

## Perceived Social Support and Romantic Relationship Quality: Better Wingman, Parent or Friend?

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## Perceived Social Support and Romantic Relationship Quality: Better Wingman, Parent or Friend?

**Abstract**— Perceived social support is associated with a better quality of romantic relationship. Potential sources of support in a romantic relationship are members of a close social network, such as friends and parents. Although perceived support from both parents and friends is essential for developing and supporting a romantic relationship, there is a gap in understanding about whether they are equally important. This study intends to contribute additional empirical data about the topic of romantic relationships among the emerging adults of Malaysia. A cross-sectional study design using a survey data collection method with the revised scale of the Social Support Index (SSI) and the Investment Model Scale–Short Version (IMS-S), indicated a significant positive effect of friends’ support on the quality of romantic relationships, whereas parental support was insignificant. The importance of taking cultural and societal background into consideration is also discussed.

**Keywords:** early emerging adult, perceived parental support, perceived friend support, romantic relationship quality, Malaysia

### Introduction

According to emerging adult theory, one of the dimensions of emerging adulthood is identity formation which involves the exploration of diverse life possibilities and eventually moving toward making enduring decisions (Arnett, 2000). Romantic relationship is one of the main areas that is involved in this process of exploration. However, it is important to comprehend the romantic relationship in its intrapersonal and relational context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Research has found that perceived social support is associated with a better quality of romantic relationship (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004). Potential sources of support for people who are engaged in a romantic relationship are the members of their close social network (Sprecher, Femlee, Orbuch, & Willets, 2001), such as friends and parents.

Friends assume an essential part in affecting the beginning and maintenance of a romantic relationship, especially in adolescence (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Etcheverry, Le, & Charania, 2008; Etcheverry, Le, & Hoffman, 2013). As development processes are not determined merely by age, friends may remain in their role as a main source of support until the early period of emerging adulthood (Rodrigues, Lopes, Monteiro, & Prada, 2016). On the other hand, there is evidence that parental support helps to improve adjustment, not only socially, or in terms of well-being, but also in a romantic relationship (Le, Dik, & Barbara, 2015). During emerging adulthood, individuals start to develop a more egalitarian and mutual relationship with their parents (Arnett, 2015). Together with reduced conflicts and increased cohesion (Parra, Oliva, & Reina, 2015), parental support will eventually become salient to emerging adults as well for romantic relationship maintenance (Arnett, 2015). Hence, it is fair to conclude that during emerging adulthood, support from both friends and parents are highly interactive with the relationship quality between an individual and his or her romantic partner.

In one study conducted in the United Kingdom (UK), they classified emerging adult participants into two categories based on their chronological age, which were early emerging adults (EEA; 18–21 years old) and middle emerging adults (MEA; 22–25 years old) (Arnett & Schwab, 2012; Arnett, 2015; Rodrigues et al., 2016). Other than age difference, it was argued that there was a difference in the perceived adult status between these two groups: the majority of EEAs perceive themselves as not yet having entered or having partially entered adulthood, whereas the majority of MEAs perceive themselves as having achieved adulthood. It also demonstrated that different types of social support appear to be salient at different ages of emerging adults. Friend support is more salient and has a greater impact upon EEA's relationship quality as the influence of friends during adolescence is most likely to remain during the EEA period. On the other hand, parental influence and support will regain its central role in influencing relationship quality during the MEA stage, as they have achieved a more egalitarian relationship with their parents. However, according to (Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004), the majority of the young people in China between the age of 18 to 25 viewed themselves as have reached adulthood, and this figure is much higher than young people of the same age in the United States. The researcher suggested that Chinese might be one culture that experiences a shorter emerging adulthood, and one of the reasons is the practice of collectivism. In contrast to the individualistic qualities that are viewed as necessary to be considered as an adult in the United States (Arnett, 2015), the Chinese emphasize criteria related to the responsibility to family, which reflect Confucian doctrine and the collectivistic values in the country.

As a non-Western country, Malaysia's emerging adults are expected to be similar to the Chinese (Wider, Halik, Mustapha, & Bahari, 2015). Hence, emerging adulthood in Malaysia is believed to be shorter than the UK and a higher percentage of EEA may perceive themselves as adult than in the UK. In this research, we examined whether perceived support from parents and friends were differently associated with relationship quality.

This research was conducted to examine on whether perceived support from parents and friends can predict different romantic relationship outcomes. A previous study conducted by Rodrigues and colleagues (2016) separated the emerging adult into EEA and MEA, and claimed that EEAs are less likely to perceive themselves as having achieved adulthood than MEAs. However, categorizing emerging adults into groups and assuming that EEAs are less likely to perceive themselves as having acquired adult status might not be representative of certain cultures that have a shorter emerging adulthood period (Nelson et al., 2004).

The development of a great quality of romantic relationship is important during the period of emerging adulthood (Collins, Welsh, Furman, 2009) and it aids the process of psychological adjustment, social well-being, and the development of a stable social identity (Loving & Slatcher, 2013; Lee & Goldstein, 2015). Nevertheless, there has been a lack of empirical studies that have investigated romantic relationships among the Malaysian population, especially emerging adults in this country (Baptist, Norton, Aducci, Thompson, & Cook, 2012). Thus, this study intends to contribute additional empirical data about the topic of romantic relationships among emerging adults in Malaysia.

## Literature Review

### A. *Romantic Relationship Quality*

Romantic relationship is a symbol of adolescence which indicates mutual spontaneous interactions characterized by affection and anticipated or ongoing sexual behavior (Collins et al., 2009). There are various indicators of romantic relationship quality. These can be observed in the way the relationship contributes to generally beneficial experiences (Collins, 2003). Romantic relationships that are viewed as high quality often exhibit affection, intimacy, and nourishment. On the other hand, romantic relationships that are seen as low quality will be characterized by conflict, annoyance, and controlling behavior (Galliher, Welsh, Rostosky, & Kawaguchi, 2004). Quality of relationship can also be viewed as the love, commitment, and satisfaction experienced between couples (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). The indicator of romantic relationship quality used in our study was characterized by beneficial effects such as the desire to persevere (satisfaction), the need to persevere (high investment), and having no options but to persevere (low alternatives) (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 2005). An essential romantic relationship quality is mutual dependence, which promotes high commitment if mutual dependence is high.

Commitment is the intention to continue a relationship, which includes high attachment and emotional investment in the long-term (Rusbult et al., 2005). Commitment will increase in adolescence as satisfaction and investment increase, while the quality of alternatives to the relationship decrease (De Goede, Branje, Van Duin, Van Der Valk, & Meeus, 2011). The investment model of commitment developed from social exchange theory (Homans, 1961), particularly from interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Kelley & Thibaut, 1980); proposes that variables related to commitment include satisfaction, comparison to alternatives, investment size, equity, and social support. This means that positive reactions and support for the romantic relationship increases commitment and other feelings such as attachment, love, and satisfaction. Interdependence theory is known to be especially useful in describing the way people assess interpersonal relationship quality (Etcheverry et al., 2013). It explains how we are motivated to magnify our rewards while reducing costs in our interpersonal relationships, which includes romantic relationships. Interdependence theory states that high levels of relationship dependence are due to higher levels of satisfaction, a bigger investment, and the lower quality of alternatives (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004).

### B. *Perceived Friends Support*

Friendship is characterized by the shared interdependence of needs, wants, and goals (Fincham & Cui, 2011). It is also indicated by fairness, mutual trust, and respect. Friends may be the first group of people that adolescents rely on for satisfying these needs. Even though there are many different qualities associated with friendship; including closeness, support, and intimacy (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009); according to attachment theory, being able to relate and gain support can trigger friendship. Perceived social support involves a person's belief that social support is present and accessible, and is usually considered either negative or positive, according to whether it provides what the person needs (Norris & Kaniasty, 1996). Meanwhile, social support refers to the degree to which social networks approve or disapprove

of a romantic relationship (Sprecher, 1988). This is the focus of our study. For instance, friends or parents offer support by communicating and revealing their blessing or approval of a relationship, by viewing both people as a couple, as well as being a good listener and a safe haven when a couple face relationship problems and stress.

When adolescents view their relationship with their parents as increasingly egalitarian (De Goede et al., 2009), they will have a more intense and supportive relationship with their friends (De Goede et al., 2009). An individual's circle of friends can affect dating choices by providing positive or negative appraisals of the quality of the potential date (Wright & Sinclair, 2012). This study was conducted with undergraduate students and found that friends' support can determine who the individual likes (Wright & Sinclair, 2012).

Friends have an important role in influencing the start and preservation or maintenance of a romantic relationship. As reported previously (Etcheverry et al., 2013), friends' approval and validation of a relationship affect romantic relationship quality in the sense of commitment. Previous researchers (Sprecher, Felmlee, Orbuch, & Willets, 2001) also found evidence that friends who are a source of support can determine the result of a romantic relationship; whether it remains stable or leads to a breakup or dissolution; which is in alignment with our hypothesis. An individual's uncertainty over a romantic relationship reduces as the support received from friends reinforces an individual's beliefs about their partner, indicating that they are meant for each other. Uncertainty can also be reduced by acquiring advice or views from each other's circles (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2005).

According to research by Parks (2007), disapproval from one's friends can cause a deterioration in partnership quality. In a relationship, young adults tend to evaluate their relationship decisions by looking at different aspects, such as the lack of support from friends, and the interference of a relationship with other social networks. Early emerging adults (EEA) were more inclined to seek help from friends than family members during the relationship initiation process in western cultures (Parks, 2007). This shows that friend support is highly important to young adults, as friends carry more weight during the initiation of a relationship. In addition, with friends' support, enhances the quality of romantic relationship, including commitment (Sinclair, Hood, & Wright, 2014), and stability (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2005). Therefore, we hypothesized that:

*H1:* Perceived support from friends has a positive effect on romantic relationship quality among early emerging adults.

### ***C. Perceived Parental Support***

In a study conducted by Meeus, Branje, van der Valk and de Wied, (2007), adolescent couples with parental support claimed to have strong commitment to their relationship, and have fewer emotional issues. Support from parents can be demonstrated through sharing common activities, emotional ties, and nurturing behavior which provides a secure basis to step into the outside world and develop new relationships (Collins & Laursen, 2004). When adolescents move toward late adolescence, their relationship with a romantic partner will be viewed as more important and psychological valuable than during early adolescence (De Goeder et al.,

2009). According to a study conducted by Wright & Sinclair (2012), parents who provide more resources to their children are more influential when offering their opinions than friends.

The level of interpersonal network approval or support is positively associated with relationship stability, satisfaction, and feelings of love and commitment, within both dating and marital relationships, whereas network disapproval significantly predicts relationship breakup (Felmlee, 2001). With parental approval, support is provided and hence couples are more likely to have a higher quality, more successful relationship (De Goede et al., 2011). Furthermore, it has been argued that when there is a positive association between social support and relationship development, couples form a dyadic identity, similar to how a person forms a self-identity, which eventually leads to the stability of a relationship, given that a strong sense of dyadic identity is formed (Lewis, 1973). For instance, when support such as being told you are a “a perfect match” or being labeled as a couple, is offered by network members such as family or friends, the bond between two people will strengthen and interaction between them will increase. Unsupportiveness may lead to the weakening of bonds and may speed up the relationship’s dissolution (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992; Felmlee, 2001).

In addition, studies have also found that support from parents benefits an individual in the form of social well-being and adaptation, especially in a romantic relationship (Lee, Dik, & Barbara, 2015). It has been stated that when it comes to making a huge decision, emerging adults usually turn to their parents as a source of support. Parental support such as classifying them as a pair, involving both people during events, and providing encouragement, are also related to developing commitment and satisfaction in dating and marriage (Felmlee, 2001; Sinclair, Hood, Wright, 2014). The more support and approval a pair gets from their parents, the more stable the romantic relationship becomes as a means to form a shared and stabilized identity. Hence, the lower the possibility and susceptibility to dissolution. Furthermore, data has indicated that parental support increases relationship commitment, which in turn decreases the probability of having emotional problems in romantic relationships (Meeus et al., 2007), and enhances other positive effects; such as satisfaction, stability, and feelings of love (Felmlee, 2001). Thus, this results in a greater possibility of having a high quality romantic relationship (De Goede et al., 2011). Evidence from the literature on the relationship between parental support and romantic relationship quality led us to make a prediction: that perceived parental support positively affects the quality of a romantic relationship among EEA. Therefore, we hypothesized that:

*H2: Perceived parental support has a positive effect on romantic relationship quality among early emerging adults*

## **Methodology**

### ***A. Participant***

There were three criteria to be fulfilled in this study, including must be an undergraduate students, aged between 18 to 21 years old, and involved in a romantic relationship. To determine the sample size, the G\*power software was used. For the effect size, a medium level (.15) was used in the calculation, and other adjustments were made, such as .05 for alpha, .95



for power, and 2 predictors. The calculation results showed that only a minimum sample size of 107 respondents was needed for the study. Through snowball sampling, a total of 154 respondents were recruited and 25 of the total respondents were excluded from our samples due to their failure to respond to more than 15% of the total items, or equivalent to three items in total. There were two respondents who failed to respond to less than 15% of the total items, thus the missing values in their responses were replaced using mean replacement and their data were retained. After filtering our samples, only 129 remained for further analysis. The average age was 19.70 ( $SD = 0.39$ ), and it consisted of 82 females (63.6%). There were 127 Chinese (98.7%), one Indian, and one Chinese Philippine respectively (0.8%). All respondents were heterosexual. Furthermore, the descriptive statistics showed that the 54 (47.4%) respondents' length of romantic relationship was less than a year, followed by 31 (24.7%) at less than two years, 21 (16.7%) at less than three years, 8 (6.4%) at less than four years, 3 (2.4%) at less than five years, 3 (2.4%) at less than six years and 5 (4.0%) at less than seven years.

## B. Measures

### 1) Social Support Index (SSI)

We utilized the revised SSI adapted version which consists of seven items (Rodrigues et al., 2016). The first four items measured the perceived parental support for the romantic relationship offered by one's parents and the partner's parents. For example, one of the items was "how much does your mother support your current romantic relationship?" The remaining three items measured the perceived support from one's friends, the partner's friends, and mutual friends. One of the items was "how much do your partner's friends support your current romantic relationship?" The responses were provided on a seven-point Likert scale, which ranged from completely unsupportive (1) to completely supportive (7). Both the perceived parental support and perceived friend support scales illustrated good reliability: parental (.84) and friend (.86).

### 2) Investment Model Scale – Short version (IMS-S)

The current study employed the IMS-S, a 13-item version of an instrument derived from the original 37-item IMS (Rodrigues & Lopes, 2012). There were three items for satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives subscales, and four items for the commitment subscale. An example of an item for satisfaction was "I feel satisfied with our relationship," and for investment size was "I feel very involved in our relationship-like I have put a great deal into it," whereas for quality of alternatives was "the people other than my partner with whom I might become involved are very appealing," and lastly for commitment was "I want our relationship to last for a very long time." Responses were given on a seven-point Likert scale, which ranged from "Do not agree at all" (1) to "Agree completely" (7). Each factor in the IMS-S demonstrated have high reliability, as illustrated by the Cronbach's alpha for satisfaction (.94), quality of alternatives (.80), investment size (.82), and commitment (.89).

#### ***D. Data Analysis***

All the completed questionnaires were collected and the data keyed in into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 to conduct the data analysis. All the data collected through Qualtrics were transferred to SPSS as well before the analysis began. Then, data cleaning was carried out on all the data in SPSS. Data with more than 15% ( $n = 15$ ) missing values were deleted, and those with missing value less than 15% ( $n = 2$ ) were completed using the mean replacement of the missing value referring to the mode of the response for that particular item. After data cleaning, the raw data were converted into a comma separated values file and transferred to SmartPLS 2.0 M3 to proceed with data analysis.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the data. SEM is a statistical model that illustrates the relationships between multiple variables (Hair Jr, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). PLS-SEM is a second-generation multivariate data analysis method which functions as an important tool for testing theory and causal modeling (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2007).

PLS-SEM comes with a few advantages. It is able to overcome the shortcoming of using first-generation multivariate data analysis methods, such as multiple regression, which can be conducted by SPSS (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2004). PLS-SEM is also able to analyze complex models with multiple constructs, especially when both the mediator and moderator are used, and it also helps to reduce the sample size needed (Urback & Ahlemann, 2012).

### **Results**

The mean score of items for perceived parental support was 4.95 ( $SD = 1.19$ ), for perceived friend support 5.95 ( $SD = 0.98$ ), and for romantic relationship quality items 5.94 ( $SD = 0.83$ ).

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the data using the SmartPLS 2.0 software. A two-step procedure that included measurement model assessment and structural model assessment was necessary, hence both assessments were conducted during our analysis (Hair et al., 2017). The former examined validity and reliability, whereas the latter analyzed the hypothesized relationships.

#### ***A. Measurement Model Assessment***

This study involved three reflective variables, which were perceived parental support, perceived friend support, and romantic relationship quality. The reliability and validity of the constructs was assessed to determine the measurement model. To evaluate the measurement model, the composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) had to be determined (Chin, 2010). For reliability, an assessment of indicator reliability and construct reliability were performed by checking the loading of each indicator with its associated latent construct, because the loadings of each item with its associated construct had to be greater than 0.7 (Hair et al., 2017). However, indicator loadings between 0.40 and 0.70 should only be



removed if deleting the item would increase the CR or AVE above the threshold value (Hair et al., 2017). According to Table I, a total of five items were removed from the romantic relationship quality construct (RRQ\_4, RRQ\_6, RRQ\_7, RRQ\_9, and RRQ\_11) due to low factor loadings. Construct reliability can be assessed by using CR or Cronbach's alpha coefficient, however, CR is deemed more suitable for PLS-SEM [44]. Table I shows the CR of all first-order latent variables was more than 0.70, and thus confirmed the internal consistency of the measurement model.

Next, the validity of measurement model was assessed by determining the convergent and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2017). AVE is used to measure the amount of variance in a latent variable as contributed by its indicators (Chin, 2010). For a convergent validity to be accepted, the AVE value has to be equal or above 0.5 (Hair Jr., Bush, & Ortinau, 2013). Table I shows that all constructs had achieved convergent validity as their AVEs were above 0.5. The discriminant validity was assessed to ensure all items were measuring different concepts or differentiated concepts. To determine the discriminant validity, criteria were tested (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). During the criteria test, comparisons were made between the square roots of AVE and the correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table II shows that the all the square roots of AVE were higher than the equivalent row and column values, therefore all the constructs were sufficiently differentiated from each other. This showed that the model had achieved discriminate validity.

TABLE I. RESULTS OF MEASUREMENT MODEL

Construct	Item	Convergent Validity		
		Factor loadings	AVE	CR
Perceived Parental Support	PPS_1	0.829	0.808	0.927
	PPS_2	0.781		
	PPS_3	0.866		
	PPS_4	0.871		
Perceived Friend Support	PFS_1	0.922	0.701	0.904
	PFS_2	0.854		
	PFS_3	0.919		
Romantic Relationship Quality	RRQ_1	0.794	0.583	0.918
	RRQ_2	0.734		
	RRQ_3	0.836		
	RRQ_5	0.732		
	RRQ_7	0.512		
	RRQ_8	0.738		
	RRQ_10	0.748		
	RRQ_12	0.767		
	RRQ_13	0.751		

Note. RRQ\_4, RRQ\_6, RRQ\_7, RRQ\_9, RRQ\_11 were removed due to low factor loadings.

TABLE II. DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY OF FIRST-ORDER CONSTRUCTS

		1	2	3
1	Perceives Friend Support	0.837 <sup>a</sup>	-	-
2	Perceived Parental Support	0.546	0.899 <sup>a</sup>	-
3	Romantic Relationship Quality	0.509	0.339	0.764 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>. Values represent square root of AVE while those without indicate correlations between constructs.

### B. Structural Model Assessment

The values of  $R^2$ , t-value, standard beta, and predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ) were assessed in the structural model (Hair Jr., Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017). In this study, bootstrapping used 5000 resamples. As shown in Table III, the value of  $R^2$  was 0.264, which is categorized as moderate (Cohen, 1988). The value of  $R^2$  indicates that romantic relationship quality explains 26.4% of the variance in perceived parental support and perceived friend support. For direct effect, perceived friend support ( $\beta = .461$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) significantly predicted romantic relationship quality, whereas perceived parental support ( $\beta = .087$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) did not. Thus, H1 was supported and H2 was unsupported. The Stone-Geisser's  $Q^2$  is used to assess predictive relevance and examine the predictive capacity of the research model (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009). To determine the predictive relevance, a blindfolding procedure was used. Table III shows that the  $Q^2$  value was .154, which was more than zero, and showed the exogenous constructs (perceived parental support, and perceived friend support) had a predictive relevance for the endogenous construct (romantic relationship quality).

TABLE III. RESULTS OF HYPOTHESIS TESTING

		Path Coefficient	t-Value	Decision	$R^2$	$Q^2$
H1	PFS → RRQ	0.461	4.83**	Supported	.264	.154
H2	PPS → RRQ	0.087	1.12	Unsupported		

\*\*p-value < 0.01

Note. PFS: perceived friend support; PPS: perceived parental support; RRQ: romantic relationship quality

## Discussion

The findings in this study indicated that perceived friend support was a significant predictor of romantic relationship quality among EEA, however the findings indicated that perceived parental support was not a significant predictor of romantic relationship quality. The insignificant relationship between perceived parental support and romantic relationship quality can be explained through individual factors, such as psychological reactance. Psychological reactance is defined as the negative emotional state that emerges when one perceives his or her freedom is being confined (Brehm, 1966). This negative emotional state is part of the mechanism that helps to arouse certain behaviors to restore the restricted freedom. People tend to exhibit reactance when they perceive themselves as having the power to disregard or ignore

the opinions, wishes, or desires given by their social network members without any negative outcomes. A less confrontational form of reactance is resisting other's persuasion or influence and persisting in their pre-existing course of action.

In a slightly dated research study conducted by Woller, Buboltz, & Loveland (2007), the relationship between age and reactance was investigated, and they found that people from a younger-aged group (18–24) were more reactant than the middle-aged group (35–44) and the older-aged group (45–54). Although it was not mentioned in the research, the younger-aged employed fell into the category of early emerging adulthood (18–21) and middle emerging adulthood (22–25). Thus, this might imply that the EEA recruited in our study were high in reactance level as well. It has also been pointed out that psychological reactance reaches a peak during emerging adulthood (18–25 years old) and this might be the reason behind the greater likelihood of emerging adults engaging themselves in risky behaviors, such as binge drinking and substance use (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009; Miller & Quick, 2010). In addition, as mentioned earlier, emerging adults tend to have a more egalitarian relationship with their parents (Arnett, 2015), and in fact slightly more than half of our total sample ( $n = 65$ ) thought they had established an equal relationship with their parents.

Thus, emerging adults might perceive themselves as able to maintain a romantic relationship regardless of the opinions of their parents, without any potential negative outcomes. It is important to note that we did not disregard the important role of perceived parental support in helping to improve romantic relationship quality. However, it is important to consider the impact of individual reactance alongside the more egalitarian relationship between emerging adults and their parents.

Friends provide security and coziness for each other (Arnett, 2007), hence it is crucial for them to develop a sense of belonging to a network and to be recognized as a part of a social scene. By developing such a sense, intimacy between them will also be enhanced, allowing them to share their intimate and deep feelings and thoughts more often, instead of concealing them from each other. Usually romantic partners are common members of one close group of friends, and they have the tendency to have mutual friends when in a romantic relationship (Furman, 1999). As for emerging adults, intrinsic investments are crucial and important for a relationship, because they are valued as resources that bring comfort. One example of an intrinsic investment is spending quality time with each other, hanging out as well as disclosing personal details (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2005). Studies have also revealed that friends, as figures that provide social and moral support, can actually affect the quality of a romantic relationship, either by enhancing the stability of the relationship or leading to a break up (Sprecher et al., 2001). Friends' approval of a romantic relationship will act as a reinforcement, strengthening the individual's belief he or she has made the correct choice and has a compatible partner, hence reducing the uncertainties of the relationship. The same outcome can be achieved by seeking guidance or opinions from each other's social network (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2005).

## Conclusion

This study has further determined the relationship between the two sources of social support and the romantic relationship quality of the EEA in Malaysia. As such, this study provides further understanding of the factors that influence the romantic relationship quality of emerging adults in the Malaysian context. These findings open several new avenues for future research on this population. Last but not least, the study results also have academic and practical implications for human services professionals and wider society.

### *A. Implications*

As the development of a romantic relationship is one of the most important developmental tasks for EEA, and a good romantic relationship will aid their psychological adjustment, social well-being, and social identity, it is important to understand the factors that can significantly affect the quality of their romantic relationships. Here we identify the implications of our study for the public, policy makers, and theory. Our findings showed that perceived friend support was a significant predictor of EEA' romantic relationship quality, whereas perceived parental support was not. With an awareness of this finding in mind, people around the early emerging adult stage may be more likely to emphasize the importance of friend selection and the social influence exerted by friends. For example, parents may want to play their role by monitoring their child's social network. School or university counselors may want to take peer influence into consideration when they are trying to understand the factors that lead to a problematic romantic relationships among their early emerging adult clients. They may wish to consider integrating friend support in couple counseling and intervention programs. Peers who understand their power of influence may want to be more supportive when their friends are facing a relationship crisis, or having problem initiating and maintaining a romantic relationship. Support can be offered by approving the relationship, communicating blessings to the couple, and being a good listener when their friends are facing relationship problems.

Our study also has practical implications for the youth development policy in our country. As mentioned earlier, the Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia which was led by YB Khairy Jamaluddin, the Minister of Youth and Sports, announced that the Malaysian Youth Policy (MYP) would be implemented in 2018 to replace the outdated National Youth Development Policy. However, one of the flaws of the MYP is that it does not clearly identify the emerging adult population, although they are focusing their resources on building and developing youth aged between 18 to 25 years old. This failure to acknowledge the existence of the emerging adult population may imply that the policy makers are not aware of the concept of emerging adulthood, and thus policy designs may overlook the distinctive and unique needs of emerging adults in Malaysia. Now, after the 14th General Election, with the gradual formation of the new cabinet, the Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia is being led by a new minister, YB Syed Saddiq. We hope that our findings can spark the attention and interest of policy makers in redefining youth and revising their upcoming policy accordingly, so that emerging adults in Malaysia can benefit.

The revised youth policy may want to invite youth development workers to work with schools or universities directly (as here we are referring to EEA, the majority of them may have proceeded to tertiary education), or if they are already present in the school or university, their roles should be given more emphasis. They could offer soft skills programs, such as teaching students simple counseling skills. For instance, active listening skills, empathy, and paraphrasing could be taught so that the students are able to provide a listening ear to their friends that are facing challenges in life, especially difficulties in romantic relationships.

Our findings also contribute to the theory of emerging adulthood. The theory formulated has noted the importance of taking cultural and societal background into consideration (Arnett, 2000). Our study was carried out in Malaysia, a country where collectivism is widely practiced, and this has influenced the factors mentioned above (Nelson et al., 2004). Thus, the findings of our study contribute not only additional empirical data to the theory but also help to view emerging adulthood from a different cultural perspective. Furthermore, our study contributes more empirical data and evidence to the subject of romantic relationships among emerging adults in Malaysia, specifically on how perceived support can influence their romantic relationship quality. To the best of our knowledge, only limited and sparse research efforts have investigated this topic so far. Thus, it is fair to claim that our study findings help to enrich the theory of the emerging adult and improve the applicability of the theory in the Malaysian context.

### ***B. Limitations and Future Recommendations***

The limitations of this study include the homogeneity of the samples' sexuality and limited generalizability. One of the major limitations of this study is that our sample only involved heterosexual participants. Although we did not set the criteria for sexuality, we still failed to capture any data from non-heterosexual respondents. Besides, non-heterosexuals living in Chinese collectivistic culture have been proven to be less likely to reveal their sexuality as it does not conform to the norms (Liu, Feng, Ha, Liu, Cai, Liu, & Li, 2011; Zhao, Ma, Chen, Li, Qin, & Hu, 2016). Thus, if we still hold on to the assumption made earlier: that emerging adults in Malaysia are similar to the emerging adults in China (Wider et al., 2015), then the norms practiced among these two groups of emerging adults should be similar. Hence, one of the reasons for this limitation is related to challenges identifying non-heterosexuals. Thus, we cannot generalize the results yielded in this study to non-heterosexual EEA. Various studies have found that there is a difference in family supportiveness of heterosexual and homosexual romantic relationships (Blair & Holmberg, 2008); therefore, we recommend including a non-heterosexual sample in future studies to investigate whether the differences in social support are correlated with different romantic relationship outcomes among EEA. Multiple variables need to be controlled, such as parents' and friends' acceptance of non-heterosexuality and their acceptance of a non-heterosexual romantic relationship.

Another limitation of this study was the poor generalizability of the study results. This study was conducted with EEA who were university students, and raises concerns about its generalizability to non-student EEA. Hence, the application of the results to non-student EEA should be avoided. There is empirical evidence showing differences between student

emerging adults and non-student emerging adults, specifically in terms of demographic and psychosocial factors (Halperin, 2001). Thus, we suggest that future studies should involve a more diversified sample to examine the differences and similarities between student and non-student EEA.

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