



The Relationship between Social Capital and Soft Skills among University Students

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at identifying the level of social capital to improve soft skills among university students in Malaysia. Social capital construct based on Putnam's [1] social capital theory. Social capital in this research refers to students' participation in community-based activities and university's clubs. Soft skills construct included university students' communication, leadership, teamwork, continuous learning, critical thinking, ethics and professionalism, and entrepreneurship skills. This study is a survey research design using a questionnaire instrument for data collection. The sample was chosen randomly, participating in a total of 264 university students in Malaysia. The study used descriptive analyses such as mean, standard deviation, t-test, and Pearson Correlation to analyze the data. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23 was used for the data analysis. The findings of study demonstrated that the majority of university students had moderate levels of both constructs, namely social capital and soft skills. Results from this study revealed that there was no significant difference in social capital based on Gender. However, the results of the study found there is a significant difference in soft skills based on Gender. Accordingly, it has been found that male students had a higher soft skill compared to female students. Correlation analysis demonstrated that there was a significant positive relationship between social capital and soft skills. Overall, this study suggests the importance of social capital towards soft skills development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

University students should be equipped with soft skills such as critical, creative thinking skills, problem-solving skills, communication skills, initiative, ethics and fostering a lifelong learning culture [2]; with solid and credible personal preparation, each university graduates will be able to compete globally. In Malaysia, 33 800 university students obtained their degrees, and 31,700 students got their diplomas from the Universities. There were 5.36 million graduates in 2020 [3]. The number of unemployed graduates in 2019 was 170.3 thousand persons, an increased 5.5 percent (2018: 161.3 thousand persons). Active unemployed graduates accounted for 74.8 per cent (127.4 thousand persons) of the total unemployed graduates [4]. This indicates the level of marketability of graduates is still low in the country. Various factors, among them, influence unemployment: the attitude of choosing a job, quality of education, and failure to meet the demands of the industry and the job market [5].

Lack of industrial training, poor communication skills and English proficiency, problem-solving skills, love to change workplaces, and lack of self-confidence are among the five factors that graduates fail to get a job after graduating from university. The failure of graduates to get a job is because they do not have the soft skills needed by employers. Political media is also associated with English language weakness, narrow-mindedness, lack of leadership characteristics, and lack of communication skills [6]. Academic achievement alone is not enough to hold positions in the public or private sectors. Employers are beginning to view employability skills as one of the necessary skills to enable graduates to get a place in employment. Employability skills include personality, attitudes, habits and behaviour, communication skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and organizational management processes. Several studies have been conducted on the importance and application of soft skills for the locally and internationally job market. However, studies on the role of social capital in shaping students' soft skills at the university have not been conducted. Therefore, this study was conducted to see one of the angles of social capital in playing a role in shaping soft skills among students at the university.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Capital Theory [7] focuses on 'features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam 1995, p. 67). Scholars have interpreted various terms on social capital according to their respective roles. However, the central concept of social capital, which is an interaction involving an interdependent society to achieve the same goal, is essential in interpreting the meaning of this social capital. Social Capital is the appearance of social organizations, such as trust, norms (or reciprocity), and networks (of community bonds), which can improve community efficiency by facilitating coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 2002); [8]. The two main constructs in social capital are structural constraints that involve relationships and interactions within the community and cognitive constructs that include perceptions in support and beliefs that are more conducive to attitudes and perceptions. Social capital consists of a network of institutions such as families, classes or political parties that are interdependent and involve cultural exchange within their group only. The development of an individual's social capital depends on the extent to which the network of relationships can be built and mobilized and the amount of capital in the form of economic, cultural and symbolic belonging to community members [1].

Putnam [1] defines social capital as a value of the mutual trust (trust) between members of society and society towards its leaders. Social capital is defined as a social institution that involves networks, norms, and social trust that encourages social collaboration (coordination and cooperation) for the common good. Social capital is seen as a network of interaction networks that involves high trust in its community members to achieve common aspirations. Social capital is the stock of dynamic relationships between communities. Each pattern of relationships is bound by trust, mutual understanding, and shared values, which bind group members to make it possible for joint action to be carried out efficiently and effectively. A key element in the formation of social capital is involved in a community or group. The ability of a community to participate in social networking that is done voluntarily, equality, freedom and civilization. The commitment of community

members to attend community gatherings is a benchmark for the formation of social capital in the community. The second element is trust, where trust is crucial to forming strong social capital in society. Trust can be defined as a sense of mutual trust between individuals and between communities. Next is reciprocity, i.e. exchanging kindness. Social capital involves interactions that often benefit both parties over a long and continuous period of time. To form a strong social capital, community members must have the same norms and social values that is a rule that is expected to be followed by community members in order to prevent individuals from doing something that is contrary to the values of the local community. It can be concluded that social capital is a resource generated through interaction between society and institutions that give birth to a sense of trust, reciprocity, social networks, norms and values that shape the structure of society to achieve the same goal. The loss of social capital in a society can be seen through the divisions and social problems that result due to the decline of the value of trust, the emergence of suspicion and individualism between communities in society [7], (Putnam, 2002); [8].

Soft skills are generic skills that are also referred to as employability skills [9]. Communication skill refers to the process of formation and sharing of meaning between two or more parties [10]. Communication can also be formulated as a process of conveying information or information between several people. Thus the communication aspect involves a sender or informant, the information or information brought, and the recipient of the information may also respond to the sender to state that the information has been received and acted upon. Communication skills are a set of skills that allow a person to convey information that can be understood by the recipient [11]. Thus, these communication skills can be executed if they are born, achieve the desired goals, and the communication is in accordance with the expectations of the communication actors on the communication situations. Critical thinking and problem-solving skills involve thinking critically, being creatively creative, analytical, and applying knowledge and understanding to new and different problems. These skills include aspects of the ability to identify and analyze issues in complex situations, create justification skills, and find ideas and find alternative solutions.

Teamwork skills refer to a group of individuals in an organization who perform tasks jointly to

achieve a group goal [12]. It can be defined as two or more people working together to achieve the same goal that combines the efforts, skills, knowledge and advantages done to produce more effective work. Teamwork skills involve the ability to work with others from a variety of socio-cultural backgrounds to achieve common goals. It includes aspects of building good relationships, interacting, and working effectively together to achieve the same goal. In addition, these skills also require team members to recognize and respect the attitudes, behaviour and beliefs of others as well as take on their respective roles as group members.

Continuous learning from its concept covers a wide range of aspects. It encompasses the democratization of education, which includes programs to enhance individuals' knowledge, skills and competencies through formal and informal education, whether in the classroom or outside the classroom, courses, talks, information sharing on the internet or through daily experience. Continuous learning is the implementation of various learning activities that can be followed throughout life to improve the knowledge, skills, and abilities of individuals. Continuous learning involves independent learning in the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. It covers aspects of the ability to find and manage relevant information from various sources and the ability to receive new ideas and learn autonomously.

Entrepreneurial skills involve exploring opportunities and developing awareness of risk, creativity, and innovation in business and employment-related activities. Students should be able to identify business opportunities, design business plans, be able to build, explore and seize business and employment opportunities. Entrepreneurial skills refer to translated abilities in the behaviour or actions of an entrepreneur. These skills include the ability to start a new business, manage a business, make decisions, identify opportunities, manage time, communicate well, solve problems creatively and manage stress which are all considered basic skills in business management.

Ethics as morality, morals, courtesy and human character in facing daily life in all aspects. It contains values that shape the human personality to determine good, bad, true or false. Morality is expressed as a general idea that is accepted and held by a society about the good and bad of a human behaviour. Professional ethics and morals involve the ability to practice

high moral standards in professional practice and social interaction. An individual should be able to understand the economic, environmental and socio-cultural effects of professional practice as well as be able to analyze and make decisions in solving ethical related problems.

Leadership skills are among the skills that are very much needed by the industry that employees should possess other than technical skills. Leadership can be trained through co-curricular activities such as big associations and sports clubs. Some aspects of leadership should exist among those who hold associations. Among them are having the skills to describe, practice and control behaviour, understand problems and help find solutions, listen, give relationships, give explanations, reflection, confrontations, interpret, give information, make conclusions, and human relationships. In short, leadership skills involve the ability to practice leadership traits in a variety of activities. Individuals should have knowledge of basic leadership theories, be able to lead projects, and understand and take on alternate roles between team leaders and team members.

3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims at identifying the level of social capital improving soft skills among university students in Malaysia. The survey aims at identifying the levels of social capital among university students regarding their involvement in various activities. It also identifies the levels of soft skills among university students. The study also identified the differences in students' social capitals and soft skills based on Gender. This study also identifies the relationship between social capital and soft skills among students.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the level of social capital among university students?
2. What is the level of soft skills among university students?
3. Is there any differences in social capital based on gender?
4. Is there any differences in soft skills based on gender?

5. Is there any significant relationship between social capital and soft skills?

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Study Design and Sampling

The investigation used a quantitative research design. The study population included university students in Malaysia. A total number of 264 university students has been selected using a random sampling technique.

5.2 Instrument and Procedures

The questionnaire instrument was developed in line with the needs of the study. It included 44 statements that measured both social capital and soft skills. This study uses a set of questionnaires adapted and modified from the social capital and soft skills scale of Grootaert et al. [13] and Bullen & Onyx [14]. The instrument's internal consistency was based on the report of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient values for social capital and soft skills constructs as 0.967 and 0.993, respectively.

5.3 Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used in analyzing the data. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23 was used for the data analysis. Descriptive analysis was used to obtain the mean and standard deviations to determine the overall social capital and soft skills level. T-test used to identify the differences of social capital and soft skills based on Gender. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between social capital and soft skills.

6. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Descriptive analyses, such as mean and standard deviation, were used to identify the level of social capital and soft skills. The social capital construct included university student's involvement in community-based activities and university's club activities. Table 1 shows that the

Table 1. The Levels of social capital

Social Capital	Mean Score	Standard deviation
Participation in Community-based Activities	2.1340	0.71923
Involvement in University's Clubs	2.0283	0.75522
Average	2.0913	0.70528

level of social capital is considered moderate. This means that the majority of university students are actively involved in community-based activities and university's club activities.

Soft skills construct included university students' communication, leadership, teamwork, continuous learning, critical thinking, ethics and professionalism, and entrepreneurship skills. Accordingly, Table 2 shows that the overall majority of university students have a moderate level of soft skills. Results from this study showed that the highest level of soft skills is entrepreneurship skills. Moreover, the study's findings show that the majority of university students have a moderate level of other soft skills such as communication, leadership, teamwork, continuous learning, critical thinking, ethics, and professional skills.

Further t-test analysis was carried out to identify the differences in the social capital based on Gender. Table 3 shows no significant differences in social capital in terms of students' participation in community-based activities and University's Clubs based on Gender. On the other hand, an independent t-test result demonstrated a significant difference in soft skill levels based on Gender. Male students had a higher mean score = 2.2472 compared to female students = 2.0761.

In order to identify the relationship between social capital and soft skills, a Pearson

Correlation was calculated. The findings of Pearson Correlation are shown in Table 4 below. This study revealed a significant relationship between social capital and soft skills ($p < 0.01$).

7. DISCUSSION

Past studies have found that soft skills are an ongoing process and require constant training. Since this study found that the level of soft skills of students is in an intermediate state, then more concrete and systematic action is needed by the university [15]. A study carried out by Majid; Liming & Tong [16] found that many universities worldwide pay attention to integrated soft skills development strategies. For example, many universities in the United States provide flexibility for students to pursue a variety of academic subjects to university students. Flexibility in study programs at the university level allows students to learn various forms of soft skills. This study is in line with past studies that there is a diversity of social phenomena based on Gender. Past studies have found that there are many differences between genders in many aspects related to education. For example, many research findings found significant differences between male and female students [17]. The current result provides insight into the past study that has explored the link between social capital and soft skills among graduates [18].

Table 2. The levels of soft skills

Soft Skills	Mean	Standard deviation
Communication	2.1692	0.67324
Leadership	2.1111	0.71157
Teamwork	2.0019	0.80342
Continuous learning	2.1084	0.76190
Critical Thinking	2.1495	0.71490
Ethics and Professional	2.1751	0.72386
Entrepreneurship	2.2230	0.76334
Average	2.1344	.66704

Table 3. Differences of social capital and soft skill levels based on gender

	Gender	n	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value	Sig.
Participation in Community-based Activities	Male	88	2.0193	.86643	-.138	0.052
	Female	174	2.0329	.69491		
Involvement in University's Clubs	Male	90	2.2083	.80430	1.209	0.357
	Female	174	2.0955	.67025		
Soft Skills	Male	90	2.2472	0.77025	1.987	0.028
	Female	174	2.0761	0.60097		

Table 4. The relationship between social capital and soft skills

		Social Capital	Soft Skills
Social Capital	Pearson Correlation	1	.845**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	264	264
Soft Skills	Pearson Correlation	.845**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	264	264

** Correlation significant at levels 0.01 (2-tailed)

8. CONCLUSION AND RECCOMANDATIONS

It is clear that there is diversity in social capital and soft skills among university students. Overall, the findings from this study show that the level of social capital and soft skills are at a moderate level. Therefore, the university management needs to do many activities to increase social capital. A neat, integrated and systematic planning should be developed. More focus should be given to the various aspects of student involvement in activities within the university and outside the university. In fact, participation in online networking activities needs to be driven wisely. The development of information technology allows students to build networks with other university students from other countries. The empowerment of such social networks is essential because it is very clear from this study found that there is a significant positive relationship between social capital and soft skills.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the authors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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