

## **Social Support as a Mediator in the Relationship between Job Insecurity and Psychological Well-being among Employees in Public and Private Sectors**

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Job insecurity influences employees' effectiveness at work as they face uncertainty about their future. The objective of this study therefore, is to examine the relationship between job insecurity, social support and, psychological well-being. In addition, this study also investigates the role of social support in mediating the relationship between job insecurity and psychological well-being. A total of 1188 respondents from both public and private sectors consisting of 571 males and 617 females were involved in this study. A set of questionnaire was used to collect data and this questionnaire included the adapted Job Insecurity Scale, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) and Psychological Well-being Scale. Results showed that there was a significant and negative correlation between job insecurity and psychological well-being, a significant and negative correlation between job insecurity and social support, and a positive and significant correlation between social support and psychological well-being. Regression analysis on the other hand, found that social support significantly mediated the relationship of job insecurity on psychological well-being. The findings indicated the importance of social support in buffering the effect of job insecurity which in turn will influence psychological well-being.

*Keywords:* job insecurity, social support, psychological well-being, mediator

Having a job gives an individual a sense of confidence as he or she becomes part of the social integration and social participation, in addition to receiving recognition and status. Failure to have a stable job may result in an individual being stigmatized and consequently, this can influence his or her self-esteem. In the uncertainty of economic downfall and recession, one of the greatest fears is of

losing one's job as it may bring about unemployment and having no salary or income to continue with one's life. This problem is exacerbated when an individual has a family to support and with no means of income, not only the quality of life is reduced but other practical aspects of living such as providing education to children are also affected.

Job insecurity is ‘the threat of unemployment’ (De Witte, 1999), thus its’ opposite job security means having a secure feeling about one’s job. It is also defined as the perceived threat of job loss and the worries related to that threat (Sverke, Hellgren, Naswall, Chirumbolo, De Witte, & Goslinga, 2004). De Witte, Vander Elst and De Cuyper (2015) regard job insecurity as the subjective concern about the continued existence of the actual job. Standing (1999, p.168) also said that “an objective indicator of employment security is the proportion of the employed with stable or regular contracts of employment; a subjective indicator is the reported expression of the belief that employment continuity is assured”.

One of the antecedents of job insecurity is the characteristics of the environment in which there is a high rate of unemployment in the country and a high rate of temporary employment. Research on the comparison of various European countries suggests that job insecurity reflects the national level of unemployment and economic situation (De Weerd et al., 2004). In the Malaysian context, this environment is showing a serious pattern as many employees are laid off due to economic recession, automatisisation of jobs, restructuring of companies and organizations, downsizing, mergers, and privatization. The Edge Market (October 2015) reported that there were over 10,000 retrenchments in 2014, and in the 12 months ended June 2014, there have been almost 12,000 retrenchments.

Hence, the study of job insecurity becomes crucial as it is not only an actual social phenomenon but various studies have also documented the effect it has on employees’ job satisfaction (Sverke, Hellgren, & Naswall, 2002; Cheng & Chan, 2008; Wan Yusoff et al., 2014), mental well-being and physical health (Sverke, Hellgren, & Naswall, 2002;

Cheng & Chan, 2008), and life satisfaction (Green, 2011; Sora et al., 2011). De Witte (1999) also found a significant correlation between mental health scores with job insecurity. In addition, job insecurity was found to be associated with anxiety (Burchell, 2009), irritation (Otto et al., 2011), depressive symptoms, hostility and loneliness (Kalil et al., 2010). Studies have also found that quantitative job insecurity predicted physical health and psychological well-being (Hellgren et al., 1999; De Witte et al., 2010; Ferrie et al., 2005; Kalil et al., 2010; Virtanen et al., 2011). It was also suggested that individual differences in personality traits moderate negatively job insecurity towards well-being such as negative affect and self-care (Roskies, Louis-Guerin, & Fournier, 1993; Mak & Mueller, 2000), self-esteem and optimism (Makikangas & Kinnunen, 2003), emotional intelligence (Jordan, Ashkanasy, & Hartel, 2002), locus of control and need for security (Ashford et al., 1989; Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984).

Job insecurity can be explained by two theories which are the latent deprivation model (Jahoda, 1982) and the vitamin-model (Warr, 1984). The latent deprivation model explains that employment can satisfy the needs of individuals such as having an income, having social relationships outside the family, ability to structure an individual’s time and the ability for individual and social development. Employees who feel insecure about their jobs risk losing all this and it can be a frightening and worrying experience.

On the other hand, the vitamin-model describes several factors of the work situation which can influence psychological well-being, among them, are environmental clarity or predictability and uncontrollability. Lack of environmental clarity or unpredictability can reduce psychological well-being (Warr, 1984). Uncontrollability or the powerlessness

experienced by individuals is considered as the core aspect of job insecurity (Dekker & Schaufeli, 1995; Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984). This refers to the inability of employees to do anything about their job security. This can also explain why individuals' well-being increase once they are certain about their dismissal, after being uncertain about their job for a lengthy period. This also means that individuals can control their future again after knowing that they are dismissed.

Dekker and Schaufeli (1995) said that employees who are uncertain about their jobs face more problems compared to knowing that they will be fired. The study measured employees who were insecure about their jobs and they were measured again two months later. During the second measurement, one group of employees would be dismissed, while the second group was uncertain whether they would be retained or dismissed. Results showed that the well-being of the first group increased once they were certain about dismissal while for the second group, the insecurity remained the same. The first group could start preparing to cope with their dismissal and begin to look for a new job. This finding indicates that employees prefer certainty to insecurity, even if it is negative. One reason for this may be due to the perception that certainty enables individuals to have control in their life. This is supported by Sverke, Hellgren, and Naswall (2002) who conducted a meta-analysis on 72 studies regarding the consequences of job insecurity and found that work-related well-being was significantly and negatively correlated with job insecurity.

Job insecurity can influence negative reaction; therefore, it is important to identify the factors that can reduce them. It is suggested that social support can buffer the negative impact of work stressors (LaRocco, House, & French, 1980). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described

social support as a coping resource and it is found to have correlations with well-being, however, only a few studies have investigated the role of social support in relation to job insecurity and its outcomes (Dekker & Schaufeli, 1995; Frese, 1999). Having family support can buffer the effect of stressors and several other strains (Jackson, 1992). Heaney et al. (1995) state that by having strong social support, individuals can rely on family and significant people in their life to talk to about stressful and frustrating situations and this can build self-confidence.

Various research has shown a significant and positive relationship between social support with health and well-being (Kaufmann & Beehr, 1986; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). This is consistent with the study conducted by van Daalen, Sanders and Willemssen (2005) on the role of social support as a predictor towards health, psychological well-being and life satisfaction among 459 Dutch males and females dual-earners. Results showed that men have better health and psychological well-being compared to women, in contrast, women have higher life satisfaction compared to men. The study showed different findings: women obtain more social support from colleagues than men, but equally, receive support from their supervisor. Men get more social support from their spouse, but women get more social support from relatives and friends for the non-work related sources of social support.

### **Objectives**

The current study therefore, aims to examine: (1) the relationship between job insecurity, social support and psychological well-being; and (2) the effect of social support as a mediator towards job insecurity and psychological well-being among Malaysian employees.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This is a cross-sectional study using the survey method. The cross-sectional survey was employed because it is the best method to collect data at a single period on two different groups of respondents. A total of 1188 respondents from both public and private sectors consisting of 571 males and 617 females were involved in this study. Participants were those aged from 20 to 46 with an overall mean age of 28.98 (SD=5.11).

### Instruments

#### *Demographic Background*

Respondents were required to specify their gender, ethnicity, age, what sector their profession is (public or private), and their marital status.

#### *Job Insecurity*

The perception of job insecurity was measured through the adapted scale of Job Insecurity Scale by Vance and Kuhnert (1988). The questionnaire consists of 8 items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = disagree strongly, 5 = agree strongly). The higher the score, the higher the perceived job insecurity by the respondents. Scores ranged from 6 to 28. Reliability was acceptable but not high, with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .635.

#### *Social Support*

Social support of respondents was measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet and Farley (2010). A total of 12 items were split evenly into three dimensions: family; friends; and significant individuals; each measuring the social support received by those that are close to the respondents. All

items are scored on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree, and the higher the score for that particular dimension, the higher is the social support perceived by the respondents from either their family, friends or significant individuals. Each dimension is scored from 4-28, with a score from 4-11 indicating low social support, 12-19 as medium and 20-28 as high social support received from that person. Reliabilities were good, with the family dimension having a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .884, the friend dimension with .868, and .907 for the significant individual dimension, and .938 for the total items.

#### *Psychological Well-Being*

Psychological well-being was measured through the use of a 42-item, 6-scale instrument developed by Ryff (1989). The instrument was developed as a way to integrate the six main dimensions of well-being: autonomy; environmental mastery; personal development; positive relationships; purpose in life; and self-acceptance. Each of these attributes is self-explanatory; higher scores indicate a more positive outlook at each of them. All 42 items are measured in a 6-point Likert scale, with a 1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree. Dimensions are split evenly – each represented with 7 items. Each of them scored ranging from 7-49, with a score of 7-20 for low level; 21-34 for medium and 35-49 for the high level of each dimension. As for reliability, the internal consistencies for all dimensions in this study ranged from .643 to .751, while reliability for the whole instrument was .943.

### Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the findings of the demographic

data such as frequency and percentage. Besides that, inferential statistics were used to test the hypotheses developed. For testing the relationship between variables, Pearson Correlation analysis was used. For testing the mediation effect, regression with PROCESS and bootstrapping analysis was used (Hayes, 2013).

**Results**

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents. A total of 571 (48.06%) respondents were male while 617 (51.94%) respondents were female. The majority of the respondents were Malay with 1097 respondents (92.34%), followed by 48 (4.04%) Chinese respondents, 30 (2.53%) Indian respondents, and 13

(1.09%) respondents were from other ethnic groups. Most of the respondents come from the age group between 25-34 years old with 875 (73.65%) respondents, 166 (13.97%) respondents from the age group between 35-44 years old, 143 (12.04%) respondents were below 25 years old, and 4 (0.34%) respondents were above 45 years old. A total of 674 (56.73%) respondents were single, with 489 (41.16%) respondents were married and 16 (1.35%) respondents were divorced. Respondents also came from public and private sectors with 580 (48.80%) respondents were from the public sector while 608 (51.20%) respondents were from the private sector.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

Demographic		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	571	48.06%
	Female	617	51.94%
Ethnicity	Malay	1097	92.34%
	Chinese	48	4.04%
	Indian	30	2.53%
	Others	13	1.09%
Age	Under 25 years old	143	12.04%
	25-34 years old	875	73.65%
	35-44 years old	166	13.97%
	45 years old and above	4	0.34%
Marital status	Single	674	56.73%
	Married	489	41.16%
	Divorced	16	1.35%
Employment sector	Public	580	48.80%
	Private	608	51.20%

The data were analysed using Pearson correlation to examine the relationship among variables. Results in Table 2 showed that there was a significant and negative correlation between job insecurity and psychological well-being,  $r = -.159$ ,  $p$

$< .0001$ . There was also a significant and negative correlation between job insecurity and social support,  $r = -.154$ ,  $p < .0001$ . However, the correlation between social support and psychological well-being was positive and significant,  $r = .392$ ,  $p < .0001$ .

Table 2 : Correlation between job insecurity, social support, and psychological well-being

	1	2	3
Job insecurity (1)	-		
Social support (2)	-.154*	-	
PWB (3)	-.159*	.392*	-

\*p < .0001

The second objective of this study was to examine the effect of social support in mediating the relationship between job insecurity and psychological well-being. The data were analysed using regression with PROCESS analysis recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2004). According to Baron and Kenny (1986), four criteria were suggested to analyse a mediator effect.

First, job insecurity must predict social support in the first equation (path a); second, job insecurity must be the predictor to the psychological well-being in the second equation (path c); and third, social support must predict psychological well-being in the third equation (path b). To test this, regression analysis was conducted and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 : Results of regression for mediation analysis

Antecedent	Social Support (Mediator)			Consequent Psychological well-being (outcome)		
	Coefficient	SE	P	Coefficient	SE	p
Job Insecurity	-.461	.086	.000	-.936	.250	.000
Social Support				1.170	.084	.000
Constant	73.960	.452	.000	111.960	.746	.000
	R <sup>2</sup> = 0.237			R <sup>2</sup> = 0.164		
	F(1, 1188) = 28.836, p < .0001			F(2, 1185) = 115.925, p < .0001		

Figure 1 demonstrates the model of social support as a mediator in the relationship between job insecurity and psychological well-being. To test the effect of social support as a mediator in this model, a series of three regressions were conducted. First, social support was regressed on job insecurity ( $\beta = -.46, p < .0001$ ). Job insecurity contributed a significant amount of variance to social support (23.7%). Second, psychological well-being was regressed on job insecurity ( $\beta = -.94, p < .0001$ ). In the third equation, psychological well-being was simultaneously regressed on both job insecurity ( $\beta = -.94, p > .05$ ) and social support ( $\beta = .38, p < .01$ ). Both job insecurity and social support contributed 16.4% towards psychological well-being. Table 3

shows the results of regression with PROCESS analysis.

The Sobel test for indirect effect was significant,  $Z = -5.003, p < .0001$ . Bootstrapping was conducted to perform a formal significance test of indirect effect after Baron and Kenny’s (1986) criteria have been met (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The bootstrapped estimate of the true indirect effect ( $\beta = -.5397$ ) lay between  $-.7492$  and  $-.3406$  with 95% confidence. It can be concluded that the indirect effect was indeed significantly different from zero at  $p < .05$  because zero was not in the 95% confidence interval (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). This result indicates that there was a significant indirect effect (mediational effect) of job insecurity on

psychological well-being mediated by social support.

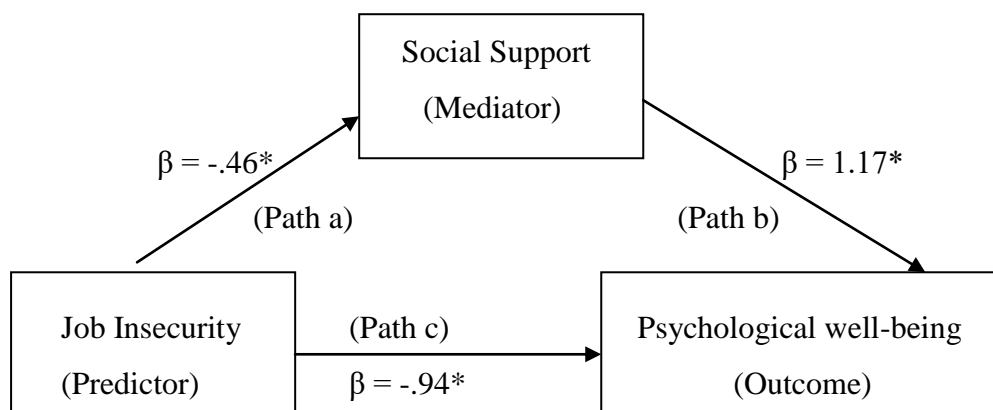


Figure 1

*Model of social support as a mediator between job insecurity and psychological well-being*

### Discussion

Results showed that there was a significant and negative correlation between job insecurity and psychological well-being. This means that the higher the experiences of job insecurity among employees the lower their psychological well-being. This is supported by previous studies (Hellgren et al., 1999; De Witte et al., 2010; Ferrie et al., 2005; Kalil et al., 2010; Virtanen et al., 2011) which explain that once a person feels insecurity in their employment, they will experience anxiety and stress as they have no control over the future. The feelings of insecurity may involve worrying about being fired from the job, loss of income and thoughts of seeking other employment. The negative experience can be worse among employees who have been with the organization for a long period as they have gone through organizational socialization and have inculcated organizational values and norms (Mohamad Irwan et al., 2016).

Findings also showed that there was a significant and negative correlation between job insecurity and social support which implies that the lower the experiences of job insecurity the higher social support received from family,

friends and significant individuals. This study also found that there was a significant and positive correlation between social support and psychological well-being which means that those who receive higher social support from family, friends and significant individuals experience higher psychological well-being. This is consistent with findings from Jackson (1992) and Heaney et al. (1995) which state that social support can buffer the effect of stressors and by having strong social support, individuals can rely on family and significant people in their life to talk to about stressful and frustrating situations and this can build self-confidence. Sarah Mahfuz et al. (2017) also state that employees with a low workload and receive the reward, social support and job security perceive their work as satisfying.

Results showed that job insecurity contributed a significant amount of variance to social support. In addition, job insecurity and social support also predicted significantly psychological well-being. Findings obtained showed that social support significantly mediated the relationship between job insecurity and psychological well-being. High job insecurity experienced by individuals will

lead to lower social support indicating that individuals feeling insecure about their jobs may experience low self-confidence (Heaney et al., 1995) and tend to isolate themselves from social interactions. The thought of losing their jobs may result in an individual being stigmatized and having low self-esteem (Makikangas & Kinnunen, 2003). This will lead to feelings of anxiety and stress and can decrease mental health (De Witte, 1999; Burchell, 2009; Kalil et al., 2010) and psychological well-being (Hellgren et al., 1999; De Witte et al., 2010; Ferrie et al., 2005; Kalil et al., 2010; Virtanen et al., 2011). However, having strong social support can mediate this relationship. If individuals receive support from family and close friends, they can cope with feelings of insecurity and this will ensure they have positive psychological well-being.

### Conclusion

The results of the current study imply the importance of social support in buffering the effects of job insecurity on psychological well-being. Experiences of job insecurity are faced by many individuals in countries with economic instability and recession, therefore strategies need to be employed to reduce anxiety and stress associated with it. Social support provided by family, significant others and friends can help in alleviating the uncertainty and this can increase an individual's well-being. Having strong social support and psychological well-being will prepare individuals to make plans for alternative careers and prepare themselves for the future.

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