

The Role of Perceived Attachment to God in Times of Distress on Psychological Well-Being: A Mix-Method Study

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Article history: Received:05 December 2023 Received in revised form: 20 June 2024 Accepted: 22 June 2024 Published online: 31 August 2024

Abstract

God can be perceived as an attachment figure (AF) who functions as a safe haven and secure base during distressful times. Nevertheless, stress levels might influence individuals' attachment styles with God, which can in turn differentially affect their psychological well-being (PWB). This study aimed to examine the mediating role of attachment to God in the relationship between stress and PWB among religious young adults. A mixed-methods design was utilized, whereby 118 participants completed a survey, and 4 participants were interviewed to obtain more in-depth insights about religious attachments. The quantitative results indicated that stress negatively predicted PWB and positively predicted insecure attachment to God, secure attachment to God positively predicted PWB, and insecure attachment to God negatively predicted PWB; however, stress did not predict secure attachment to God. Additionally, the relationship between stress and PWB was mediated by insecure attachment to God. For the qualitative aspect, several themes were identified, namely, a relationship with God provides security, religious attachments are hindrances in religious practices and sources of distress, religious insecurities create distress, and differences in 'God' conceptualizations. The theoretical implication of not generalizing the attachment to God concept to all religions, and the practical implication of considering religious attachments in therapy were also discussed.

Keywords: attachment to God, stress, psychological well-being, spirituality, coping.

Abstrak

Kepercayaan kepada Tuhan boleh dianggap sebagai keterikatan (AF) yang berfungsi sebagai tempat perlindungan dan pangkalan yang selamat semasa masa yang sukar. Namun begitu, tahap tekanan mungkin mempengaruhi gaya keterikatan individu dengan Tuhan, yang seterusnya boleh menjejaskan kesejahteraan psikologi (PWB) mereka secara berbeza. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peranan pengantara keterikatan kepada kepercayaan kepada Tuhan dalam hubungan antara tekanan dan PWB dalam kalangan dewasa muda. Reka bentuk kaedah campuran telah digunakan, di mana 118 peserta menyelesaikan tinjauan, dan 4 peserta telah ditemu bual untuk mendapatkan pandangan yang lebih mendalam tentang keterikatan agama. Keputusan kuantitatif menunjukkan bahawa tekanan meramalkan PWB secara negatif dan meramalkan keterikatan yang tidak selamat kepada Tuhan secara positif, keterikatan yang selamat kepada Tuhan meramalkan PWB secara positif, dan keterikatan yang tidak selamat kepada Tuhan meramalkan PWB secara negatif; bagaimanapun, tekanan tidak meramalkan keterikatan yang selamat kepada Tuhan. Selain itu, hubungan antara tekanan dan PWB telah dimediasi oleh keterikatan yang tidak selamat kepada Tuhan. Bagi aspek kualitatif, beberapa tema telah dikenal pasti iaitu hubungan dengan Tuhan memberi keselamatan, keterikatan agama menjadi penghalang dalam amalan agama dan punca kesusahan, ketidakamanan agama mewujudkan kesusahan, dan perbezaan konsep 'Tuhan'. Implikasi teori tidak mengeneralisasikan konsep keterikatan kepada Tuhan kepada semua agama, dan implikasi praktikal mempertimbangkan keterikatan agama dalam terapi turut dibincangkan.

Kata Kunci: keterikatan kepada Tuhan, tekanan, kesejahteraan psikologi, spiritual, coping.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Religion can help individuals deal with life adversities by serving as a stress coping mechanism (Gardner et al., 2013). As stress coping is a determining factor for psychological well-being (PWB) (Chan et al., 2022; Leow et al., 2019), which refers to the optimal functioning and development from life experiences (Deci & Ryan, 2001), there is a growing interest in the understanding of how stress, religion and PWB can interact with each other (Fiorito & Ryan, 2007). More specifically, researchers have extended upon Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory to postulate that God can be perceived as an attachment figure (AF) who can help individuals cope with stress by acting as a safe haven and secure base (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013). Nevertheless, God's distress-regulating abilities and their subsequent influences on PWB have been found to still depend on individuals' attachment styles with God (Ellison et al., 2012). The present study aimed to address these literature gaps by examining the mediating role of attachment to God in the relationship between stress and PWB among young adults in Malaysia.

■2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory postulated that individuals' developmental progressions until early adulthood are influenced by their attachment styles with primary caregivers during infancy. Secure attachment arises when caregivers are perceived as safe havens and secure bases who can provide infants with comfort and security during distressful times; hence, infants tend to maintain proximity with caregivers as a form of protection (Ainsworth, 1993). By knowing that caregivers can be relied on when faced with challenges, these children grow up to be more confident in the independent exploration of new surroundings and relationships (Grossmann & Grossmann, 2019). Conversely, insecure attachment develops when caregivers are insensitive, unavailable or unresponsive to their infants' needs. Insecure attachment can be categorized in the dimensions of anxious attachment, which refers to excessive fear about the unavailability of AFs, and avoidant attachment, which signifies wariness about the goodwill of AFs (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). As children might extend such insecurities to future social interactions, such feelings of anxiety or distrust towards social partners can also impair their relationships in adulthood (Fletcher & Gallichan, 2016).

2.1 Attachment to God

The role of primary AFs gradually transitions from parents to peers in adolescence or early adulthood, and individuals tend to look for substitute AFs to deal with negative outcomes that might arise from the relinquishment of attachment bonds with parents, such as emotional loneliness (Granqvist, 2012). Moreover, individuals' abilities to engage in higher-level thinking processes such as mentalization and symbolic thought also increase with age due to cognitive maturation, whereby young adults and adults often rely more on internalized forms of security such as personal values or unseen incorporeal entities; therefore, God might be a suitable substitute AF (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008). In fact, God's omniscient (i.e., all-knowing), omnipresent (i.e., ability to be present anytime and anywhere) and omnipotent (i.e., unlimited power and authority) nature might even allow God to be perceived as an ideal AF whose availability, security and distress-regulating abilities greatly surpass that of human AFs (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013). Commonly, attachment to God can be understood based on the compensation hypothesis, which states that attachment bonds with God are formed in order to compensate for certain inadequate human attachment experiences, or the correspondence hypothesis, which states that beliefs and expectations towards attachment bonds with God are based upon prior experiences with human attachments (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

The concept of attachment to God has been primarily examined in the context of Christianity, whereby religious practices such as supplicatory praying, calling out to God and attending church services are seen as ways to maintain proximity and strengthen personal relationships with God (Kirkpatrick, 1992; 2005). Moreover, the portrayal of God as a safe haven and secure base can also be seen in biblical scriptures, whereby God is depicted as a more knowledgeable other who protects those who have faith in Him (Proctor et al., 2009). Such attachment dynamics with God can also be observed in other theistic faiths, such as Islam, whereby Muslims also depict God as a secure base to rely on during uncertainties (Ghobary Bonab et al., 2013), and Judaism, whereby attachment-related phrases can also be found in Jewish religious scriptures (Pirutinsky et al., 2019).

In comparison, certain aspects of the non-theistic religion of Buddhism appear inconsistent with the concept of attachment to God. More specifically, the Buddha is not viewed as a God, but "the perfectly enlightened one" (*Āṅguttara Nikāya*, 2012, 4:36), which signifies a figure who is "not subjected to birth, aging, illness, sorrow, suffering and rebirth" (*Majjhima Nikāya*, 2009, 26). Nevertheless, practitioners often still consider the Buddha as a godlike supernatural figure due to his counter-intuitive properties that clearly transcend that of human capabilities (e.g., having psychic powers) (Pyysiäinen, 2003). Furthermore, Buddhists consider 'attachment' as a cause of suffering in this impermanent and ever-changing world, and instead promote 'non-attachment' – the liberation from mental fixations by being in the present moment (Sahdra et al., 2010; Wallace, 2006). Despite this, Gammage (2006) highlighted that non-attachment in Buddhism results in low attachment anxiety and avoidance, which are outcomes of secure attachment. In fact, one common Buddhist prayer is "I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha", which according to attachment researchers, signifies that Buddhists technically still depend on mental representations of the Buddha, the Dhamma (his teachings), and the Sangha (his monastic community) as safe havens and secure bases (Granqvist et al., 2010). Therefore, religious aspects of Buddhism that were not established from the attachment system per se, might still be indirectly connected to the concept of attachment to God, and were thus further examined in this study (Granqvist et al., 2010).

2.2 Attachment to God in Young Adulthood

Young adults between 18 to 25 years old often do not endure full normative responsibilities of adulthood but nonetheless still have relatively more freedom to explore different life choices compared to children and adolescents (Arnett, 2000). However, those who are religious often face instabilities in their relationships with God due to stress from uncertainties that are associated with their abundant life possibilities (Granqvist, 2012). In fact, many religious young adults also start developing individualized beliefs about religiosity, which can subsequently result in religious skepticism (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). Despite young adulthood being presented as a dynamic period for individuals' attachments with God, prior literature on attachment to God mostly focused on other life stages such as adulthood and older adulthood (Ellison et al., 2014; Miner et al., 2014); therefore, this justifies the need for attachment to God to be examined among young adults in this study.

2.3 Stress, Attachment to God and Psychological Well-being

Psychological well-being refers to the optimal functioning and development from life experiences (Deci & Ryan, 2001), which can be assessed based on the perspective of eudaimonia (Ryan & Deci, 2017; 2001). From the eudaimonic perspective, the concept of well-being

addresses the degree to which an individual fully engages in meaningful endeavors and positive functioning (Diener et al., 2010; Leow et al., 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryff, 1989). Nevertheless, this stress-PWB relationship was still examined in this study to fulfill the assumptions of mediation analysis (further elaborated below), with this hypothesis:

H1 Stress negatively predicts PWB.

Prior research also indicated that stress significantly influences individuals' attachment styles with God. More precisely, low stress levels allowed religious individuals to have stronger secure attachment to God as they became more trustful about God's availability and responsiveness in looking out for them (Kelley & Chan, 2012). Conversely, stress levels that exceeded individuals' perceived or actual coping abilities resulted in stronger insecure attachment to God, as individuals began doubting God's care for them and even felt abandoned by God (Stauner et al., 2019). Nevertheless, such studies were mainly based upon Caucasian and the Christian contexts (Counted, 2016; Miner et al., 2014), and attachment to God in extremely stressful circumstances (e.g., loved one's passing or pregnancy) (Clements & Ermakova, 2012; Kelley & Chan, 2012). Therefore, these relationships were reexamined to better comprehend how attachment to God is associated with typical day-to-day stressors, as well as from the perspectives of Malaysia and other religions besides Christianity, with these hypotheses:

H2a Stress negatively predicts secure attachment to God.

H2b Stress positively predicts insecure attachment to God.

Furthermore, prior research findings also indicated that attachment to God can predict PWB. More specifically, individuals with stronger secure attachment to God were found to utilize healthier emotion regulation strategies, had more stable self-worth, and better interpersonal functioning, which are all aspects of PWB; however, stronger insecure attachment to God was found to produce contrasting patterns in these associations (Mikulincer et al., 2010; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Nevertheless, the relationship between stress and PWB was also reassessed to address literature gaps on the lack of perspectives from Malaysia, and other religions besides Christianity, with these hypotheses:

H3 Secure attachment to God positively predicts PWB.

H3 Insecure attachment to God negatively predicts PWB.

Moreover, attachment to God was also found to significantly moderate the relationship between stress and PWB, whereby certain negative effects of stress on PWB (e.g., psychological distress and lower life satisfaction) were alleviated by secure attachment to God, but exacerbated by insecure attachment to God (Ellison et al., 2012). However, there is a lack of evidence about the mediating role of attachment to God in the relationship between stress and PWB. In order to address these mediation literature gaps, and the lack of insights from the Malaysian context, and other religions besides Christianity, this study examined the mediating role of both secure and insecure attachment to God with this final hypothesis:

H4 Attachment to God mediates the relationship between stress and PWB.

Additionally, there is also a lack of qualitative insights as prior studies on religious attachments were mostly quantitative (Miner et al., 2014); hence, the current mixed-method study also attempted to address this gap by providing in-depth understandings about religious attachments from a qualitative viewpoint to complement the quantitative findings.

2.4 The Current Study

To address all the aforementioned literature gaps, a mixed-method study was conducted to examine the mediating role of attachment to God in the relationship between stress and PWB among young adults in Malaysia. The researcher aimed to answer the research question of "Does attachment to God mediate the relationship between stress and PWB?". For the qualitative part, the researcher aimed to answer the research question of "What does religious attachment mean to a local sample of young adults?"

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

Sample for the quantitative part of the study comprised of 118 religious Malaysian young adults, whereby religiosity referred to the devotion to beliefs and practices that are upheld by a certain sacred institution (Good & Willoughby, 2008). Participants consists of 71 female (60.2%) and 47 male participants (39.8%) between 18 to 25 years old ($M = 21.39$, $SD = 1.80$). Participants were mainly ethnic Chinese ($N = 80$, 67.8%) and ethnic Malay ($N = 38$, 32.2%) living in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The religious beliefs of the participants were relatively equal spread, Islam ($N = 38$, 32.2%), Christianity ($N = 42$, 35.6%) and Buddhism ($N = 38$, 32.2%). For the qualitative sample, a total of 4 participants were interviewed. These participants were volunteers from the quantitative sample and thus met the similar inclusion criteria as the quantitative survey (i.e., Malaysian, between 18-25 years old, religious). They were also screened for sufficient English fluency. This sample consisted of 2 Christians and 2 Buddhists.

3.2 Design

An exploratory mixed-method research design was utilized, whereby findings from the qualitative interviews were used to complement understandings from the quantitative surveys (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010). More specifically, the mediating role of attachment to God in the relationship between stress and PWB was examined in the quantitative surveys, and possible differences in the interpretation of religious attachments that might have influenced the quantitative findings were explored in the qualitative interviews.

3.3 Materials (Quantitative)

3.3.1 Demographic variables

Self-developed demographic questions were used to collect information about participants' age, gender, race, nationality, religion and religiosity.

3.3.2 Stress

The Perceived Stress Scale 14 (PSS-14) (Cohen et al., 1983) was used to measure the extent to which participants perceived life situations as stressful in the past month. This 14-item questionnaire was rated on a 0 to 4 Likert scale that ranged from 'never' to 'often'. Some items from the questionnaire were reversely scored and the total scores of all 14 items signified participants' overall stress scores, whereby higher total scores indicated higher stress levels. An example of a positively scored questionnaire item is "In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?" Scores were computed as the average across responses. The internal consistency reliability as estimated by Cronbach alpha for this scale is high, with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$.

3.3.3 Psychological well-being (PWB)

The Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) was utilized to assess participants' self-perceived functioning in various life. This 8-item questionnaire was rated on a 1 to 7 Likert scale that ranged from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. An example questionnaire item is "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life" Higher total scores indicated better psychological well-being. The internal consistency reliability as estimated by Cronbach alpha for this scale is high, with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$.

3.3.4 Secure attachment to God

The Emotionally Based Religiosity Scale (EBRS) (Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999) was incorporated to measure participants' perceived attachment and security with their religions. This 10-item questionnaire was rated on a 1 to 6 Likert scale that ranged from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. An example questionnaire item is "My religious faith helps me to feel less lonely" Higher total scores indicated stronger secure attachment to God. The internal consistency reliability as estimated by Cronbach alpha for this scale is very high, with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$.

3.3.5 Insecure attachment to God

The attachment to God inventory (AGI) (Beck & McDonald, 2004) was utilized to assess the 2 dimensions of insecure attachment to God (i.e., anxious and avoidant attachment styles). This 28-item questionnaire was rated on a 1 to 7 Likert scale that ranged from 'disagree strongly' to 'agree strongly'. An example of a positively scored questionnaire item is "I worry a lot about my relationship with God" Some items were reversely scored, and higher total scores indicated stronger insecure attachment to God. The internal consistency reliability as estimated by Cronbach alpha for this scale is very high, with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$.

3.4 Materials (Qualitative)

A self-developed interview schedule was utilized which included topics of descriptions of God, the significance of religious practices, and religious coping. These topics were chosen based on a review from prior qualitative research studies about religious attachments (Kimball et al., 2013; Zhang & Yang, 2018).

3.5 Procedure (Quantitative)

After ethics approval was obtained, a Qualtrics survey link was distributed to participants. At the start of the survey, participants answered questions about demographic variables, stress, PWB, secure and insecure attachment to God. As certain religions might not believe in a God (Pyysiäinen, 2003), a disclaimer was shown before the religion-related questions informing participants about how 'God' will be used in the upcoming sections as a general word to represent all relevant religious figures. All participants were debriefed upon completing the survey. Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS version 28.

3.6 Procedure (Qualitative)

Participants who agreed to be interviewed were participated in a semi-structured interviews conducted in English on Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes. Before the actual interviews, a pilot interview was conducted to ensure that the researcher was familiar with the interview flow and the usage of the Microsoft Teams platform. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. During the interviews with Buddhist participants, the interviewer also ensured not to use the word “God”, but instead “the Buddha” when referring to the religious figure in Buddhism. After the interviews, participants were debriefed and data was analyzed using thematic analysis (TA), which is a way to find, analyze and report meaningful patterns (themes) that emerged from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.7 Data Analysis (Quantitative)

For quantitative data analysis, H1, H2a, H2b, H3a and H3b were tested using correlation and linear regression analyses, and H4 was tested using PROCESS Macro and the Sobel test. The fourth model of PROCESS Macro was utilized to generate mediation outputs, and as recommended by Hayes (2013), the Sobel test was run to validate the mediation approach through bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals. A syntax was run for the Sobel test, whereby the syntax file from Preacher and Hayes (2004) was downloaded, and the command of SOBEL $y=yvar/x=xvar/m=mvar/boot=z$ was executed. More specifically, $yvar$, $xvar$ and $mvar$ were the names of the dependent, independent and mediator variables respectively, and z referred to the number of bootstrap resamples desired, which was 1000 in this study. As discrepancies might exist in the applicability of the attachment to God concept in Buddhism compared to Christianity and Islam (Sahdra & Shaver, 2013), additional analyses of Kruskal-Wallis and one-way between-subjects ANOVA were conducted to identify possible differences in secure and insecure attachment to God scores between Buddhist, Christian and Muslim participants.

3.8 Data Analysis (Qualitative)

Qualitative data was analyzed with TA as it allows for the summarization and organization of extensive textual data without compromising the richness of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method has also been found to be effective in capturing participants’ lived experiences about religious attachments (Kimball et al., 2013). An inductive TA approach was utilized, whereby codes were developed based on core commonalities in data content, rather than being predefined from preconceived theoretical framework(s) (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2021). The 6-phase TA process by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used: i) data familiarization, ii) initial codes development, iii) themes development, iv) reviewing potential themes, v) naming and defining themes, vi) reporting.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Quantitative Results

4.1.1 Correlation

As shown in Table 1, Pearson’s correlation analyses indicated that stress ($r = -.71, p < .001$) and insecure attachment to God ($r = -.45, p < .001$) were both negatively correlated with PWB. Contrastingly, positive correlations were found between stress and insecure attachment to God ($r = .30, p < .001$), and between secure attachment to God and PWB ($r = .19, p = .045$). However, there was no significant correlation between stress and secure attachment to God ($r = -.03, p = .725$).

Table 1 Correlations between key variables ($N = 118$)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Stress	42.00	6.87	1			
2. Psychological Well-Being	41.26	7.15	-.71**	1		
3. Secure Attachment to God	46.15	12.23	-.03	.19*	1	
4. Insecure Attachment to God	96.22	21.08	.30**	-.45**	-.37**	1

Note. *Significant at $p < .05$, **Significant at $p < .001$

4.1.2 Linear Regression

As depicted in Table 2, stress negatively predicted PWB ($B = -.74, p < .001, R^2 = .49$), but positively predicted insecure attachment to God ($B = .92, p < .001, R^2 = .08$). Furthermore, secure attachment to God positively predicted PWB ($B = .11, p = .045, R^2 = .03$), whereas insecure attachment to God negatively predicted PWB ($B = -.15, p < .001, R^2 = .20$). However, stress did not significantly predict secure attachment to God ($B = -.06, p = .725, R^2 = -.01$). In short, H1, H2b, H3a, H3b were supported, but H2a was rejected.

Table 2 Linear regressions for key variables

Relationship	<i>B</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Hypothesis
Stress → Psychological Well-Being	-.74	-.71	< .001	.49	H ₁ supported
Stress → Secure Attachment to God	-.06	-.03	.725	-.01	H _{2a} rejected
Stress → Insecure Attachment to God	.92	.30	< .001	.08	H _{2b} supported
Secure → Psychological Well-Being	.11	.19	.045	.03	H _{3a} supported
Insecure → Psychological Well-Being	-.15	-.45	< .001	.20	H _{3b} supported

4.1.3 Mediation

A significant mediation indicates that the independent variable predicts the mediator, which in turn, predicts the dependent variable. Based on the assumptions of mediation analyses (Abu-Bader & Jones, 2021), all variables were assumed to be continuous data and normally distributed, the errors associated with one observation were assumed to be independent from the errors of any other observations, and relationships between variables were assumed to be linear.

In this study, there were two mediation models. One mediation model had insecure attachment to God as a mediator, and another mediation model had secure attachment to God as a mediator. The relationships between the independent variable (stress), mediator (secure or insecure attachment to God), and dependent variable (PWB). More specifically, i) total effect indicates the effect of direct causality of stress on PWB without accounting for the mediator, ii) direct effect indicates the effect of direct causality of stress on PWB while accounting for the presence of the mediator, iii) a-path indicates the effect of stress on the mediator, iv) b-path indicates the effect of the mediator on PWB while controlling for stress, and v) indirect effect is the effect of the mediation path, whereby stress predicts the mediator, and the mediator in turn predicts PWB (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

The mediation analysis with insecure attachment to God as the mediator indicated a significant regression of stress on the mediator (a-path) ($b = .92, t = 3.40, p < .001$). Secondly, there was also a significant regression of the mediator on PWB while controlling for stress (b-path) ($b = -.09, t = -4.03, p < .001$). Thirdly, there was a significant direct effect of stress on PWB, with a significant reduction in effect ($b = -.65, t = -9.67, p < .001$) compared to the significant total effect of stress on PWB ($b = -.74, t = -10.73, p < .001$). Lastly, the Sobel test indicated that there was a significant partial mediation, whereby the indirect effect was significant ($b = -.08, t = -2.56, z = -2.56, p = .011$) with a lower limit of $-.15$ and upper limit of $-.02$ at the cumulative interval of 95%.

Next, the mediation analysis with secure attachment to God as the mediator based on the regression of stress on the mediator (a-path) was not significant ($b = -.06, t = -.35, p = .726$). Nonetheless, there was still a significant regression of the mediator on PWB while controlling for stress (b-path) ($b = .09, t = 2.52, p = .013$). Moreover, there was also a significant direct effect of stress on PWB, with a significant reduction in effect ($b = -.73, t = -10.89, p < .001$) compared to the significant total effect of stress on PWB ($b = -.74, t = -10.73, p < .001$). Lastly, the Sobel test indicated that there was no significant mediation, whereby the indirect effect was not significant ($b = -.01, t = -.32, p = .746, z = -.32$) with a lower limit of $-.04$ and upper limit of $.03$ at the cumulative interval of 95%. Overall, H4 is partially supported, whereby a significant partial mediation was only found when the mediator was insecure attachment to God, and not secure attachment to God. A summary of the mediation analyses is shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Mediation effect of secure and insecure attachment to God on stress and PWB

Path	<i>B</i>	s.e	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
						Lower	Upper
Mediator: Insecure (Figure 2)							
a-path	.92	.27	.30	3.40	< .001	.39	1.46
b-path	-.09	.02	-.26	-4.03	< .001	-.13	-.05
Total Effect	-.74	.07	-.71	-10.73	< .001	-.87	-.60
Direct Effect	-.65	.07	-.63	-9.67	< .001	-.79	-.52
Indirect Effect	-.08	.03	-.08	-2.56	.011	-.15	-.02
Mediator: Secure (Figure 3)							
a-path	-.06	.17	-.03	-.35	.726	-.39	.27
b-path	.09	.04	.16	2.52	.013	.02	.17
Total Effect	-.74	.07	-.71	-10.73	<.001	-.87	-.60
Direct Effect	-.73	.07	-.70	-10.89	<.001	-.86	-.60
Indirect Effect	-.01	.02	-.01	-.32	.746	-.04	.03

Note. The independent variable was stress and the dependent variable was psychological well-being. Insecure = insecure attachment to God, secure = secure attachment to God

4.1.4 Additional Analyses

The variable of secure attachment to God in Christianity and Buddhism violated normality assumptions; hence, a non-parametric Kruskal Wallis test was used. It indicated that there were significant differences in secure attachment to God scores between religions, $X^2(2) = 50.30, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .43$. Follow-up Mann-Whitney U with Bonferroni corrections indicated that Buddhist participants ($Med = 35.00, IQR = 22.00$) had significantly lower secure attachment to God scores compared to Christian ($Med = 55.00, IQR = 11.00, U = 126.00, p < .001, r = -.73$) and Muslim participants ($Med = 53.00, IQR = 15.00, U = 170.50, p < .001, r = -.66$). However, there were no significant differences in secure attachment to God scores between Muslim and Christian participants ($p = .454, r = -.01$).

Conversely, the variable of insecure attachment to God did not violate normality assumptions; thus, a one-way between-subjects ANOVA test was used. No significant differences were found in insecure attachment to God scores between Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, $F(2, 115) = 2.28, p = .107, \eta^2_p = .04$.

4.2 Qualitative Results

Based on the quantitative results, Buddhist participants had significantly lower secure attachment to God scores compared to Christian and Muslim participants; therefore, qualitative interviews were conducted to obtain deeper understandings about possible distinctions in the perceptions about religious attachments. Since similar ideologies about the concept of attachment to God can be observed in Christianity and Islam (despite differing definitions and interpretations) (Miner et al., 2012), the qualitative results were based upon interviews that were conducted only with Christian and Buddhist participants in order to better focus on the examination of religious attachments. Four main themes emerged from the TA: (1) a relationship with God provides security, (2) religious attachment are hindrances in religious practices and sources of distress, (3) religious insecurities create distress, and (4) differences in 'God' conceptualizations.

4.2.1 A Relationship With God Provides Security

Both Christian participants believed that a relationship with God provides them protection and guidance in life, especially at times of uncertainty.

“He will protect me from all the harm in the world ... this relationship with God, I think it helps me a lot when I face uncertainties in life ... Even though I do not understand what is going on, I know that God is watching over me, and because He loves me so much, He wouldn't want to harm me, but indeed He has a plan for me. So I can always rely on this hope that He will eventually help me get through the situation.” (Participant 3)

Furthermore, both Christian participants also said that God's presence gives them strength to overcome different challenges by making them feel less alone.

“I know that I am not able to deal with this alone ... God is there helping me along the way.” (Participant 3)

Additionally, God's all-forgiving and all-loving nature gave these participants more reassurance compared to other human beings, which enhanced their sense of self-worth. In fact, both Christian participants stressed on the need to put in effort to maintain such closeness with God through religious practices such as prayer.

“God, the biggest being in the world, wants to have a relationship with you, a random human ... To build that relationship, you need to talk, you need to communicate. So that's why prayer is important.” (Participant 1)

4.2.2 Religious Attachments Are Hindrances In Religious Practices And Sources Of Distress

Both Buddhist participants did not seek to have any religious attachments, regardless of whether it is the desire to strengthen their relationship with the Buddha or to be a better Buddhist. In fact, Participant 2 highlighted that “enlightenment is not achieved by being closer to the Buddha ... it is only achievable with our own power of being very mindful of ourselves”; hence, these attachments were perceived as hindrances in their Buddhist practices. Additionally, one Buddhist participant even stated that her attachments with a Buddhist identity made her practice stressful and performative. It also made her feel out of place and insecure about her true self.

“I was really attached to a Buddhist identity, so it became my personality, which was not who I really was ... I became very insecure because I felt like I was super weird ... I felt like I wasn't human and I also felt like this was all I had, and it wasn't making me happy.” (Participant 4)

4.2.3 Religious Insecurities Create Distress

Both Christians participants felt “lost”, “sad”, “mad” and “angry” when they did not receive God's immediate help or did not understand the reason God made them go through certain challenges. According to Participant 3, such circumstances made her relationship with God “feel a bit like a one-way thing”. Furthermore, this participant also expressed doubtfulness about God's intentions during the Covid-19 pandemic as it did not seem plausible for God to allow so many people to suffer.

“It was really difficult because seeing how many people suffered ... it is affecting everybody's life ... I don't know why God would allow this to happen ... Sometimes till now I don't understand.” (Participant 3)

Similarly, doubts and disillusionment were also present among both Buddhist participants when they did not obtain the desired outcomes of their Buddhist practices.

“I felt very disillusioned by Buddhism at one point ... I thought I was doing everything right, ticking all the boxes, meditating every day, like doing what I thought I was supposed to do, but I was not happy.” (Participant 4)

In fact, looking up to the Buddha even made one participant discouraged and insecure about her own practices. To her, it seemed almost impossible to reach the same level as the Buddha.

“I cannot relate, how is he free from all suffering? It feels very discouraging if I am taking him as a role model and kind of like using him as a goal that I am working towards ... that goal is very unattainable.” (Participant 4)

4.2.4 Differences In ‘God’ Conceptualizations

Unlike how both Christian participants referred to Jesus Christ as God, both Buddhist participants viewed the Buddha as a teacher, not a God. This difference mainly revolved around the reduced need for worship and conformity in Buddhism.

“When it comes to God ...you worship them ... they are very powerful and what they say is correct even without validating it.” (Participant 2)

“A teacher is more somebody who points the way and guides you ... I just take his teachings and test them out for myself ... There is less of a pressure to conform to something without being able to question it.” (Participant 4)

Nonetheless, Participant 4 stated, “even though I know that he was a human being, he almost sounds like a mystical thing”, there was still some degree of perception that the Buddha possesses some Godlike properties.

5.0 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study aimed to examine the mediating role of attachment to God in the relationship between stress and PWB. The findings of this study indicated that stress negatively predicted PWB, stress positively predicted insecure attachment to God, insecure attachment to God negatively predicted PWB, and insecure attachment to God partially mediated the relationship between stress and PWB. However, stress did not positively predict secure attachment to God, and secure attachment to God did not mediate the stress-PWB relationship.

Stress negatively predicted PWB, which supports prior findings about the deleterious effects of stress on important PWB domains (Galanakis et al., 2016; Kader Maideen et al., 2014; Tai et al., 2019). Additionally, stress also positively predicted insecure attachment to God. This finding can be explained by high stress levels resulting in individuals developing feelings of insecurities about God’s abilities to provide security and resilience during stressful situations (Stauner et al., 2019). As similar prior findings on stress positively predicting insecure attachment to God were primarily obtained from studies based on extreme stressors (e.g., loved one’s passing or pregnancy) (Clements & Ermakova, 2012; Kelley & Chan, 2012), this study also indicated for the replicability of these findings with daily life stressors. Furthermore, secure attachment to God was a significant positive predictor of PWB, and insecure attachment to God was a significant negative predictor of PWB. These findings corresponded with Okozi (2010) who found that higher secure attachment to God scores resulted in higher overall PWB scores, whereas higher insecure attachment to God scores resulted in lower overall PWB scores. More precisely, these findings can be explained by secure attachment to God leading to the utilization of active and healthy stress coping mechanisms that can promote individuals’ PWB, whereas insecure attachment to God leads to the employment of passive and unhealthy stress coping strategies that can undermine individuals’ PWB (Surzykiewicz et al., 2022). Moreover, insecure attachment to God was also a significant partial mediator in the relationship between stress and PWB in this study. As limited amount of prior research has quantitatively examined this specific mediation relationship, this finding serves as an important discovery to show that, at least partially, stress can predict PWB through the underlying mechanism of insecure attachment to God. Nevertheless, this finding must be interpreted with caution as only a significant partial mediation was present, which means that stress predicted PWB because of insecure attachment to God, and some other factors; hence, future research should explore other religion-related factors that could possibly contribute to this mediation relationship.

Conversely, stress did not negatively predict secure attachment to God in this study; thus, it contradicts prior research which indicated that lower stress levels predicted stronger secure attachment to God (Kelley & Chan, 2012). Additionally, secure attachment to God also did not significantly mediate the relationship between stress and PWB. Nevertheless, a significant linear relationship between the independent and mediator variable is required in a mediation (Abu-Bader & Jones, 2021); therefore, this insignificant mediation finding was not surprising given that stress already did not significantly predict secure attachment to God. These insignificant findings could be explained by differentiated perceptions towards certain components of attachment to God, which were further explored below.

5.1 Perceptions towards secure and insecure attachment to God

Drawing upon the additional quantitative analyses results, Buddhist participants had significantly lower secure attachment to God scores compared to Christian and Muslim participants, but such score differences were not evident between Christian and Muslim participants. Hence, it is possible that aspects of secure attachment to God were less relevant to Buddhists. More specifically, original conceptualizations of attachment to God suggested that “security” is acquired from strong personal relationships with God (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013). However, these are not sought after in Buddhism as “security” is obtained through the liberation from all attachments, regardless of whether they are attachments with certain self-concepts, relationships, or the Buddhist religion (Sahdra & Shaver, 2013).

Therefore, the insignificant findings in this study could be explained by the aspect of secure attachment to God being incongruent with Buddhist beliefs. This assumption also corresponds with Buddhist participants' own accounts from the qualitative interviews of this study. More specifically, they indicated that original conceptualizations of secure attachment to God that were placed in the context of Buddhism (e.g., desiring for close relationships with the Buddha or a stronger Buddhist identity) were not necessary, but were instead perceived as hindrances in Buddhist practices that could lead to distress.

Furthermore, there is also a need to understand why the stress-PWB relationship was only significantly mediated by insecure attachment to God, and not secure attachment to God. Prior literature has commonly depicted Christians having insecure attachments with God, often in the forms of feeling doubtful or abandoned by God (Stauner et al., 2019). Similarly, the qualitative findings of this study indicated that Buddhist participants also identified with aspects of insecure attachment to God, such as having feelings of doubt, distance and disillusionment towards the Buddha. In fact, past studies also indicated that these insecurities often exist within Buddhism (Batchelor, 2015). Therefore, it is possible that both secure and insecure attachment to God could mediate the relationship between stress and PWB in a purely Christian sample; however, with the presence of Buddhists in this sample group and the relevance of only aspects of insecure attachment to God (not secure attachment to God) with Buddhist beliefs, only insecure attachment to God was found to be a significant mediator in this study.

5.2 Implications and limitations

One theoretical implication from this study is the possible dissociation in the applicability of the attachment to God concept in certain religions. More precisely, the concept of attachment to God was built upon Christianity, and has been generally assumed to be generalizable to other religions (Granqvist et al., 2010). Therefore, the fact that Buddhist participants only identified with aspects of insecure attachment to God, and not secure attachment to God, might suggest for the possibility of practitioners of certain religions to only relate with specific attachment to God domains. Hence, researchers should avoid generalizing the whole attachment to God concept to all religions. Instead, more research should be conducted with participants of distinct religious affiliations in order to further identify possible nuances in the applicability of this concept in different religions.

One practical implication of this study is the need to consider influences of religion in therapy. Noting that insecure attachment to God significantly mediated the relationship between stress and PWB in this study, it might be important for clinicians to address insecure religious attachments of clients who are religious (Rasar et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2011), as means to help them cope with certain deleterious effects of stress on their mental health.

A possible methodological limitation of this study is the utilization of the word 'God' in questionnaire items. Despite having Buddhist participants in the sample, and noting that the Buddha is not perceived as a God, the word 'God' was still nonetheless used in the questionnaire, mainly because the Buddha is also often considered as a Godlike supernatural figure due to his counterintuitive properties (Pyysiäinen, 2003). This rationale was also supported by the qualitative findings of this study, whereby the Buddha was also perceived to some extent as a mystical being. In fact, a disclaimer was also presented to inform participants that they should interpret "God" as a religious figure of their religious faiths. However, the fact that Buddhist participants also strongly asserted in the qualitative interviews that the Buddha is a teacher, and not a God, might suggest for the possibility for their interpretations of questionnaire items to still be unconsciously influenced by the word 'God'. Therefore, future research should consider tailoring questionnaire items to be more religion-specific, or even develop new questionnaires to measure attachment to God without directly or indirectly making references to specific religious belief systems (Huber & Huber, 2012).

Moreover, findings of this study were based upon cross-sectional data; thus, the temporal order of the examined variables was not identified (Spector, 2019). For instance, it is possible that higher stress levels did not predict stronger insecure attachment to God, which subsequently predicted lower PWB, but instead, it was stronger insecure attachment to God that predicted higher stress levels, which subsequently predicted lower PWB. Hence, researchers should also conduct more longitudinal studies to better estimate relationships, and more experimental studies to determine the causality of the variables examined in this study (Ellison et al., 2012; Spector, 2019).

6.0 CONCLUSION

The mediating role of attachment to God in the relationship between stress and PWB was examined among Malaysian young adults. Generally, this study highlighted the possible positive influences of attachment to God towards stress and PWB among young adult believers. More specifically, insecure attachment to God was a significant partial mediator in the relationship between stress and PWB; however, secure attachment to God did not significantly mediate the relationship between stress and PWB. Additionally, stress negatively predicted PWB, stress positively predicted insecure attachment to God, secure attachment to God positively predicted PWB, and insecure attachment to God negatively predicted PWB; nevertheless, stress did not predict secure attachment to God. In our study, we assert that attachment to God have a positive impact to whom believe in the existence of God and worship God. The qualitative aspect of this study supported the possibility of these findings to be influenced by differentiated conceptualization of secure attachment to God in certain religions, methodological limitations, and the lack of account for religious diversity in questionnaire items. Future research should attempt to examine the attachment to God concept with more diverse religious groups, more religion-specific questionnaire items, as well as consider experimental or longitudinal research designs. Nevertheless, this study provided a positive demonstration of how qualitative insight can complement understandings from quantitative data in a mixed-method study design.

Acknowledgement

We express our sincere gratitude to Heriot-Watt University Malaysia for their invaluable support and dedication, which were instrumental in the successful completion of this study.

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