

**THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SELF-ESTEEM IN
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY
FUNCTIONING AND LIFE SATISFACTION
AMONG VIETNAMESE ADOLESCENTS: A
STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODELING
STUDY**

TRUONG QUOC TUAN

**ASIA e UNIVERSITY
2026**

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A Thesis Submitted to Asia e University in
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2026

ABSTRACT

Mental health problems affected a high percentage of adolescent population in Vietnam. Looking at factors affecting psychological development and well-being of adolescents, family environment and self-esteem have central role. However, there is lack of previous literature utilizing family functioning as a construct to measure quality of family environment and investigate its relationship with self-esteem and life satisfaction in adolescents. The objective of this study aims to investigate the mediation role of self-esteem in the relationship between family functioning and life satisfaction among Vietnamese adolescents. The current study applied McMaster Model of Family functioning with a sample size of 400 adolescents in Bac Ninh Province, Vietnam. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted to examine the relationship, which showed good model fit (CMIN/df = 2.492, CFI = 0.937, TLI = 0.930, SRMR = 0.0642, and RMSEA = 0.061). Results showed self-esteem acted as indirect mediator ($b = 0.092$, $p < .05$). Furthermore, the data confirmed the role of family functioning and its direct positive impact on life satisfaction in Vietnamese adolescents ($b = 0.508$, $p < .001$). The study concluded that there is influence of family functioning and self-esteem on life satisfaction of adolescents. Policy makers and educators should pay attention on providing families with support and training in order to improve family functioning, well-being and outcome for adolescents. In addition, training to improve self-esteem should be considered by educators and education system to ensure that adolescents could obtain positive self-esteem and life satisfaction.

Keywords: Adolescents, life satisfaction, self-esteem, family functioning, Bac Ninh, Vietnam

APPROVAL

This is to certify that this thesis conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in quality and scope, for the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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(13 January 2026)

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy is my own work and that all contributions from any other persons or sources are properly and duly cited. I further declare that the material has not been submitted either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university. In making this declaration, I understand and acknowledge any breaches in this declaration constitute academic misconduct, which may result in my expulsion from the programme and/or exclusion from the award of the degree.

Name: Truong Quoc Tuan

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Tuan', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Signature of Student:

Date: 13 January 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family for support during this research project as well as during my time following my PhD journey. Especially, I would like to give my dearest appreciation to my wife Michelle Chung who has been helping to balance my career, research and building our family with our two small daughters.

I also would like to give my sincere appreciation to AeU lecturers and staff members for your tremendous help during this course, especially towards my late supervisor Professor Dato' Paduka Haji Dr. Mohamed Anwar Bin Omar Din who has been supporting me along the way. Without his guidance, I will not be able to complete this journey. May your soul rest in peace.

Finally, I would like to give my appreciation towards Professor Dr. Siow Heng Loke, who is the source of guidance for not just me but other PhD students throughout our PhD journey with AeU. I cannot give enough appreciation for his kindness to become my supervisor and guide me through the preparation of my Thesis Defense.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SWB	Subjective Well-being
WHO	World Health Organisation
FAD	Family Assessment Device
RSES	Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale
SWLS	Satisfaction with Life Scale
SEM	Structural Equation Modeling
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CFI	Comparative Fit Index
TLI	Tucker-Lewis Index
RMSEA	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
CR	Composite Reliability
AVE	Average Variance Extracted
CMB	Common Method Bias
GF	General Family Functioning
SE	Self-esteem
LS	Life Satisfaction

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Adolescent mental health is a critical yet under-addressed problem in the world, especially in Southeast Asia where rising cases are exacerbated by cultural stigma and limited healthcare access (Vu et al., 2022). WHO reports that 1 in 7 youths globally face mental health challenges; while in Vietnam, studies show 16–30% of adolescents suffer from depression or anxiety, yet only 20% of sufferers receive professional help (La et al., 2020; Orri et al., 2020, Vu et al., 2022). This thesis therefore investigates adolescent development, their life satisfaction and factors affecting life satisfaction such as family functioning and self-esteem to bridge the research gaps. By addressing Vietnam’s mental health crisis in adolescents, the findings from this thesis ultimately support and contribute to societal well-being and inform policy.

1.0 Background of Study

The question on how to live a fulfilling life has remained one of the enduring and profound inquiries throughout human history. From the earliest civilizations to the present days, thinkers have pondered with the essential question of what it truly means to live well, what steps to be taken to reach human flourishing and how civilizations can ensure well-being of its citizens (Stearns, 2020). While traditional markers of development such as economic growth, scientific innovation and political stability have been used as indicators to assess the progress of societal development, there has been growing recognition that these metrics alone do not capture the full picture of human flourishing. In recent decades, happiness or well-being has re-emerged as a crucial and perhaps a strong indicator of a society’s overall success (Turner, 2018). It could be argued that throughout history, many of the core motivations driving human

activity forward whether in the realms of labor, shaping societies, education, governance, philosophy, cultures and arts could trace back to the desire of individuals to attain a happy and meaningful life. This desire for happiness is not confined to any culture or historical period; rather, it is an intrinsic part of human condition, present in each individual in a society regardless of their background or circumstances (Schubert, 2012).

While the pursuit of happiness is a shared human experience, its definition and what constitutes happiness might not be universal. It changes depending on cultural values, historical contexts and philosophical worldviews (Mathews, 2012). Looking at the current contemporary worldview, modern societies often emphasize personal freedom, individual rights and subjective well-being as central to the understanding of happiness. In this more individualistic framework, happiness is seen as the result of personal choice, autonomy and psychological satisfaction. Despite that, there is argument that this definition of happiness does not apply to collective cultures, especially in the Far East, South East Asia and South Asia. In Eastern cultures, community interdependence and harmony might be a strong contribution of happiness and historically argued to have higher impact than individual well-being (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2018). However, with the convergence of cultures and globalization worldwide, this distinction is being challenged; a lot of previously collective cultures have become more and more Westernized. As this understanding continues to evolve, it becomes clear that the pursuit of happiness is both a personal and collective journey, of which the equilibrium however depends on specific culture. Hence, more research in different contexts is much needed for deeper understanding of relationship between human civilizations and happiness.

In academic literature, happiness is often understood as a more immediate and fleeting emotional state, typically associated with feelings of joy, pleasure or satisfaction in the moment (Jalloh, 2014). Happiness is therefore usually seen as a subjective momentary experience that can fluctuate based on current circumstances or external stimuli, i.e. not an enduring state (Fave, 2023). On the other hand, well-being serves as a broader and more comprehensive framework for evaluating an individual's overall quality of life, i.e. an enduring state. By adopting the framework of well-being, researchers are able to distinguish and study various components that contribute to human flourishing such as mental well-being, emotional well-being, social well-being and physical well-being. It could be seen that, using the concept of "well-being" allows scholars to examine specific aspects of life and identify the factors that promote or hinder overall well-being. As such, well-being is considered a multidimensional construct that provides a more stable and long-term assessment of how individuals are functioning and flourishing across different domains of life (Sarriera & Bedin, 2017).

Amongst various domains of well-being, subjective well-being (SWB) is the conceptual term that is most aligned with the idea of well-being perceived by adolescents, which is the context of this thesis (Avedissian & Alayan, 2021). In recent decades, research on subjective well-being has gained attention across various academic disciplines, especially in psychology, sociology and economics (Diener et al., 2018). Scholars are increasingly interested in how individuals evaluate their own lives (i.e. SWB), not only in terms of fleeting emotional states but overall satisfaction and psychological functioning. Subjective well-being is typically defined as individual's internal and personal perception of their life experiences (Diener et al., 2018). Compared to other domains of well-being, subjective well-being is often considered as a more influential psychological indicators of well-being in general. This

argument stems from the suggestion that first person experience plays a more crucial role in shaping how people interpret the world around them and how happy they “feel” (Diener et al., 2017). In another word, the way individuals think about their lives, process emotional experiences and derive meaning from events directly influences how happy and fulfilled they are. For instance, a person could have tremendous amount of wealth but still feel unfulfilled while a very poor person could still experience peace and happiness. Furthermore, cognition leads to behaviors (Aizawa, 2017); because subjective experience (cognition part) governs much of a person’s behavior and emotional response, it becomes a central decisive factor in actually motivating individual to create life outcomes.

Theoretically, there is a distinction between two fundamental philosophical approaches to subjective well-being: *hedonic* and *eudaimonic*. Hedonic well-being, rooted in the philosophy of Epicurus from ancient Greece, is centered on the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. This approach equates subjective well-being with the presence of positive emotions, the absence of negative emotions and the overall balance between pleasure and discomfort (more pleasure than discomfort overall). On the other hand, eudaimonic well-being is derived from ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle’s philosophy, which offers a difference view of human flourishing. Rather than focusing on pleasure, eudaimonic well-being emphasizes living in accordance with one’s true self authentically and realizing one’s full potential (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Fave, 2023). Eudaimonic well-being prioritizes purpose, meaning, personal growth and virtue functioning. According to this view, true happiness comes not just from pleasurable experiences but from fulfilling meaningful goals and developing one’s character over time (Fave, 2023). For instance, a person could sacrifice and embrace pain and discomfort in short-term to achieve their long-desired dream and passion.

However, scholars increasingly recognize that hedonic and eudaimonic well-being are not mutually exclusive. Rather than viewing them as opposing models, recent theoretical frameworks suggest that they are complementary concepts that together contribute to a better understanding of subjective well-being (Lee et al., 2021). For example, a person who experiences frequent pleasure but lacks meaning and purpose may not report high overall subjective well-being. On the other hand, a person, who has actualized their potential but always feel miserable, could not be argued to have high well-being either. Therefore, integrating both hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonic fulfillment offers a more accurate picture of what it means to live a satisfying life. This combination of hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonic fulfillment represent modern view and theoretical framework on subjective well-being (Lee et al., 2021).

To overcome measurement challenges and enable a quantitative assessment of adolescent SWB, researchers commonly use the construct of life satisfaction coined by Diener (Diener, 1984). This measure has been validated in adolescent populations and is considered robust, reliable and practical tools for capturing both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of subjective well-being (Garcia & Archer, 2012; Rose et al., 2017; Izaguirre et al., 2021; Jovanović et al., 2022; Lukoševičiūtė et al., 2022). Life satisfaction is defined as an individual's overall cognitive appraisal or judgment of their life as a whole at a specific point in time (Diener et al., 2017). Moreover, life satisfaction is particularly valuable in mental health research, prevention and treatment program. Many psychological studies and intervention programs use life satisfaction as a primary outcome variable, especially in school-based and adolescent-focused mental health strategies (Meule & Voderholzer, 2020). Higher scores of life satisfaction have been associated with lower risk of mental health disorders, better social adjustments, stronger academic engagement and greater resilience in the face of

stress. Conversely, declining life satisfaction score can serve as an early warning signal for emerging psychological problems, such as depression, anxiety or low self-esteem (Cavioni et al., 2021). In this way, life satisfaction serves not only as a theoretical indicator of subjective well-being but also a practical tool for identifying youth at risk and guiding early interventions. Given its dual function as both a comprehensive indicator of SWB and a diagnostic proxy for mental health risk, life satisfaction emerges as an ideal construct for research focused on adolescent well-being.

In the research literature on well-being, it has been established that different age groups tend to perceive and experience subjective well-being in distinct ways (Ulloa et al., 2013). Prominent empirical conclusion in the difference of well-being according to age group is that subjective well-being tends to follow a U-shaped curve across life span. This pattern has been identified in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (Blanchflower, 2021). The curve suggests that subjective well-being is typically higher during youth and early adulthood, dips during middle age and then rises again in older elderly. One of the most critical and highly prioritized age groups in well-being research is adolescents. The well-being of individuals in this developmental stage holds far-reaching implications not only for their personal future but also for broader societal outcomes such as economic growth, social cohesion, public health and innovation (Lukoševičiūtė et al., 2022). Adolescents represent the next generation of workers, leaders, inventors and citizens; therefore, their mental, emotional and physical health today directly impacts the strength and stability of societies tomorrow. In both academic and policy discussions, it is increasingly argued that adolescents and young people form the core engine of societal progress economically, culturally and socially (Johnson et al., 2014). Consequently, investing

in the well-being of adolescents is not only an ethical or moral responsibility but also a strategic imperative for sustainable civilization development.

Nevertheless, especially in adolescents, the traditional U-shaped theory is increasingly being challenged by the realities of modern lifestyles, especially for younger generations. Recent studies and media reports suggest that adolescents and young adults in many developed and developing countries are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress, anxiety and loneliness (Kazakova & Zhao, 2019; Spytska, 2023; Shah, 2024). They are often dubbed “snowflake” or “loneliness” generation. This decline in well-being among youth has been linked to several emerging societal issues, including academic pressures, digital addiction, social media comparison, family instability and economic uncertainty (Spytska, 2023). The proliferation of smartphones and online platforms has reshaped how young people connect, communicate and form their identities, often exposing them to cyberbullying, unrealistic expectation and feelings of social isolation (Gao et al., 2021). These factors have significantly altered the adolescent experience, potentially flattening or even inverting the traditional U-shaped well-being curve. Given this evolving landscape, it is increasingly clear that existing data of subjective well-being may be outdated and not fully capture the contemporary experiences of young people (Blanchflower, 2021). Therefore, researchers must integrate new data, update methodologies and have culturally sensitive approaches to remain relevant and impactful.

To prevent mental health crisis in adolescents, it is imperative to understand and improve their well-being. When looking at definition of adolescent well-being, according to United Nation, adolescent well-being is achieved when “adolescents have the support, confidence and resources to thrive in contexts of secure and healthy relationships, realizing their full potential and rights” (Ross et al., 2020). High levels

of adolescent well-being have been consistently linked to numerous positive developmental and life outcomes. For instance, research has shown that adolescents with strong well-being tend to perform better academically, maintain healthier interpersonal relationships and demonstrate greater emotional resilience. Additionally, they are more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviors such as regular physical activity, nutritious eating habits and adequate sleep, which in turn support their overall physical health and cognitive functioning (Cavioni et al., 2021). In long-term, well-being in adolescence has been associated with greater life satisfaction, more successful careers and higher levels of civic engagement in adulthood (Steptoe et al., 2015; Martín-María et al., 2017; Cavioni et al., 2021). On the contrary, a lack of well-being during adolescence is increasingly being recognized as a significant public health and social concern in both high income and low- and middle-income countries (Žukauskienė, 2014). Adolescents who experience low well-being are at a higher risk of developing various mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and behavioral disorders (Han et al., 2025). Furthermore, longitudinal studies have demonstrated that the effect of poor adolescent well-being can persist into adulthood, manifesting in long-term consequences such as low educational attainment, reduced income, increased social isolation and diminished quality of life (Sheehan et al., 2022). In many cases, the early onset of emotional distress or trauma during adolescence can shape a person's trajectory for years, or even decades, leading to cycles of disadvantage that are difficult to break without effective intervention (Dye, 2018). Adolescents who view themselves or their future in a negative light are more likely to engage in risky or self-destructive behaviors, including substance abuse, school dropout, aggression or self-harm (Taylor, 2011).

Adolescent well-being is shaped and molded by the environmental conditions and social structures surrounding an individual during their developmental years. It includes a range of ecological systems, such as family, peer group, school environment, local community and broader societal institutions, collectively contribute to shaping an adolescent's overall sense of well-being (Crawford, 2020). These systems interact dynamically with each other and with the individual, creating both risk and protective factors that influence mental, emotional and social development. These factors operate both at the macro level such as national economic policies or education systems and at the micro level such as family dynamics and peer relationships (Andayani et al., 2021). Together, they form the context in which adolescents learn, grow and navigate their personal identities.

While all of these domains hold relevance, it can be argued that the family remains a foundational and influential external factor in determining adolescent well-being. This assertion is grounded in classical psychological theory as well as in a robust body of empirical evidence (Arunachalam & Nguyen, 2016; Farsani et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2022). Studies have demonstrated that adolescents who grow up in dysfunctional or unsupportive family environments are at heightened risk for a range of psychological disorders, including anxiety, depression, conduct problems and other behavioral issues (Bowlby, 2004; Huang et al., 2022). Specifically, children whose parents are divorced or separated have been found to display higher rates of academic difficulties, psychological distress and behavioral problems compared to their peers raised in stable, two-parent households (Huang et al., 2022). In contrast, adolescents who are nurtured in healthy, cohesive and emotionally supportive family settings generally report higher levels of self-efficacy, self-esteem and subjective well-being. Such environments promote not only psychological resilience but also a greater sense

of life satisfaction and happiness (Antony & Manikandan, 2015; Holzer et al., 2023). Establishing and understanding the relationship between family environment and adolescent well-being is therefore essential for addressing the growing concerns related to youth's mental health problem. This connection is particularly significant in today's evolving landscape, where traditional family structures are being reshaped by global changes. Moreover, the ongoing economic stagnation and increasing societal pressures in many nations contribute further stressors to families, which can trickle down to affect adolescent development (Fosco & Grych, 2013).

Despite its importance, the family environment is a multifaceted and complex construct that poses challenges in terms of measurement and operationalization (Bush et al., 2020). Researchers have approached this complexity from different research directions. One of the effort to conceptualize family influence came from Diana Baumrind, who pioneers research on parenting styles (Fadlillah & Fauziah, 2022). She proposes that variations in parenting, such as Authoritative, Authoritarian and Permissive, play a central role in determining child and adolescent outcomes (Baumrind, 1999). Her framework suggests that parenting style could serve as a proxy for family environment, with the Authoritative style being most beneficial (Fadlillah & Fauziah, 2022). However, while influential, Baumrind's model has been criticized for being culturally specific (Sorkhabi, 2005). In particular, studies in East Asian contexts have shown that Authoritarian parenting, which is traditionally associated with negative outcomes such as low self-esteem and poor well-being in Western culture, does not always result in the same consequences in Asian context. In countries such as China, Japan or Vietnam, strict or high-control parenting may coexist with high academic motivation, strong family loyalty and even positive mental health outcomes, thereby challenging the universality of Baumrind's framework and raising

questions about cross-cultural applicability (Sorkhabi, 2005). In response to the limitations of single-factor or culturally narrow approaches, researchers began to adopt more comprehensive models to conceptualize family environments. Amongst these models, McMaster Model of Family Functioning has emerged as an applicable tool in both research and clinical setting (Miller et al., 2000; Fosco & Grych, 2013). McMaster Model of Family Functioning conceptualizes family functioning through the lens of structural, organizational and interactional properties of the family unit (Miller et al., 2000). It provides a framework for assessing how family members relate to one another, solve problems, regulating emotions and behaviors.

On the other hand, aside from external environmental influences, a growing body of psychological literature has established that internal psychological factors play a crucial role in determining an individual's overall well-being as well (Schimmack, 2006; Telef & Furlong, 2017; Tran et al., 2022). These internal dimensions encompass a wide range of constructs, including but not limited to emotional intelligence, hope, optimism, resilience, personality traits, sense of meaning in life and self-esteem. These factors contribute to how individuals perceive and manage their lives, process emotions and cope with challenges (Plys et al., 2023). In addition, during adolescence, which is a critical developmental stage marked by significant cognitive, emotional and social transitions, these internal factors are actively being shaped and refined (Hartman et al., 2017). In another word, these factors are “evolving” together with adolescent growth up. The development of personality traits and psychological characteristics in adolescence is understood as the product of a dynamic interaction between an individual's innate genetic predispositions and their environment, including family upbringing, peer relationships and life experiences (Oliva et al., 2014). Once these traits become consolidated after adolescence, they can become stable innate character,

exerting a long-term influence on an individual's mental health, life satisfaction and general sense of well-being through adulthood (Tomljenović, 2014).

Among these numerous internal psychological variables, self-esteem has been argued to be a robust and validated predictors and mediators of subjective well-being, particularly during adolescent years (Neff, 2011; Fadda et al., 2021). Empirical research has demonstrated the role of self-esteem in influencing emotional and mental health outcomes (Røysamb et al., 2018; Fadda et al., 2021). Self-esteem is defined as an individual's subjective evaluation of their own worth, competence and value (Orth & Robins, 2014). It reflects how much a person likes, accepts and respects themselves and is intertwined with one's identity. High self-esteem is associated with adaptive psychological functioning while low self-esteem is a known risk factor for various mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, social withdrawal and suicidal ideation (Orth et al., 2012; Fadda et al., 2021).

From the above discussion, it would be academically valuable to investigate the gaps in literature and build an integrated conceptual framework that brings together three core psychological and environmental constructs: subjective well-being, family functioning and self-esteem.

1.1 Gap Analysis

First research gap is lack of studies investigating relationship between family functioning and life satisfaction as well as family functioning and self-esteem in adolescents. While there is argument that family environment plays a significant and sometimes foundational role in adolescent development, researchers continue to face challenges in explaining exactly how this influence is manifested in practical and measurable ways (Bradley, 2000; Izzo et al., 2022). From previous systematic review, it could be seen that existing research in this field has concentrated on identifying and