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A Futures Study on the Quality of Life from the Point of View of Iranian Youths
**Sina Saedy, Mojtaba Amiri, Mohammad Mahdi Zolfagharzadeh,
Mohammad Rahim Eyvazi**

Housing for Young People: What are their Opportunities?
**Mahazril Aini Yaacob, Siti Hajar Abu Bakar, Wan Nor Azriyati Wan Abdul
Aziz**

The Mediating Effect of Happiness on the Relationship between Work-Life Balance and Life
Satisfaction: An Empirical Study on Employees of Malaysian Financial Industry
Siti Hartini Najamudin, Muhamad Khalil Omar, Azzarina Zakaria

Descriptive Analysis - Predictors of Attitude towards Purchasing Halal Skin Care Products
Azreen Jihan, Rosidah Musa

The Roles of Employees Coaching towards Employee Outcomes
Nursaadatun Nisak Ahmad, Azman Ismail, Ida Rosnita Ismail

MDAB Programme is a Waste of Money?
**Nor Hazizah Julaihi, Mohammad Isa Mohamad, Bebe Norlita Mohamed,
Mariathy Karim**

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- 1. A Futures Study on the Quality of Life from the Point of View of Iranian Youth** **1**
Sina Saeedy
Mojtaba Amiri
Mohammad Mahdi Zolfagharzadeh
Mohammad Rahim Eyvazi

- 2. Housing for Young People: What are their Opportunities?** **15**
Mahazril 'Aini Yaacob
Siti Hajar Abu Bakar
Wan Nor Azriyati Wan Abdul Aziz

- 3. The Mediating Effect of Happiness on the Relationship between Work-Life Balance and Life Satisfaction: An Empirical Study on Employees of Malaysian Financial Industry** **33**
Siti Hartini Najamudin
Muhamad Khalil Omar
Azzarina Zakaria

4.	Descriptive Analysis - Predictors of Attitude towards Purchasing Halal Skin Care Products	55
	<i>Azreen Jihan</i> <i>Rosidah Musa</i>	
5.	The Roles of Employees Coaching towards Employee Outcomes	71
	<i>Nursaadatun Nisak Ahmad</i> <i>Azman Ismail</i> <i>Ida Rosnita Ismail</i>	
6.	MDAB Programme is a Waste of Money?	89
	<i>Nor Hazizah Julaihi</i> <i>Mohammad Isa Mohamadin</i> <i>Bebe Norlita Mohamed</i> <i>Mariathy Karim</i>	
7.	Orientalism in Celluloid: The Production of the ‘Crazy Year’	109
	<i>Théry Béord</i> <i>Achim Alan Merlo</i>	
8.	Modelling Basic Numeracy Learning Application for Children with Autism: A Pilot Study	125
	<i>Muhamad Fairus Kamaruzaman</i> <i>Harrinni Mohd Noor</i> <i>Mustaffa Halabi Hj Azahari</i>	

A FUTURES STUDY ON THE QUALITY OF LIFE FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF IRANIAN YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

Quality of life and satisfaction with life as tightly interconnected concepts have become of much importance in the urbanism era. No doubt, it is one of the most important goals of every human society to enhance a citizen's quality of life and to increase their satisfaction with life. However, there are many signs which demonstrate the low level of life satisfaction of Iranian citizens especially among the youth. Thus, considering the temporal concept of life satisfaction, this research aims to make a futures study in this field. Therefore, using a mixed model and employing research methods from futures studies, life satisfaction among the students of the University of Tehran were measured and their views on this subject investigated. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analysed together in order to test the hypotheses and to address the research questions on the youth discontentment with quality of life. Findings showed that the level of life satisfaction among students is relatively low and their image of the future is not positive and not optimistic. These views were elicited and discussed in the social, economic, political, environmental and technological perspectives.

Keywords: *futures studies, quality of life, satisfaction with life, youth*

INTRODUCTION

Ensuring and increasing public welfare and solving societal problems are the principle matters of governments. Similarly, improving the quality of life (QOL) is also among the most important objectives of policy makers, hence enhancing life satisfaction is the ultimate goal of every good governance.

Indeed, judgments of life satisfaction are dependent upon a comparison of one's circumstances with what is thought to be an appropriate standard, where judgment of how satisfied individuals are with their lives is based on a comparison with a standard which is determined by each individual (Evren, 2013). In fact, life satisfaction is a cognitive measure of quality of life (Kahn & Juster, 2002).

Nowadays, the search for quality of life has become a growing concern for individuals, communities and governments seeking to find and sustain satisfaction, happiness and a belief in the future in a rapidly changing world (Maditinos, 2014). But, quality of life is a multi-faceted concept that is frequently used in the media and by politicians which defies precise definition. Often it is difficult to differentiate between the notions of QOL, well-being, satisfaction, and happiness (Marans, 2012).

Quality of life consists of two main dimensions: (1) Objective QOL that represents in a broad sense the individual's standard of living comprising of verifiable conditions inherent in the given cultural unit; (2) Subjective QOL that explores the degree to which the individual's life is perceived to match some implicit or explicit internal standard (Dissart & Deller, 2000). Subjective QOL is a person's evaluative reactions to his or her life. The individual's judgment is important in the investigation of individual wellbeing, and in the evaluation of the quality of life of societies (Diener, Inglehart & Tay, 2013).

There is considerable evidence to show that 'place' matters when it comes to QOL concerns, and studies focusing on urban quality of life enable us to better understand the meaning of QOL and how it might be measured (Marans, 2002). Urban growth in the 20th century increased the urban population so that urbanisation has currently become the dominant form of life. Although urbanisation is one of the most important indicators of social

and economic well-being and development, its rapid growth can reduce the enjoyment of many social and economic facilities per capita and thereby its implications appear as reduced quality of life in urban areas. Hence, the quality of urban life is one of the first subjects associated with urban growth that has gradually attracted specialists since several decades ago.

Urban quality of life is not a simple term that has a clear or an agreed definition but is a complex concept which might be defined by various disciplines. Nevertheless, some researchers have proposed several attributes for this concept. For example, the model used in a study by Ulengin *et al.* (2001) consisted of the following categories:

- Quality of physical environment: building arrangement, house type, green areas, recreational areas, infrastructure and municipal services.
- Quality of social environment: extent of educational services, price of educational services, extent of health services, price of health services, cultural activities and entertainment, safety.
- Quality of economic environment: cost of living, opportunity of finding a satisfactory job, accommodation cost.
- Quality of transportation and communication: means of communication, means of public transportation, traffic flow.

Life satisfaction, or the self-perceived well-being, of college students has recently become an important issue since, improving students' life satisfaction can help reduce the risks of physical injury and mental disorder among them (Valois *et al.*, 2004, 2006). It is noteworthy that there is no one key to happiness or life satisfaction, but rather a recipe that includes a number of ingredients (Omar *et al.*, 2016). Also, assessing the satisfaction with life can be focused on the different stages of life; how has life been in the past? How is it now? And how will it be like in the future? A person may have a positive view about life in the past but a negative view about the future of his life.

Mercer Institute as an accredited institution in the field of human resources, annually assesses and ranks different cities worldwide in terms of quality of life, taking into account several criteria (Mercer, 2016). According to Mercer's 2016 quality of living city rankings report, the capital of Iran, Tehran, ranks 203rd among the 230 major cities in the world. This report reveals that the living condition of Iranian citizens is distant from international criteria and acceptable standards of urban life.

According to official reports, several signs such as high rate of migration and the growing tendency of youth to leave the country, has made Iran top in the world's brain drain. This implies youth dissatisfaction with the current quality of life and hopelessness about the future quality of life in this society.

Considering the importance of citizens' satisfaction with urban quality life, especially the young generation and since life satisfaction is a temporal concept, this study tries to measure students' present and future satisfaction with quality of life with a futures approach and to investigate the causes of this phenomenon. Therefore, the research questions, hypotheses and the methods to address them are as follows.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

- H1: The average students' present satisfaction with life is low.
- H2: The average students' future satisfaction with life is low.
- H3: Present satisfaction with life is significantly related to future satisfaction with life.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the factors influencing youths' satisfaction with life?
2. What are the characteristics of youths' ideal society?
3. What is the youths' image of the future quality of life like?

RESEARCH METHOD

To include only quantitative or qualitative methods would fall short of the major approaches being used today in the study of social and human sciences. Thus, in mixed methods research, investigators use both quantitative and qualitative data because they work to provide the best understanding of a research problem. The researcher bases the inquiry on the assumption that collecting diverse types of data best provides an understanding of a research problem. Hence, the study begins with a survey in order to generalise results to a population and then focuses, in a second phase, on qualitative methods to collect detailed views from participants (Cresswell, 2003).

The statistical population of this research comprised the students of University of Tehran. Hence, in order to measure their satisfaction with the quality of life, a survey was performed. Thus, questionnaires were randomly distributed among students and gathered at different faculties of the university. Finally, after the distribution of 360 questionnaires, 352 complete ones were used for the further analysis.

A 10-item questionnaire (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$) was employed to measure the present and future life satisfaction, which was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (Pavot *et al.*, 1998).

Then, futures workshops were held in order to study different aspects of the subject more deeply. This method was originally developed by Robert Jungk for citizen groups with limited resources who wanted to influence the decision making process related to their future life. It is a workshop or conference meant to shed light on a common problematic situation, to generate visions about the future, and to discuss how these visions can be realised. It is usually composed of the following main phases:

- 1- Critique phase
- 2- Fantasy phase
- 3- Implementation phase (Vidal, 2006)

RESULTS

Demographic data are demonstrated in Table 1, based on gender and academic grade. Data shows that 42.3% of the students are male and 57.7% of them are female. Also, 48.5% of students are bachelor, 41.8% masters and 9.7% are PhD students.

Table 1: Demographic Data of the Sample

Demographic variables		Percentage	Frequency
Gender	Male	42.3	149
	Female	57.7	203
	Total	100	352
Grade	MS	48.5	171
	BS	41.8	147
	PhD	9.7	34
	Total	100	352

SPSS software was used to calculate the means of research variables. Table 2 indicates the means of responses and the standard deviation of these means.

Table 2: *t* Test Statistics

	Mean	Standard deviation	<i>T</i>	Degree of Freedom	Sig.
Present satisfaction with life	2.20	0.722	20.92	351	0
Future satisfaction with life	2.28	0.609	22.33	351	0

According to the *t* test statistics, the means of both research variables are less than average, thus the H1 and H2 are accepted.

Table 3 indicates the correlation between the present satisfaction with life and the future satisfaction with life.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Between Present and Future Satisfaction with Life

	R (Pearson correlation)	Sig. (P-value)
Future satisfaction with life	0.63**	0.0
Present satisfaction with life		

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

According to the data shown in Table 3, H3 is accepted, since the present satisfaction with life is significantly correlated with the future satisfaction with life ($R = 0.63$, $P = 0.0$).

Also a regression model has been used to analyse the relationship between the present satisfaction with life and the future satisfaction with life. Table 4 and Table 5 indicate the regression coefficients between the present life satisfaction and the future life satisfaction.

Table 4: Correlation Coefficients Between Present and Future Satisfaction with Life

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std. Error
1	0.63	0.39	0.39	0.475

Table 5: Regression Coefficients

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	<i>t</i>	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	1.12	0.081		13.77	0.0
Present satisfaction with life	0.53	0.035	0.063	15.03	0.0

According to Table 4, the present satisfaction with life predicts 39% of the future satisfaction with life.

Subsequently, three futures workshops with eight to 12 participants were held. The result of these workshops is as follows:

Critique Phase

In the critique phase, the problem is being critically framed. All innovative processes consist of two divergent and convergent parts. In this phase, brainstorming technique can be used in the divergent part and tools such as matrices and mind maps in the convergent part.

First, in order to clarify different aspects of the problem and to find its roots from the participants' opinions, the following items in the five social, economic, political, environmental and technological fields were identified as the main factors affecting the youths' satisfaction with the quality of life:

- In the social field: problems such as lack of social injustice, despair, pessimism, comparing the current situation with developed countries and the gap between generations
- In the economic field: problems such as poverty, inequality, class differences, inflation, unemployment, financial barriers to marriage and economic corruption.
- In the political field: Issues such as lack of sufficient freedom, lack of accountability of authorities, official corruption and lack of transparency.
- In the environmental field: problems such as air pollution, heavy traffic, noise pollution and lack of green space per capita.
- In the technological field: issues such as lack of advanced technological facilities, lack of opportunities for use of youths' knowledge and expertise and weakness of national industries.

Fantasy Phase

In the fantasy stage, all participants have to rely on their intuitive knowledge to try to create a utopia and exaggerated images of possible futures and to offer solutions without taking into account the current barriers. The central question at this point is, "If there were no limitations and there were many resources available with no legal restrictions, what would you do?" In this phase, a utopia is visualised and free from the constraints and limitations, it will be attempted to imagine the desirable future. On the one hand, participants' responses about the characteristics of an ideal society and desired future included the following key concepts: peace of mind and optimism, economic development, easy wealth, no poverty, equality, justice, peace and security, freedom, ethics, pluralism, respect for each other and self-actualisation.

On the other hand, their talks about their mental picture of the probable future included several key concepts such lack of optimism about the future, despair, uncertain future, challenges of the future and the desire to migrate.

Implementation Phase

In the implementation phase, the key actors, the basic changes and the most promising solutions to achieve the desired future were discussed. At this stage, the participants unanimously recognised the government as the main responsible institution for the current situation and the most important agent that affects their present and future quality of life. Hence, they uttered several demands and offered some solutions to achieve the desired future, including: economic reform and recovery, paying attention to youths' employment, paying attention to the poor and elimination of class differences, cultural reform, rebuilding youths' spirit, public enforcement of justice, elimination of gender discrimination, meritocracy, increasing freedom, curbing corruption and practice of law, respecting educated youths and assuring their future.

DISCUSSION

As the findings from the survey showed, the research respondents' satisfaction with the quality of life is below average. Hence, the causes of this problem were explored in futures workshops. The results of discussions and what was the consensus of the participants were then classified into five categories.

In the social context, weakness of social justice is one of the main causes of students' dissatisfaction. In fact, the young generation, especially students and the young elite have special sensitivity about justice, so that according to investigations, the perception of social justice and brain drain are in a significant inverse relationship.

In addition, justice is a key concept in Islam and religious teachings have made the young generation more sensitive on this subject. But, it seems that their perception of the current situation is far from what they perceive as fair, and this has become a source of dissatisfaction.

Moreover, due to expansion of communication technologies, today's young generation through sources such as foreign movies, TV shows, world news and the internet have become aware of the quality of life in advanced

societies. Comparing what they have with what their peers in the western societies have cause them to feel severe underdevelopment and despair.

Also, in the economic field, financial difficulties of families and class differences in the society are the most important causes of youths' discontent. Today, not only economic issues and lack of employment are challenging the youth, but also, thanks to social networks, lifestyle of the rich class has been revealed and has caused the youth to perceive such a large division. Young people under the burden of inflation, unemployment, discrimination and inequality find themselves incapable of marriage and recognise the government's inefficiency and corruption as the main cause.

Besides, in the political field, there is such a condition that the young people feel they do not have enough liberty, especially in the realm of thought and expression, while many of them have new ideas and thoughts, which are sometimes in a distance from the official ideology and may not be much welcome.

Furthermore, in the students' view, the corruption in governmental organizations and lack of transparency in the processes has undermined meritocracy and caused lots of problems in the country, while authorities usually avoid accountability.

Also, there exist problems such as air pollution, traffic congestion, noise pollution and lack of green space per capita which have greatly reduced the liveability and environmental quality, especially in Tehran. Although, the negative impact of these problems on community's physical and mental health is obvious, the students believe that government policies to solve these problems are inadequate and inefficient.

In addition, issues such as lack of advanced technological facilities, lack of opportunities for use of knowledge and expertise, weak industry, low quality of products and the shortcomings of technology compared to advanced industrial countries are other factors affecting discontent of the young generation.

According to the results, a significant correlation exists between dissatisfaction with the quality of present life and lack of satisfaction with

future life. In fact, the present life satisfaction can significantly predict the future life satisfaction.

Explanation of the relationship between these two components lies in the fact that today's problems and low level of students' satisfaction with the quality of life have negatively affected their images of the future.

The negative assessment of the present situation and the pessimistic mental images of the future have caused frustration and reluctance among the youth, thus many of them intend to migrate to another country in order to obtain the chance of making their ideal future.

It is noteworthy that the ideal society from their perspective is somewhere rich with spiritual peace, progress and prosperity, full of justice, freedom and security, full of knowledge and ethics. A place where diversity and plural ideas are respected, growth and self-actualisation are achieved and citizens' satisfaction is met.

In the young generation's view, construction of such a society is most dependent on government policies as the responsible institution for the prosperity of society and the public good. Hence, they expect the government to properly play its role to achieve their demands such as justice, freedom, and meritocracy, reduction of corruption and improvement of the economic situation.

CONCLUSION

Urban quality of life has been given much attention in recent times. However, based on Mercer's 2016 quality of living report, quality of life in the city of Tehran is not desirable. Hence, in this study, life satisfaction among the students of the University of Tehran was investigated. Regarding the temporal essence of satisfaction with life, present life satisfaction and future life satisfaction were measured using survey questionnaires. The quantitative data analysis indicated that both levels of life satisfaction were low and there was a significant correlation between them.

Furthermore, in order to determine the causes of dissatisfaction with life among the youth, future workshops were held with participation of university students and three phases of critique, fantasy and implementation were conducted. According to the findings, several influential factors were discovered in social, economic, political, environmental and technological fields, among them lack of social injustice, pessimism, poverty, inequality, class differences, inflation, unemployment, lack of sufficient freedom, official corruption, lack of transparency, air pollution, heavy traffic, noise pollution, lack of advanced technological facilities and weakness of national industries.

In addition, the characteristics of young participants' utopia were delineated. In their ideal society there exist peace of mind, economic development, equality, justice, security, freedom, pluralism, respect for each other and self-actualisation. However, as a result of suffering from negative perspectives, they were relatively hopeless and pessimistic about the perceived probable future.

Moreover, the students believed that government should be responsible for their current and future living conditions. They expected the government to make economic and cultural reforms, pay more attention to youth employment, establish justice and meritocracy, eliminate gender discrimination, increase freedom, harness corruption and enforce laws.

Finally, based on findings, it would be expected of the government to make more efficient attempts and to pay more attention to the satisfaction with life of Iranian youth. For this purpose, the government should not only take tangible actions to improve the objective quality of life but also, ensure bright and promising visions of the future among the young generation as a subjective driver of development.

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