

## INVESTIGATING NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSETS AND BEST FRIEND ATTACHMENT WITHIN A CONTEXT OF EMOTIONS AMONG YOUTH IN A DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITY IN KUALA LUMPUR

Nor Ba' yah Abdul Kadir,  
Asmawati Desa,  
Salleh Amat,  
Nur Saadah Muhamad Aun,  
Norhayati Ibrahim  
Hilwa Abdullah @Mohd.Nor

*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*

### ABSTRACT

*The present study is among the first to investigate the neighbourhood assets and best friend attachment within a context of emotions among youth in a disadvantaged community in Kuala Lumpur. The aim of this cross-sectional study is to examine the positive and negative emotions in relation to neighbourhood assets and best friend attachment in youth, who are living in communities known to have high levels of exposure to violence and to determine these factors as predictors of positive emotion and negative emotion. Using a convenience sampling technique, a total of 448 participants from low-income apartments in Kuala Lumpur, aged 13–24 years old were asked to complete a set of standardized questionnaires to measure neighbourhood assets, best friend attachment, and positive emotion and negative emotion. Multiple regression analysis revealed that two factors are the most significant predictors of positive emotion while four factors are the most significant predictors of negative emotion. The results suggested that the presence predictors of positive emotion can enhance the positive development of youth, however, the presence predictors of negative emotion must first be reduced to some extent to help these youths increase their emotional well-being.*

**Keywords:** *positive youth development; adolescent attachment; community; malaysia*

### INTRODUCTION

The predicament of youths who are living in a disadvantaged community in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia has been the main focus of government, politicians, policymakers, parents, and public concern with education and community support seen as a means of improving their social and psychological well-being. Parallel concern has been expressed in terms of the higher rates of delinquent behaviour, dropping out of the school system, and academic failure, and the implications for youth who are living in a disadvantaged community, and the resulting social disadvantages (Abdul Kadir et al., 2012, 2014, 2015; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). In Malaysia, an initiative has been made to reduce delinquent behaviour, dropping out of school, and academic failure through youth programmes in schools

and community settings (e.g. Putrajaya Youth Festival, the National Sports Day, Professional Skills for Youth, the National Services Training Programmes, 1Malaysia for Youth, the Rakan Muda Program). However, the implications for the positive development of youth living in a disadvantaged community are often overlooked. Furthermore, the well-being of youth is decreasing in Malaysia, with few opportunities available to them to seek professional help.

Previous studies suggest that identifying the risk and protective factors before designing an intervention programme for youth is of crucial importance. Many social science researchers in Malaysia for instance are more interested in studying youth problems with drugs (Desrosiers et al., 2016; Razali & Kliewer, 2015; Yusoff et al., 2014), smoking

behaviour (Hock et al., 2015; Lim et al., 2015; Zulkefli et al., 2015), sexual risk behaviour (Awaluddin et al., 2015; Chan et al., 2013; Rahman et al., 2015), bully behaviour (Balakrishnan, 2015; Ismail et al., 2014), gambling risk (Sheela et al., 2015), illegal street racers (Ismail et al., 2015; Wong, 2013), and internet addiction (Mak et al., 2014). These risk factors help other mental health professionals when considering what is best when designing individual or group treatment for youth. Despite that, these risk factors have been linked to a host of negative outcomes, such as depression and anxiety (Choon et al., 2015; Lim et al., 2014). Research investigating neighbourhood assets and best friend attachment that can explain individual differences in relation to positive emotion and negative emotion is scarce. Therefore, this research has been conducted to fill this research gap.

Several studies have examined the association of attachment and friendship (Weimer et al., 2004; Doumen et al., 2012; Doyle et al., 2009; Schwarz et al., 2012). Weimer et al. (2004) for instance, examined the associations of attachment style and social interactions with their best friends among adolescents. The results showed that both males and females have secure attachment style when they behave in ways that promote a sense of connectedness with their best friends, have high intimacy in friendship, and positive friendship interaction. However, that study was unable to provide evidence of a relationship between other attachment styles and intimacy in friendship, and positive friendship interaction. Another study revealed that adolescents were more secure and less insecure with their mothers than they were with their fathers (Doyle et al., 2009). That study found that best friend attachment was similar to their mothers apart from preoccupied style, where best friend was similar to father. That study also found that attachment insecurity with best friend was significantly associated with later insecurity with romantic partner. Doumen et al. (2012) also studied the identity styles and the quality of peer relationships among college students. That study revealed that the associations of these factors were partly mediated by avoidant attachment and anxiety attachment.

Empirical reports suggested that best friend attachment plays a vital role in mental health problems, particularly depression (Chow et al., 2015; Duchesne & Ratelle, 2014; Ehrlich et al., 2013; Kullik & Petermann, 2013; Margolese et al., 2005; Muris et al., 2001). Kullik and Petermann (2013), in their study measuring the attachment to peers and depressive disorders, found that less attachment to peers was significantly associated with depressive disorders for both male and female adolescents. The results supported the attachment theory that adolescents begin to develop attachment relationships with friends when they seek comfort, support, and assurance as well as to fulfil their desire for affiliation. Wilkinson (2010), who examined the prediction of adolescent psychological health, found that anxious attachment and anxiety attachment were significantly associated with depression. When compared with other psychological factors, insecure attachment was found to be the most significant factor related to depression. Therefore, that study concluded that best friend attachment plays a vital role in the lives of adolescents and that parental attachment remained the primary attachment. A recent study examined how the transitions in attachment in adolescents predicted changes in depression symptoms from late adolescents throughout adulthood in a sample of African Americans (Cook et al., 2016). The results indicated that those adolescents with a stable-secure attachment style had lower levels of depression symptoms during adulthood than those groups with secure-insecure, insecure-to secure or stable-insecure. The results also reported that the stable-insecure group experienced a higher level of depression symptoms than that of the stable-secure group. They concluded that being secure at some point can be considered as a protective factor against depression symptoms throughout adulthood.

Few studies have examined neighbourhood assets in relation to adolescent health outcomes (Behnke et al., 2011; Chen & Paterson, 2006; Urban et al., 2010). The main principle of using neighbourhood assets in examining adolescents' health is a good fit where there is congruence or a match between the naturally developing individuals and their capacities with a supportive community (Benson et al., 2006). The neighbourhood resources can potentially help at-risk youth to

actively become involved in recreational and social programmes, such as sports programmes, leisure activities, and youth clubs, so that these activities may lead to their well-being. A previous study found that female adolescents with high self-regulation living in lower availability neighbourhoods showed higher levels of positive youth development when engaged in low to moderate levels of activity involvement than those with lower levels of positive youth development when engaged in higher levels of activity involvement (Urban et al., 2010). That study revealed that extracurricular activity interacts with multiple factors that may contribute to adolescent development in social skills and emotional regulation as well as in the formation of adolescent characteristics. Chen and Paterson (2006) explained that a lack of neighbourhood assets and a deficiency in family socio-economy status predicted adolescent physical health outcomes. Chen and Paterson claimed that neighbourhood assets also play a vital role in increasing Body Mass Index (BMI) among adolescents. They suggested that neighbourhood resources, such as parks, sidewalks, and grocery stores, are essential for the adolescents to engage in physical activities in their neighbourhood and to control their diet. All these may help these adolescents to improve their physical health well-being.

The aim of the study is to examine the positive and negative emotions in relation to neighborhood assets and best friend attachment in youth, who are living in communities known to have high levels of exposure to violence and to determine these factors as predictors of positive emotion and negative emotion. The specific hypotheses and aims of the present study are as follows. First, we examine the specificity of associations between three dimensions of best friend attachment style, five dimensions of neighbourhood assets, and with two dimensions of emotions. We expected that 1) insecure, anxious, and avoidant attachment are negatively associated with youth' positive emotions and positively associated with youth' negative emotion; 2) support and empowerment of youth, attachment to the neighbourhood, security, social control, and availability of youth activities are positively associated with youth' positive emotions and negatively associated with

youth' negative emotion. Second, the study tests which best friend attachment styles and neighbourhood asset dimensions are most strongly related with emotions: positive emotion and negative emotions. Because best friend attachment and neighbourhood assets have been found to become more important over the course of youth (De Goede et al., 2009), it was expected that anxious would be most strongly related to negative emotion (Cooper et al., 1998) and secure would be most strongly related to positive emotion (Abdul Kadir et al., 2012, 2014, 2015).

## METHOD

### Participants

The participants comprised 54% (n=242) males, 43.8% (n=196) females, and 2.2% (n=10) did not state their gender. The mean age of the participants was 16.97 years old (SD 2.92). Approximately 84.8% (n=380) of the participants were Malays, 13.6% Indians (n=61), 1.1% Chinese (n=5), and 0.4% (n=2) did not state their ethnicity. In terms of education, 70.5% (n=316) of the participants were still in education, 27.2% (n=122) had completed high school, and 2.2% (n=10) did not state their school status. Most of the fathers were employed (75.2%, n=337) and most of the mothers were full-time housewives (68.8%, n=308).

### Measures

This cross-sectional research design assessed the demographic factors, neighbourhood assets, best friend attachment, positive emotions and negative emotions. The standardized questionnaires were translated into Malay and back-translated into English before use to ensure the accuracy of the meaning; the first author and research psychologists fluent in both languages separately undertook the translations. Discrepancies were discussed and the wording changed for disputed items and back-translated until a satisfactory version was achieved.

The Neighborhood Developmental Assets Questionnaire (Oliva, Antolín, & López, 2012) was used to measure the perceptions that adolescents have about different aspects of the neighbourhood in which they reside, which may be considered to be assets or resources for the promotion of adolescent de-

velopment. This questionnaire consisted of 22 items measuring support and empowerment of youth, attachment to the neighbourhood, security, social control, and availability of youth activities. Examples of the items are “The adults in my neighbourhood are concerned with the well-being of the youth”, “I feel I am part of my neighbourhood”, “In my neighbourhood, there are people who sell drugs”, “People of my age feel valued by adults in the neighbourhood”, and “There are few neighbourhoods, such as my own, where there are as many activities for young people”. The internal consistency of the scale was achieved with good reliability for all dimensions (support and empowerment 0.91; attachment to the neighbourhood 0.91; security 0.87; social control 0.85; 0.80). The Cronbach’s alpha of the total scale was 0.93. The value of Cronbach’s alpha for this study is 0.83.

The Adolescent Friendship Attachment Scale (AFAS; Wilkinson, 2008) was used to measure the attachment aspects of dyadic, best friend relationships in terms of the significant dimensions of attachment working models. Participants were asked to think of the peer that they felt closest to and then rate the items on a five-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree to strongly agree” with respect to their relationship with that special person. Examples of the Secure items are “I can trust my friend”, “I would find it distressing if this relationship ended”; the Anxious items are “I worry my friend doesn’t really like me”, “I become angry with my friend when he/she does not understand me”; the Avoidant items are “I don’t like depending on my friend”, “I avoid discussing personal things with my friend.” Satisfactory reliability and validity of the AFAS reported by Wilkinson (2008) was achieved. The Cronbach’s alpha for the Secure items was 0.90, 0.82 for the Anxious items was, and 0.77 for the Avoidant items. The results also showed the test-retest correlations for the Negative Affect, and that the AFAS test-retest correlations were stable over a one-month period (Secure=0.79; Anxious=0.72, Avoidance=0.71). The Cronbach’s alpha value for this study is 0.75.

The Modified Differential Emotions Scale was used to measure positive emotion

(mDES; Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). The mDES consists of items measuring 10 positive emotions and 10 negative emotions. The participants were asked to respond to the 20 items using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from not at all (0 point) to extremely (4 point). The participants reported how frequently they experienced each of the 20 emotions in the past 24 hours. Examples of positive emotions are “What is the most grateful, appreciative, or thankful you felt?”, “What is the most hopeful, optimistic, or encouraged you felt?”, “What is the most joyful, glad, or happy you felt?”; and examples of negative emotions are “What is the most scared, fearful, or afraid you felt?”, “What is the most stressed, nervous, or overwhelmed you felt?”, and “What is the most angry, irritated, or annoyed you felt?”. Previous studies have reported that the MDES has good internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha 0.88). The Cronbach’s alpha value for this study is 0.83.

### Procedures

Two heads of Public Housing Projects (PPR) in Kuala Lumpur were contacted via phone and invited to participate in the study. In case the PPRs were interested introductory letters of the study were sent. Permission to conduct the study in the PPRs was granted by the executive director of Kuala Lumpur City Hall. A set of questions was distributed to 600 participants residing in the PPR of Kg Baru Air Panas and PPR of Rejang, Gombak, Kuala Lumpur, of which a total of 448 youth completed the questionnaires and returned them to the enumerators. The inclusion criteria for this study were that the participants must be between 13 and 24 years old during the study and living in the PPR of Kg Baru Air Panas and PPR of Rejang, Gombak, Kuala Lumpur. Using a convenience sampling technique of data collection, the door-to-door approach was used to collect data from March to December 2012. In each household, only one adolescent male or female was selected to participate in the study. Each participant was provided with a questionnaire pack. The researchers and research assistants explained to them that the purpose of the study was to assess the profiles of adolescents and that all the information collected would be coded and accessible to the research team only, and that they were free to withdraw their participation at any time without penalty. Then, the partici-

pants were asked to complete a set of questionnaires on their own using the self-report measures. For those youth under the age of 18 years old, informed consent was received from their parents or guardians.

**RESULTS**

Statistical analysis was carried out to examine the correlations of the variables studied with positive emotions and negative emotions. Table 1 displays that all the dimensions of

neighbourhood assets and best friend attachment were significantly correlated to positive emotions with low to moderate correlations. Interestingly, anxious best friend attachment was significantly correlated to both positive emotions and negative emotions. Attachment to the neighbourhood, security, social control, and secure best friend attachment were all significantly negatively correlated with negative emotions, while support and empowerment, availability of youth activities, and avoidant best friend attachment were not correlated with negative emotions

**Table 1:** Correlations between the variables studied, and positive emotions and negative emotions

Variables	Positive emotions	Negative emotions
Support and empowerment	0.30**	-0.08
Attachment to the neighbourhood	0.23**	-0.13**
Security	0.20**	-0.19**
Social control	0.28**	-0.14**
Availability of youth activities	0.33**	-0.01
Secure	0.35**	-0.16**
Anxious	0.23**	0.23**
Avoidant	-.10*	0.05

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed); \* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed)

Further analysis was carried out to determine the predictors of positive emotions in relation to neighbourhood assets and best friend attachment. The first model emerged secure best friend attachment as a predictor of positive emotion, which contributed 13% of the explained variance (adjusted  $R^2=0.13$ ,  $F_{(1, 446)}=64.26$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The second model pro-

duced secure best friend attachment and availability of youth activities as predictors of positive emotions, which contributed 19% of the explained variance (adjusted  $R^2=0.19$ ,  $F_{(1, 446)}=54.73$ ,  $p<.001$ ). None of the other predictors were significantly correlated with positive emotions.

**Table 2:** Multiple Regression Analyses predicting positive emotions

Variables	Standardized coefficients		
	$\beta$	t	Sig.
Model 1			
Secure	0.35	8.02	0.000
Model 2			
Secure	0.28	6.38	0.000
Availability of youth activities	0.25	5.71	0.000

Again, the Stepwise method of multiple regression analysis was used to determine the

predictors of negative emotions, in which four models emerged. The first model produced

anxious best friend attachment, which contributed 5% of the explained variance (adjusted  $R^2=0.05$ ,  $F_{(1, 446)}=24.89$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The second model produced anxious best friend attachment and secure best friend attachment, which contributed 13% of the explained variance (adjusted  $R^2=0.13$ ,  $F_{(1, 446)}=34.58$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The third model produced anxious best friend attachment, secure best friend attachment and security, which contributed

15% of the explained variance (adjusted  $R^2=0.15$ ,  $F_{(1, 446)}=27.31$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and the final model produced anxious best friend attachment, secure best friend attachment, security, and avoidant best friend attachment, which contributed 16% of the explained variance (adjusted  $R^2=0.16$ ,  $F_{(1, 446)}=21.74$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

**Table 3:** Multiple regression analyses predicting negative emotions

Variables	Standardized coefficients		
	$\beta$	t	Sig.
<b>Model 1</b>			
Anxious best friend attachment	0.23	4.99	0.000
<b>Model 2</b>			
Anxious best friend attachment	0.36	7.47	0.000
Secure best friend attachment	-.032	-6.48	0.000
<b>Model 3</b>			
Anxious best friend attachment	0.36	7.44	0.000
Secure best friend attachment	-0.27	-5.51	0.000
Security	-0.15	-3.31	0.001
<b>Model 4</b>			
Anxious best friend attachment	0.38	7.77	0.000
Secure best friend attachment	-0.31	-5.92	0.000
Security	-0.17	-5.63	0.000
Avoidant best friend attachment	-0.10	-2.15	0.032

## DISCUSSION

In line with the first hypothesis, the current findings revealed diverse associations between dimensions of best friend attachment, neighbourhood asset dimensions, and positive emotions and negative emotion. The differential associations are evident, for example, neighbourhood assets and best friend attachment are significantly correlated with positive emotions while only two dimensions of neighbourhood assets and one dimension of best friend attachment are not significantly correlated with negative emotions. Interestingly, both neighbourhood assets and best friend attachment showed a similar pattern in which all the dimensions are significantly correlated with positive emotions; however, secure best friend attachment and availability of

youth activities are the stronger predictors. This finding is consistent with prior research (Urban, Lewin-Bizan, & Lerner, 2009; Mahatmya, & Lohman, 2012) and supports the idea that the availability of youth activities and secure best friend attachment may facilitate the development of positive emotions. This result provides initial support for the idea of attachment working models that the availability of youth activities as a source of social interaction with others, in turn, developed trust as a result of comfort experiences with best friends. Therefore, the formation of secure best friend attachment facilitates the subsequent development of trusting and reciprocity relationships with others and has important consequences for the youth of positive emotions. Youth in this study have more contact with their best friends outside of home

and school. Rahim et al. (2011) found that social interaction and physical activities are significant among youth and their peers. Such activities (e.g. girl guides, police cadets, Malaysia Red Crescent, sports, karate, taekwondo) are developmentally appropriate and enjoyable for encouraging youth in sustaining and maintaining a physically active lifestyle and for nurturing positive emotions. Congruent with our second hypothesis, best friend attachment (anxious, avoidant, less secure) and a lack of security were all significantly related to negative emotion. The findings concerning the predictive capability of negative emotions suggest that higher anxious best friend attachment, lower avoidant best friend attachment, and less secure best friend attachment may actually facilitate the development of negative emotions in conjunction with the lack of security of neighbourhood assets. One possible explanation is that youth with anxious best friend attachment may exhibit different types of interpersonal behaviour. Specifically, those with high levels of anxious best friend attachment may engage in reassurance-seeking behaviours that lead to stress (Purdie & Downey, 2000), and such stress may subsequently interact with their anxious best friend attachment to produce negative emotions (Wilkinson, 2010). On the other hand, those with avoidant best attachment may also avoid close relationships, and therefore, experience less interpersonal stress. This avoidant best attachment can be treated as a defensive strategy to protect against external stressors (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Therefore, anxious best friend attachment is more predisposed to negative emotions following negative events than those with anxious best friend attachment. These results confirm the hypothesis that best friend attachment is an important psychological factors related to negative emotion. These findings are also consistent with prior research (Mmari et al., 2014) that neighbourhood contextual factors are also significant in influencing the negative emotion.

The findings of the study contribute to the conclusions for prevention and intervention programmes for negative emotions using the positive youth development approach. Positive youth development is one of the best approaches for helping adolescents enhance their talents, strengths, interests, and future

potential. This can be done by recognizing the existence of adversities and developmental challenges that may affect adolescents in various ways, and effort should be made to strengthen the protective factors by increasing the secure best friend attachment and providing a room

for youth to organize social activities. Instead of using correctional behaviour, it is suggested that professional mental health practitioners aim at understanding, educating, and engaging adolescents in productive activities, for instance, by promoting supportive relationships with their peers in neighbourhood settings.

The study has several limitations. Although the use of face-to-face survey interviews increased our chance of recruiting a wide range of participants, this study relied on a convenience sample, which may not be representative of the general population. Future studies should be conducted using stratified random sampling. In addition, the study used a cross-sectional research design, which does not permit inferences about causality. Although our analysis identified that best friend attachment and neighbourhood assets lead to the development of positive emotions and negative emotions, we suggest that other researchers investigate other socio-developmental theoretical models. For example, developing resilience and coping strategies to buffer against negative emotions may lead to positive youth development or perhaps professional mental health should help youth to alter their best friend attachment. It is recommended that future research employs a longitudinal or experimental research design to further explore these relationships.

In conclusion, this study has provided initial evidence that positive youth development, such as neighbourhood assets and best friend attachment, may be related to developing positive emotions and negative emotions. This study adds to the growing research literature on the importance of neighbourhood assets and best friend attachment for the development of positive emotions and decrease of negative emotions.

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