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FULL-LENGTH RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fragmented Integration and Well-Being of Migrants: Societal Cohesion and Happiness among Pakistani Immigrants in Selangor, Malaysia

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Abstract

Across immigrant groups, economic stability is a key contributor to well-being, alongside trust, belongingness, and societal recognition in the host country. Despite the increasing number of Pakistani immigrants in Malaysia, limited research has examined how societal cohesion shapes their subjective well-being based on lived experiences. Drawing on Berry's (1997) acculturation framework, this qualitative study explores how Pakistani immigrants in Selangor experience societal cohesion and how these experiences influence their perceptions of happiness. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants, and the data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal a pattern of fragmented integration, whereby participants were able to participate in economic activities and coexist peacefully with other groups, yet remained only partially embedded in local social networks. Belongingness was often conditional, influenced by language proficiency, which constrained deeper interactions with local communities. Participants also reported emotional strain due to separation from family members, while trust in neighbours was largely characterised by polite coexistence rather than close relationships. Happiness was therefore associated more with societal recognition, emotional security, and meaningful social connections than with material attainment. By introducing the concept of fragmented integration, this study extends the acculturation framework by distinguishing between structural participation and relational incorporation. The findings highlight the importance of societal cohesion in shaping subjective well-being and emphasise the need for more inclusive social environments in supporting migrants' everyday lives. Overall, the study reinforces that migrants' well-being is fundamentally shaped by relational experiences in daily life rather than solely by economic participation.

Keywords: social cohesion; migrant well-being; fragmented integration; sense of belonging; Pakistani immigrants

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being; SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

1. Introduction

The process of migration is not only about the physical movement of individuals across national borders but also involves entering different emotional, societal, and relational contexts in the host country. From the viewpoint of personal welfare, how immigrants appraise their lives is shaped not only by the availability of jobs and the degree of material security but also by experiences with local society in daily life, thus influencing how immigrants perceive themselves as being embraced, trusted, and connected with local society, which can profoundly impact the self-perceptions of well-being and life satisfaction (Roman

Etxebarria et al., 2024). Hence, happiness should be determined via the relational contexts of immigrants, rather than focusing on economic indicators. According to existing quality-of-life research, happiness is widely regarded as a multifaceted and subjective construct. Diener's (1984) conceptualisation of subjective well-being emphasises how individuals evaluate their lives through life satisfaction and affective experiences, while social relationships may shape these evaluations in everyday contexts. Subjective well-being is particularly important for immigrants, as migration is generally accompanied by disruptions in existing networks in the local society in the home country, and immigrants are compelled to redevelop relationships with local community members in the unfamiliar settings in the host nation. Therefore, migrants' sense of belonging and life satisfaction may be shaped by language proficiency, social inclusion, and the quality of social networks developed in the host country (Amit & Bar-Lev, 2015; Roman Etxebarria et al., 2024).

The level of societal cohesion could influence access to acceptance, trust, and emotional support from local community members, which will arise from how immigrants interact with local society. According to Coleman (1990), social capital is the value that is created based on the established relationships with local community members, which can contribute to collective action. Meanwhile, as explained by Putnam (2000), the networks of trust and norms of reciprocity can shape the levels of cohesion and participation among local community members. In particular, Putnam (2000) differentiated between bonding and bridging forms of social capital, showing how social ties and trust may vary in depth, closeness, and capacity to support meaningful participation. In migrant contexts, routine interaction may support peaceful coexistence, but it does not necessarily produce the emotional security associated with belongingness. Thus, although immigrants are structurally integrated into local society, they can continue to be distant from local community members, and with inadequate levels of societal cohesion and trust, their happiness can be diminished even in relatively stable settings (Herrero et al., 2011; Šedovič, 2023).

For migrant workers from South Asia, Malaysia represents a key destination because of its relative political stability, economic growth, and labour demand across sectors such as plantation, agriculture, manufacturing, construction, and services (Tasleem et al., 2019). Pakistani migrants form part of this South Asian labour-migration flow. Pakistani migration to Malaysia is commonly linked to employment opportunities, wage differentials, recruitment and social networks, and the perceived cultural and religious familiarity of Malaysia as a Muslim-majority host country (Tasleem, 2021; Tasleem et al., 2019; Tasleem et al., 2022). Although Pakistani workers form a smaller migrant group compared with Indonesians, Bangladeshis, and Nepalese, their presence is significant for understanding the diversity of South Asian labour migration in Malaysia, especially in urban labour markets such as the Klang Valley and Selangor.

Existing studies on immigrant integration have often emphasised legal, institutional, labour-market, and structural dimensions of integration (Penninx, 2019), while giving comparatively less attention to how migrants' everyday social interactions shape their sense of belonging and personal well-being. Nevertheless, some studies have begun to examine the lived experiences of migrant workers in Malaysia. Research on Bangladeshi migrant workers shows that interactions with local community members, social relationships, and perceptions of belonging are important for well-being (Reza et al., 2024), while economic activities and employment conditions shape life satisfaction (Reza et al., 2025). Furthermore, some migrant workers have experienced exploitation, discrimination, and limited access to healthcare and social services, which can adversely affect mental well-being (Khai & Asaduzzaman, 2025), particularly during cultural adjustment in Malaysia (Enh et al., 2024).

Although some research has been conducted on migrant workers, their daily experiences of trust, belongingness, and happiness within local society have been scarcely examined. Concurrently, Pakistani migrant workers remain a relatively under-investigated group in Malaysia, despite evidence that their migration to Malaysia is linked to labour demand, employment opportunities, and Malaysia's Muslim-majority context (Tasleem et al., 2019). Although the decision to emigrate to other countries is frequently influenced by family members, friends, and recruitment agents (Tasleem, 2021), Pakistani migrant workers have also encountered challenges related to accommodation and housing conditions in Malaysia, while maintaining transnational social practices and emotional ties with their home country (Khoso et al., 2020; Tasleem et al., 2020). As a result, there may be higher degrees of marginalisation, insecurity, or social distance in the host country, particularly during a crisis. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic,

numerous migrant workers in Kuala Lumpur, including Pakistanis, experienced delays in receiving salaries, unemployment, and food insecurity, which compelled them to depend more on informal community networks for subsistence (Khoso, 2023).

Compared with migrant groups from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Philippines, Pakistani migrants in Malaysia have received less sustained scholarly attention, particularly in relation to their everyday social relationships and subjective well-being. This gap is important because Pakistani migrants may share some experiences with other labour migrants while also encountering distinct cultural, religious, linguistic, and relational conditions in Malaysia. By focusing on Pakistani immigrants in Selangor, the present study contributes to the broader discourse on foreign workers and migrant well-being by showing how social cohesion, rather than employment alone, shapes migrants' happiness in daily life.

Comparative studies from other host countries further show that Pakistani migrants' well-being is shaped by the interaction between acculturation, social support, and belonging. In the United Kingdom, social difficulties and acculturation-related challenges have been associated with persistent depression among Pakistani women, suggesting that settlement is strongly affected by social relationships and support structures (Chaudhry et al., 2012). In the United States, research on Pakistani Muslim adolescent females has shown that adaptation is influenced by family expectations, cultural values, religion, school experiences, and wider social environments (Khuwaja et al., 2013). These studies indicate that Pakistani migrants' well-being varies across host societies; therefore, examining Pakistani immigrants in Malaysia can reveal context-specific forms of integration shaped by work, neighbourhood relations, language, and Muslim-majority cultural proximity. Karim and Hue (2022) likewise showed that, among young Pakistani students in Hong Kong, acculturative belonging was not always congruent with everyday sociocultural practices.

The acculturation framework, which was introduced by Berry (1997) to conceptualise the process of adaptation in the host country among immigrants using four key approaches, namely, assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalisation, was employed in the study. The approaches used by immigrants would be contingent upon the intention of the immigrants to maintain their personal culture while being incorporated into the host nation. Specifically, trust and belongingness function as the relational indicators of the process of integration, whereas societal cohesion reflects the lived expression of acculturation, with happiness indicating a subjective outcome that is influenced by the level of relational embeddedness attained by immigrants in the host nation. Selangor therefore provided a relevant setting for the current investigation. As one of Malaysia's most economically developed and urbanised states, it attracts diverse migrant groups through employment opportunities. Nonetheless, urban migrant settings may restrict sustained social interaction and contribute to social distance, limited community ties, and weaker opportunities for everyday inclusion, which may in turn affect migrants' mental well-being, life satisfaction, and happiness in the host society (Hendriks & Birnberg, 2024; Li & Rose, 2017; Reza et al., 2024, 2025). In addition, although it has been recognised that it is essential to foster societal cohesion to guarantee the well-being of immigrants, relevant qualitative studies in the Southeast Asian region continue to be scarce. Existing indicators might have also neglected the relational processes that can shape the perceptions of happiness in daily life among immigrants.

To bridge the above gaps in the current literature, the current study concentrated on the experience of societal cohesion and the impact of the experiences on the perception of happiness among Pakistani immigrants in Selangor. By focusing on daily experiences of belongingness, trust in neighbours, and emotional well-being, this study highlighted the relational dimensions of migrant workers' well-being and offered a context-sensitive understanding of immigrants' happiness within a multicultural Southeast Asian setting. Additionally, the present study contributed to migration and well-being scholarship by introducing the concept of fragmented integration, which could capture situations in which migrant workers achieved structural participation in the host society while remaining only partially embedded in its relational and social networks. Through this focus, the study enriches a relational understanding of how societal cohesion shapes migrant workers' happiness in Malaysia.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative design to explore Pakistani immigrants' experiences of societal cohesion and how these experiences shaped their perceptions of happiness. A quality-of-life perspective was adopted to understand how everyday relational experiences shape migrants' self-evaluation of their lives. Hence, the research design was deemed suitable, as it could assist in discovering relevant interpretations, meanings, and lived experiences instead of conducting fixed measurements of variables or hypothesis-testing. Furthermore, well-being and happiness served as subjective and contextual constructs, with societal cohesion also reflecting daily social processes continuously influenced by trust, belongingness, and interactions, instead of being a fixed outcome, which justified the qualitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.2 Study Setting

The current investigation was performed in Selangor, which represented one of the most economically developed and urbanised states in Malaysia, hosting various groups of migrant workers, including Pakistanis who resided in urban and semi-urban contexts. Selangor was selected because it is one of Malaysia's major economic and urban centres and is closely connected to migrant labour demand in manufacturing, construction, services, and related urban activities. National labour migration evidence also indicates that foreign workers are highly concentrated in Selangor, making the state a relevant site for examining how employment, neighbourhood life, and social relations shape migrants' well-being (Abdur Rahman et al., 2024; World Bank, 2020). Its urban and semi-urban settings therefore provide an appropriate context for exploring fragmented integration among Pakistani immigrants. Specifically, the former context could offer more job opportunities and greater access to important services, while restricting constant interactions with local community members owing to fragmented structures of the neighbourhood and hectic lifestyles.

2.3 Participants and Sampling

A total of 10 immigrants from Pakistan who were aged at least 18 years and had been residing in Selangor for at least six months were recruited. The inclusion criteria required participants to be Pakistani immigrants aged 18 years and above, currently residing in Selangor for at least six months, economically active or seeking livelihood opportunities in Malaysia, able to share their experiences of daily interaction with local communities, and willing to provide informed consent.

The length of residence in Selangor was stipulated as one of the key criteria of eligibility for participation in this study, as it would guarantee adequate exposure to the host society to share meaningful perspectives on personal experiences. To recruit the participants, purposive sampling was employed, as the technique could guarantee in-depth and enriched data vital to qualitative research instead of statistical representativeness (Patton, 2015).

The final number of 10 participants was determined by data sufficiency, as the later interviews repeated key patterns related to trust, belongingness, family separation, work routines, and happiness. This indicated thematic saturation for the focused aim of the study, which was to understand the lived relational experiences of Pakistani immigrants in Selangor rather than to achieve statistical representation.

2.4 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in this study, which could enable the participants to share personal experiences in detail, while concurrently allowing the current researcher to explore key themes, which were pertinent to trust, belongingness, societal cohesion, and happiness, in depth. During the interviews, there was an interview guide, which helped guarantee a satisfactory degree of consistency across different interviews while offering a certain level of flexibility for participants to share unique perspectives. On average, each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. Interviews were conducted in Urdu or Punjabi, depending on participants' language preferences and the language naturally used during each interview. The transcripts were translated into English and checked against the audio

recordings to preserve participants' intended meanings. After acquiring consent from participants, the interviews were audio-recorded before being transcribed verbatim, with all transcripts reviewed alongside the audio recordings to guarantee satisfactory degrees of accuracy by retaining the actual meanings of participants' shared experiences.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines. The researcher first familiarised themselves with the data by reading the transcripts repeatedly before generating initial codes related to trust, belongingness, social interactions, and emotional well-being. Subsequently, the initial codes were compared across different interviews and categorised into larger themes to reflect shared experiences among participants. Therefore, after an iterative procedure of reviewing and refining the codes, three key themes emerged, namely trust in neighbours, a sense of belongingness, and happiness, which were related to the interpretations of personal experiences pertinent to security, inclusion, and emotional well-being in the host society.

2.6 Researcher Reflexivity

In qualitative research, reflexivity was vital, as a researcher should constantly be aware of the potential impacts of personal assumptions, background, and stance on the process of data collection and interpretation. In particular, sharing a certain level of cultural or language familiarity with participants could promote rapport yet introduce biases into the collected data. Thus, reflexive notes were kept throughout the entire research process by recording interactions with participants during the interviews, any arising interpretations, and different decisions related to the analytical approaches, which could help guarantee a more accurate analysis of participants' perspectives with minimal bias from the current researcher.

2.7 Trustworthiness and Rigour

The trustworthiness and rigour of the findings were supported through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability strategies. Credibility was enhanced through repeated familiarisation with the transcripts, systematic coding, and the use of verbatim quotations to ensure that the themes remained grounded in participants' accounts. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear audit trail of coding decisions, theme development, and refinements during analysis. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive notes, which helped the researcher identify personal assumptions and minimise interpretive bias. Transferability was addressed by providing contextual information about participants, living arrangements, and the Selangor setting, allowing readers to assess the relevance of the findings to similar migrant contexts.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

All research ethics, including data confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation, were guaranteed, in which participants were fully informed about the objective of the current investigation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the measures employed to protect their anonymity, including the use of pseudonyms in all transcripts and reporting.

3. Results

This section presents the interview findings on Pakistani immigrants' daily social interactions, focusing on trust in neighbours, belongingness, and happiness. Although participants' experiences varied, common patterns included separation from family members, language barriers, and limited interaction with local community members. Throughout the discussion, the profiles of the participants will be described before a thematic presentation, which is supported by direct quotes from participants.

3.1 Profile of Participants

Table 1 offers a summary of the profiles of the 10 Pakistani immigrants who were involved in the current investigation, wherein all participants were economically active and had resided in Selangor for at least six

months, with none of them staying with family members in Malaysia, namely either residing alone or in shared accommodation. Moreover, several participants had resided in Selangor for over 10 years, whereas other participants had arrived in Malaysia in recent periods for at least half a year. In sum, the profiles offered a vital contextual background to have a deeper understanding of the variations in the personal experiences of trust in neighbours, belongingness, and happiness among the participants.

Table 1. Profile of participants

Panel A: Age, Residence and Employment

Participant	Age (years)	Length of residence (years)	Employment status	Occupation
A1	30	4	Employed	Service worker
A2	36	3	Employed	Restaurant worker
A3	29	6	Employed	Retail assistant
A4	39	8	Employed	Delivery worker
A5	25	3	Employed	Restaurant worker
A6	45	11	Employed	Self-employed trader
A7	27	4	Employed	Restaurant worker
A8	24	3	Employed	Retail assistant
A9	35	6	Employed	Logistics worker
A10	43	12	Employed	Service worker

Panel B: Family and Residential Circumstances

Participant	Marital status	Living arrangement	Residential locations
A1	Married	Shared accommodation (without family)	Urban neighbourhood
A2	Married	Shared accommodation (without family)	Urban neighbourhood
A3	Single	Shared accommodation (without family)	Urban neighbourhood
A4	Married	Shared accommodation (without family)	Semi-urban neighbourhood
A5	Married	Living alone (without family)	Urban neighbourhood
A6	Married	Living alone (without family)	Urban neighbourhood
A7	Single	Living alone (without family)	Urban neighbourhood
A8	Married	Living alone (without family)	Urban neighbourhood
A9	Married	Living alone (without family)	Semi-urban neighbourhood
A10	Married	Living alone (without family)	Semi-urban neighbourhood

All participants were engaged in different forms of low- and semi-skilled employment, including service worker, restaurant worker, retail assistant, delivery worker, self-employed trader, and logistics worker. This sectoral information provides socio-economic context for understanding their work routines, social interaction opportunities, and experiences of well-being in Selangor.

To protect anonymity, residential information is reported by general location type rather than by specific neighbourhood names. The participants resided mainly in urban and semi-urban neighbourhoods, which may influence their opportunities for interaction with local communities and their sense of social integration.

3.2 Sense of Belonging and Relational Inclusion

It was revealed that there was an uneven and conditional degree of belongingness among participants in Selangor, which was influenced by the language used with local community members, separation from family members, and societal interactions in the host nation. Hence, instead of indicating a stable outcome, the sense of belongingness was shaped by daily societal experiences. Specifically, certain participants expressed that the process of learning Malay enhanced self-assurance and perceived inclusion, especially at work:

"I can speak a little Malay now, which helps me feel accepted in my work. But when I go out, I'm still treated like an outsider, as if my presence is a reminder that I don't truly belong to the local community." (A3)

Although using the language of the host country could promote a certain level of societal integration, social acceptance was not guaranteed, which was reflected in the form of emotional distance in the public and neighbourhood, despite having manageable interactions at the workplace. In addition, a lower level of language proficiency could lead to social fragmentation and higher dependence on the networks with similar ethnic groups:

"I work long hours, but I don't feel connected to people here. I don't know Malay well, and I mostly stay with my Pakistani friend, since it is more comfortable to remain with the people who know my background and culture." (A7)

Although depending on familiar societal networks could offer higher degrees of comfort and emotional security, broader societal interactions were restricted, resulting in a sense of belongingness frequently constrained to limited settings. Additionally, separation from family members would impact how participants perceived belongingness, especially amidst the absence of spouses and children as the main source of emotional support:

"I have been here for three years now, but my wife and children are still in Pakistan. I send money home, but I feel empty without them. It feels as though I live in a place that is not truly home each and every day, and I miss home and my family members." (A2)

Despite having a certain level of financial stability, participants highlighted a weaker emotional attachment to the host country, as they were not with their family members, which intensified the feelings of transience, namely, low emotional investment in the host nation, while limiting engagement with local communities:

"If my family were here, I would go out more, meet people, and maybe take part in activities. Alone, I just work and then go back home. I am simply going through the motions, and I would not seem to have any connection with the world beyond my routine." (A5)

In sum, a sense of belonging among Pakistani immigrants in Selangor was situational and vulnerable. Although local language use could support inclusion, prolonged working hours, language barriers, and separation from family members reinforced feelings of social distance in the host country. Therefore, it was implied that belongingness served as one of the key factors contributing to the quality of life among migrant workers by influencing the degrees of emotional attachment to the host society and perceived inclusivity.

3.3 Trust in Neighbours and Daily Stability

According to the interview participants, there was a limited level of trust in neighbours, which was influenced mainly by cultural variations, daily interactions, and personal experiences. Although a majority of the participants regarded their neighbourhoods as harmonious and secure, trust in neighbours did not evolve into closer or emotionally supportive relationships, as trust functioned as a form of peaceful coexistence instead of having deeper relationships, primarily reflected in the form of greetings and brief exchanges:

"People in my neighbourhood are nice; they say hello, but it stops there. We don't visit each other or share meals. There is some form of courtesy, though there is no deeper relationship that comes with time spent together. Sometimes it seems as though we are simply going past each other, still keeping a physical distance even though we are only being friendly on the surface." (A1)

Cultural variations were also highlighted as one of the key factors preventing the further development of deeper trust:

"They are good people, but our cultures are different. I feel it's hard to become close friends." (A9)

Despite interactions with local community members remaining superficial, supportive encounters would promote a deeper sense of reliability, wherein trust could be enhanced via small acts of aid, although they did not have frequent interactions:

"I trust my neighbours. If I need small help, like looking after my things or showing me directions, they are always ready. I feel better knowing that, even though we are separated by distance in our conversations, I can count on them when the time is right." (A6)

Meanwhile, certain participants described trust as conditional and cautious, due to the presence of uncertainty and lower familiarity:

"I have good neighbours, but I do not tell them personal things. I do not know how much I can rely on them, having never really established a closer relationship. I always have some degree of caution when it comes to our interactions." (A2)

Furthermore, trust was associated with perceived fairness and safety in the neighbourhood, wherein fair treatment and not being disturbed would produce a feeling of peaceful coexistence. Concurrently, certain participants mentioned the requirement to maintain a certain distance to protect themselves:

"Most neighbours are good, and yet we keep a little distance. Anyone can be a troublemaker, and even though they look like friendly people, you need to keep your guard and maintain your peace." (A7)

In summary, it was uncovered that there were varying levels of trust in neighbours, which ranged from polite and distant to supportive and reassuring, continuously influenced by cultural variations, individual encounters, and perceived safety, which contributed to relationships that mainly focused on peace and stability rather than emotional proximity, wherein trust, although superficial, could serve as a form of stability and safety important to the quality of daily life. Meanwhile, as there were no deeper relationships, emotional well-being was not fostered.

3.4 Happiness as a Form of Emotional Well-Being

Participants associated happiness with family relationships, emotional well-being, and opportunities for social interaction, while also recognising the importance of economic stability. In particular, happiness was frequently described as dependent on emotional acceptance, fulfilment, and everyday social connections. Among certain participants, happiness was highly associated with a sense of belongingness in the local community, with inclusive gestures, societal recognition, or respect being capable of positively influencing emotional well-being:

"When neighbours welcome me and ask me to festivals, I am glad. It is a comforting note that even though I am far away, I am not alone. I feel I belong here." (A5)

"Even if they do not speak much, when people around us respect us, I feel good. Their silent acknowledgement leads to a feeling of acceptance, and it gives me peace in my heart because I am not perceived as an outsider." (A2)

On the contrary, there would be a lower degree of happiness when being excluded or disconnected from the host society:

"I sometimes think we are just here to work, and not to be a part of the community. We are only tourists, we have nothing to do with the local culture or people, it's such a shame, and I miss a more in-depth connection to the place I live in." (A7)

Moreover, separation from family members could diminish the feeling of happiness, even when work in the host country provided the financial means to support family members in the home country:

"I make money here and send it back home, but I cannot be completely happy without my wife and children. Nothing can fill the vacuum that their absence creates." (A1)

"We are comfortable here, but without family, we cannot be happy. We earn our livelihood through work, but nothing can give us more peace, warmth, and belonging like having family." (A4)

Owing to prolonged working hours, multiple participants also indicated scarce opportunities for leisure activities or societal interactions:

“Here we have life and work and sleep. Outings and social gatherings are no longer a possibility, and it seems like a routine without excitement or attachment. That makes living empty and unfulfilling at times.” (A6)

Nevertheless, certain participants acquired fulfilment and meaning through work when they perceived themselves as capable of supporting family members financially:

“Although there may be no time to have fun, I feel happy when I send money to my parents. It gives me some fulfilment that I am helping them, and that is all I need.” (A10)

These accounts indicate that participants’ motivation to seek employment in Malaysia was closely tied to the responsibility of supporting family members in Pakistan, improving household income, and fulfilling the role of provider, even when such employment involved long working hours and limited social life in the host country.

In sum, happiness was primarily influenced by belongingness, separation from family members, and meaning derived from work. Although financial security was offered by having economic stability, long-term happiness would be contingent upon societal interactions, the accompaniment of family members, and opportunities for leisure activities and social interactions. Thus, it was suggested that happiness was not restricted to only economic indicators, but rather, relational and emotional fulfilment, which highlighted its vital role as a subjective indicator of the quality of life.

4. Discussion

In the present investigation, the focus was on the experience of societal cohesion and the influence of the experience on perceived happiness among Pakistani immigrants residing in Selangor. According to the interview results, the well-being of the Pakistani migrant workers was mainly determined by daily relational experiences instead of the structural indicators of integration. Despite being economically active and having stable jobs, there were uneven and situational feelings of trust, belongingness, and emotional fulfilment among the participants, which implied that how migrant workers were integrated into local society could not be fully understood by referring to only the rate of participation in the labour market, especially when societal interaction and emotional recognition in daily life would also play essential roles in the quality of life of migrant workers. Accordingly, the results were analysed using the acculturation framework developed by Berry (1997) to offer deeper perspectives on Pakistani immigrants’ experiences of integration. Specifically, immigrant adaptation was posited to occur via the four key approaches, namely assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalisation, while also contingent upon how immigrants maintain their culture while engaging with the host nation.

In the current study, Pakistani immigrants experienced a form of partial integration, namely, despite being economically active and having interactions with local community members, there were no deeper relationships, which indicated that there was only structural integration, rather than emotional and societal integration. Existing studies in Malaysia have mainly concentrated on the trends of labour migration, relevant regulations, and economic contributions, especially the degrees of labour demands and economic opportunities (Tasleem, 2021; Tasleem et al., 2019), instead of the social experiences of migrant workers in daily life. As such, the current results expanded the existing body of knowledge by discovering that the self-appraisal of personal life among migrant workers was highly influenced by relational conditions, including trust, belongingness, and emotional security in the host nation.

4.1 Belongingness as a Form of Conditional Inclusion

Among Pakistani immigrants in Selangor, belongingness was neither automatic nor guaranteed by length of residence. Instead, it was situational and shaped mainly by language proficiency, family separation, and opportunities for social interaction. Particularly, having enhanced local language skills could promote a deeper level of communication and self-assurance at work, yet not in the neighbourhood or public spaces, which implied that a sense of belongingness extended beyond functional aspects to involve emotional recognition and societal validation. According to the acculturation framework (Berry, 1997), the results indicated an uneven level of integration, as, although Pakistani immigrants interacted with the host society at work, there was limited emotional attachment. In addition, separation from family members left many

participants feeling emotionally incomplete, owing to spouses and children remaining in the home country, despite being financially stable. In a similar vein, past studies conducted among Pakistani migrant workers indicated that migrant workers frequently maintained strong emotional connections with family members in the home country (Khoso et al., 2020). Although the above connections could offer a certain degree of support, they would also intensify the feeling of temporariness in the host society. In sum, Pakistani immigrants residing in Selangor experienced moments of inclusion in certain settings, especially workplaces or interactions with supportive neighbours, yet the experiences did not frequently translate into broader societal integration.

4.2 Trust as a Form of Stability Without Proximity

According to the interview participants, there was only a limited level of trust in neighbours, despite regarding the neighbourhoods as safe and orderly, as the interactions between Pakistani immigrants and neighbours rarely evolved into closer relationships. On the contrary, trust was in the form of peaceful coexistence and occasional assistance instead of deeper social connections, which corresponded to the difference highlighted by Putnam (2000) between bonding and bridging social capital. Specifically, stronger bonds were generally sustained within networks with similar ethnic groups, due to similar languages and cultures, whereas bridging connections with local neighbours were mainly superficial, which were frequently limited to brief interactions or small acts of assistance. Such superficial bridging ties are common in migration contexts, as language barriers, cultural differences, and demanding work can restrict opportunities for sustained interaction. Khoso et al. (2020) also revealed that Pakistani migrant workers in Malaysia frequently depended on networks with the same nationality and informal systems of support, while maintaining distant relationships with the host society.

4.3 Happiness Beyond Economic Stability

The current interview findings complicate traditional economic interpretations of migrant workers' well-being, in which, despite a higher level of financial security from employment to support family members, happiness was also linked to the degrees of societal recognition, emotional fulfilment, and familial relationships. Accordingly, employment offered not only meaning through the ability to support family members in the home country but also a feeling of pride in fulfilling their obligations as family providers. Meanwhile, prolonged work hours restricted the opportunities for leisure activities and societal interactions, thereby resulting in feelings of isolation. This finding is consistent with Malaysian migrant well-being studies showing that employment conditions, economic responsibilities, and limited leisure opportunities can shape migrants' social participation and overall well-being (Enh et al., 2024; Reza et al., 2025). Additionally, separation from family members served as one of the key factors diminishing the feeling of happiness, as migrant workers were staying apart from spouses and children. In sum, the current interview participants appraised happiness in terms of relational fulfilment instead of economic achievement.

4.4 Theoretical Implications

The current interview results expanded the existing body of knowledge on migration and well-being by revealing the uneven level of societal integration in structural and relational aspects. In particular, despite being involved in economic activities and having functional adaptation to the host country, there remained scarce emotional integration in societal and relational networks among Pakistani migrant workers, thereby contributing to fragmented integration. The acculturation framework by Berry (1997) was also extended by discovering different processes of integration in both economic and societal aspects, in which Pakistani migrant workers exhibited integration in terms of employment and peaceful coexistence, instead of relational belongingness. Furthermore, societal cohesion functioned as a relational mechanism linking acculturation processes with subjective well-being by influencing migrant workers' experiences of trust, belongingness, and emotional stability in daily interactions, instead of functioning only as a structural indicator of integration. In sum, the above relational processes would shape the self-appraisals of personal lives among migrant workers in the host nation, which would profoundly contribute to well-being.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how Pakistani immigrants in Selangor experienced societal cohesion and how these experiences shaped their perceptions of happiness. The findings show that well-being was influenced not only by economic participation but also by everyday relational experiences within the host community. Specifically, the levels of belongingness, trust in neighbours, and emotional fulfilment would determine the self-assessment of personal lives among migrant workers. Despite being economically active and having stable jobs, the experiences of societal inclusion remained uneven among Pakistani migrant workers, as a sense of belongingness was situational, mainly influenced by the degree of language proficiency, separation from family members, and limited opportunities for continuous social interactions. In addition, trust in neighbours was primarily in the form of peaceful coexistence instead of closer relationships, which reflected that migrant workers attained only structural participation in the host country while continuing to be partially integrated in the relational and social networks of the host society.

Through the concept of fragmented integration, this study contributed to migration and well-being scholarship by highlighting the distinction between structural participation and relational incorporation. While migrant workers might appear integrated through employment and daily peaceful coexistence, their emotional attachment to the host country and sense of belonging may develop more slowly and unevenly. The results extended Berry's acculturation framework by emphasising the relational dimensions of integration and the importance of subjective well-being. The results also highlighted the role played by societal cohesion as a key mechanism linking integration processes to migrant workers' happiness. Additionally, participants' experiences suggested that happiness was shaped less by material achievement than by daily experiences of societal recognition, meaningful interactions, and emotional security. As opportunities for belonging and social connection were limited, migrant workers' well-being remained partial despite having financial stability. In sum, the current study demonstrated the importance of understanding migrant workers' well-being as relationally grounded, in which efforts to support immigrants' settlement should extend beyond economic incorporation and consider how neighbourhood environments, daily societal interactions, and opportunities for meaningful inclusion would influence migrant workers' emotional security and long-term quality of life. Therefore, by focusing on the lived experiences of migrant workers, the current research offered a more context-dependent viewpoint on the influence of societal cohesion on the level of happiness among immigrant communities in multicultural urban contexts.

The findings also speak directly to the Sustainable Development Goals identified in this article. In relation to SDG 3 on good health and well-being, the study shows that migrants' emotional security, belongingness, and social recognition are important components of everyday well-being. In relation to SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, the findings highlight the need to reduce relational and social forms of exclusion that can persist even when migrants are economically active. Policies and community initiatives that encourage inclusive neighbourhood interactions, language support, and recognition of migrant workers' social needs can therefore contribute to healthier and more equitable migrant settlement experiences.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This study involved 10 Pakistani immigrants in Selangor and therefore does not aim to represent all Pakistani migrants or other migrant groups in Malaysia. Participants were economically active and were not accompanied by family members in Malaysia, which may have shaped their experiences of belonging, trust, and happiness. Future research could compare Pakistani migrants across different Malaysian states, employment sectors, legal statuses, and family arrangements, or adopt longitudinal approaches to examine how relational integration changes over time.

Declarations

Ethical approval and informed consent: As only non-clinical adult participants were involved in the current study, there was minimal risk. Before data collection, the study procedures were reviewed by the Research

Ethics Committee of Universiti Putra Malaysia. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after they had been informed about the objectives of the study, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the measures used to protect their confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were included only if they met the study inclusion criteria and agreed to be interviewed. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reporting. Audio files and transcripts were stored in password-protected digital folders accessible only to the researcher, and identifying details were removed during transcription. The data will be retained securely for ten years and then permanently deleted.

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