.2.1 Adolescents fall within Generation Z

One of the most significant current discussions in the young generation is pursuing a purpose in life (Moran, 2009). Recent research on adolescents shows that they have a heightened need to search for the right way to live a good life (Park & Peterson, 2009). Adolescents aged 13 to 18 years old are part of Generation Z, a generation that makes up 35% of the population in Malaysia (Rafee, 2018). This population group has been referred to by numerous names within society, such as "Generation V" (for virtual), "Generation C" (for community or content), the "Millennial Generation", "The New Silent Generation", the "Internet Generation", the "Homeland Generation", or even the "Google Generation". They were given these different names as they are hyper-connected and overly collaborative with others through social media (McCafferty, 2013). According to Glass (2007), 'generation' is the term for the specific years that a group of people are born and living in. This group of people shares similar cultural experiences and have their own lifestyle (Parry & Urwin, 2011). The term 'generation' also represents individual general characteristics, and how the world is being interpreted to the individual's understanding. Each individual has their own unique personality and behaviour that is defined as a collection of every physical action and observable emotion related to that individual (Ouellette & Wood, 1998). One's behaviour will most likely be driven by thoughts, feelings, values and beliefs. Thus, it is important to understand each generation's characteristic pattern in order to understand their behavior and guide them in pursuing a good life.

In Western studies, there are six cohorts of generations that are widely used as a reference. Previous studies have provided the time range of these generations, as seen in Table 2.1, and dominant behavioural characteristic according to the generational cohort can be used (Salleh, Mahbob, & Baharuddin, 2017; Glass, 2007). Generation Z is the latest generation that is currently growing up, and will dominate the world in the next several decades (Wiedmer, 2015).

Table 2.1 Generation dominant characteristic

Generation	Born year range	Dominant behavioural characteristic
Traditionalists	1900 – 1945	Loyal and discipline
Baby Boomers	1946 – 1964	Responsible, strong work ethics
Generation X	1965 – 1980	Independent thinkers, efficient
Generation Y	1981 – 1994	More social, confident, less independent
Generation Z	1995 – 2012	Poor communication skills, extensively engaged to technology

Note. Reprinted from "Overview of Generation Z Behavioural Characteristic and Its Effect towards Hostel Facility," by Salleh, M. S. M., Mahbob, N. N., & Baharudin, 2017, *International Journal of Real Estate Studies*, *11(2)*, 60. Copyright 2020 by UTM.

However, Tung and Comeau (2014) argued that these generational labels might be incomplete, as most generational studies have been conducted in the United States or other Western contexts. The western labelling (i.e. Gen X and Gen Y) has not been examined in relevance to the Asian experience during the same time period. For example, the Baby Boomers grew up during prosperous times in America, and have a more optimistic economic outlook and idealistic vision (Codrington, 2011). In

comparison, the same time period in Malaysia (formerly known as Malaya at that time) was a period of unrest during which the Japanese invaded during World War II and ended British domination in Malaysia. Japan occupied British Malaya and much of Asia until losing the war in 1945. From 1948 to 1960, Malaysia experienced another period of unrest, an anti-colonial movement known as the Emergency, driven by a desire for self-determination (Soong, 2011). Thus, in order to understand the implications of the notion of 'generations', it may be more logical to study generational cohorts in their proper and unique context, reflecting their own realities, rather than taking it directly from completely different social contexts of the Western world. As a result, local researchers have put effort into re-defining the concepts of generational labelling into a Malaysian perspective.

2.2.2 Generation Z in Malaysia

Comeau and Tung (2013) made an initial study and proposed a set of new generational labels that reflect the past, present and future conditions that represent the true reality of Malaysian' generations. Table 2.2 below outlines the proposed generational labels.

Table 2.2 Malaysia Generational Labels

The Seekers (Pencari) (Born 1943 – 1960)	The Builders (Pembina) (Born 1961 – 1981)	The Developers (Pemaju) (Born 1982 – 2004))	Generation Z (Generasi Z) (Born 2005 onwards)
1. Born in a period of conflict, hardship, struggle and seeking for Independence 2. The Emergency 1947 – 1960 3. World War II 4. Independence in	1. Developments in education 2. New Economic Policy (1971) aimed at economic restructuring 3. Beginning of industrialisation and	1. Unprecedented access to higher education 2. Urbanisation/towards modernisation (vision 2020) 3. Economic growth, income	1. Most educated and urbanised. 2. Higher income / higher consumption 3. Exploit/travel to the world

1957	urbanisation	and consumption improved	4. Population will start to balance out; more intense competition for jobs
		4. TV/Internet is a norm	
		5. Transformation in employment (from agricultural to industry to services)	
Why Seeker (Pencari)? -They are the groups who witnessed Japenese occupation and British colonialism and desperately in sought independence and survival.	Why Builder (Pembina)? They witness the beginning of a development towards a new era in industrialisation, economic self control, education development and progression in becoming an independent and developed nation. They provided the pathways for the modernisation.	Why Developer (Pemaju)? They grow up in a much more prosperous environment with better job opportunity and advancement in technology. They are [will be] the groups who will helps in advancing the country into a develop nation by the year 2020 [Vision 2020].	Why Generation Z (Generasi Z) ? They are growing up in a highly globalised world. The world is flattening out and that generation across space begin to look alike. This generation, in Malaysia, are highly connected, having had lifelong use of communication and media technology sharing with others the nickname digital native. But other substantial differences and challenges arise between this generation and the previous generation.

Note. Reprinted from "Demographic Transformation in Defining Malaysian Generations: The Seekers (Pencari), The Buiders (Pembina), The Developers (Pemaju), and Generation Z (Generasi Z)," by Comeau, J., & Tung, L.,

2014, *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *4(4)*, 60. Copyright 2016 by HRMARS.

Tung and Comeau (2014) proposed the generational labels stated above based on the Malaysian workforce and demographic transitions over the four identified generations during a period of 70 years (from 1940s to present time). Generation Z, defined as being born in 2005 (age 14 in year 2019) onwards, is also the latest generation that is currently growing up in Malaysia. During this period, the Malaysian government has drawn up the framework for a New Economic Model to propel Malaysia from a middle-income to a high-income economy based on innovation, creativity and high-value sources of growth (Malaysia Investment Development Authority, 2014). In turn, the majority of the population has been living in urban areas. This generation is growing up within an urban lifestyle with high expectations of life, and often see both parents working. Children who were born in this generation are increasingly being looked after in day care centres than was the case with previous generations who were cared for by members of the family. The closeness a child feels toward their parents signals a good quality parent-child relationship and may also result in greater parental knowledge of children's whereabouts due to the children's willingness to volunteer information about their daily lives to parents (Stattin & Kerr, in press). The separation between children and parents due to work schedules in the urban context may impact the quality of the parent-child relationship and lead to risky adolescent behaviors.

The adolescents of Generation Z have experienced a different childhood and lifestyle due to the environmental context surrounding them. Researchers have indicated that this generation may not hold as strongly to traditional values and practices, such as in spiritual belief, parental authority and family ties (Salleh et al.,