# Subjective Well-Being of the Malaysian Citizen: Preliminary Development of Survey Instrument

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**ABSTRACT---** *A questionnaire is a well-known measurement instrument used by most of the researchers when conducting a survey. It is a powerful tool for collecting data in survey research. It should be noted that the quality of a measurement instrument used plays a key role in ensuring the quality of data gained in the survey. Therefore, it has become essential for the researchers to carefully design their questionnaire so that the quality of the data obtained can be preserved. Then, it is also vital for the researchers to assess the quality of the data obtained before it can be successfully used for further analysis. This article discussed an early process involved in development of the survey instrument for the purpose of assessing subjective well-being of the Malaysian citizen. These include operationalization of definition, identification of the important dimension and indicators of subjective well-being, rating scale and content validity of the items with the experts.*

**Keywords---** *Subjective Well-Being, Measurement Instrument, Operationalization Definition, Dimensions and Indicators of Subjective Well-Being, Rating Scale, Content Validity.*

## I.    INTRODUCTION

One of the priorities of the government is to increase the nation's well-being. Study on well-being of the people has become a crucial issue to be taken lightly. This will assist the government in implementing practical public policies that meet the society needs. Well-being can be broadly assessed through either objective and subjective indicator. Research interest on subjective well-being which involved latent constructs such as life satisfaction and happiness has increased nowadays. A survey on subjective well-being will provides useful information on the respondents' feelings based on their own experiences. However, from the literature, it is found that there is a dearth of studies focusing on subjective well-being among people in the context of Malaysia. Therefore, there is lack of instrument that measures well-being of the people subjectively as most of the well-being instruments available are based on the objective indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP). By solely measure the well-being based on the objective indicators is not enough as the subjective feeling of the people such as life satisfaction and happiness cannot be captured. In fact, to deal with the issues faced by the

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people, it is crucial to understand how people feel and cope with the current challenging of life. Therefore, a subjective well-being survey which measures life satisfaction and happiness is also necessary to be taken.

On top of that, a well-developed instrument is needed as it plays a key role in ensuring the quality of data gained in the survey. This is because the development of inappropriate instrument will lead to poor quality of data, misleading conclusions consequently leading to ineffective corrective action taken to deal with the problems in hand. The purpose of this article is to describe the procedures involved in developing the instrument to measures subjective well-being among Malaysian people. This will become a useful reference for the researchers and practitioners in capturing the actual feeling of the people for decision making purpose. In fact, the development of questionnaire as a measurement instrument for a survey that fulfils requirement of the psychometric properties is not an easy task. It requires several important steps to be followed which takes considerable time and effort from the researchers.

In constructing the questionnaire, any researchers should take a particular concern on the measurement to be used. This is because measurement is a fundamental to proceed with any scientific researches. Sekaran and Bougie (2016) also mentioned that, measurement of the variables has become an integral part of research, where the variables of interest should be measured correctly to find the answer to the research questions. With appropriate and well-developed questionnaire, the decision maker will gain a relevant information, in which a better decision can be made. As only well-developed questionnaire will produce precise findings in which the right action can be taken to deal with the occurrence problem. In developing a usable and meaningful questionnaire, researchers need to clearly specify the purposes of the study. This is to ensure that only relevant information needed in the survey purposes will be included in the questionnaire. Before the questionnaire can be distributed to the respondents, the researchers are also advisable to follow three main guidelines to minimise bias in a survey research as highlighted by Sekaran and Bougie (2016). These include principles of wording, principles of measurement and general appearance of the questionnaire.

The usefulness of the measurement instrument will depend on its quality, as its only can be useful if certain psychometric and practical requirements are meets (Shultz et al., 2013). The quality of measurement instrument used can be affected by many factors that require careful attention by the researchers from the beginning stage of the questionnaire development. Designing a questionnaire that produces usable data is not as easy as it might seem. In fact, the development of inappropriate instrument will lead to poor quality of data, misleading conclusions and will affect the recommendation to be given (Boynton, 2004), consequently leading to ineffective corrective action taken to deal with the problems in hand. Therefore, the researchers should ensure that they are follow the correct procedures and processes required in developing a questionnaire as a research instrument. This include the types rating scales to be used, which also need to be refined by researchers to enhance data quality and utilization of research findings for decision making purposes. This is a key aspect so that the potential errors and biases can be avoided or reduced, which lead to better quality of data.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Well-being is a broad concept which can be assessed directly through objectively indicators and indirectly based on subjective indicators. Objective well-being usually measured based on economic indicator such as gross

domestic product (GDP). On the other hand, subjective well-being (SWB) is assess through happiness and life satisfaction of the people. The term subjective well-being or SWB was first introduced by Diener in 1984. The purpose of conducting a survey in SWB is to understand how people evaluate their live as a whole. It measures how people feel about their lives and whether a person likes his/her life being experience. According to Diener et al. (1997).  SWB is an evaluation judgment about specific aspects of his or life being experienced. It involved multidimensional concept which measured by four major components of life satisfaction, happiness, positive affect (e.g., joy, enthusiasm, interest) and negative affect (e.g., sadness, anxiety, anger) (Saklofske et al., 2013).

Diener et al. (2012) also highlighted that the term of "subjective well-being" refers to a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life; when a person gives conscious evaluation judgments about his or her satisfaction with life as a whole. SWB is a part of a quality of life where it measures how people feel about their lives and whether a person likes his/her life being experienced. It also concerns with individuals' subjective experience of their lives with people's conscious experiences – in terms of hedonic feelings or cognitive satisfactions (Diener & Suh, 1997). As stated by Diener et al. (1997), those who are satisfied with their life with frequent positive affect and infrequent negative affect are the people with high SWB, while the people with low SWB are those who feel dissatisfied with their life, experience little joy with negative emotion such as anger and anxiety. Diener et al. (1997) claimed that people with high SWB are those who are satisfied with their life with frequent positive affect and infrequent negative affect. On the other hand, individuals with low SWB are those who feel dissatisfied with their life, experience little joy with negative emotion such as anger and anxiety. A good subjective well-being can lead to better health and longevity of people (Diener & Chan, 2011).

It implies that those with higher SWB are more productive and could contribute to the success of the organization, societies and also to the country. In addition, Diener et al. (2015) also pointed that all government policies such as income security through pensions, unemployment insurance, and compensation for the disabled could lead to SWB of the people. Therefore, a survey on SWB is significant to be carried out as it will assist the government especially policymakers in developing relevant public policies which meet the basic needs of the societies. High level of SWB is not only beneficial to the individual but also to the society as a whole (Diener & Ryan, 2009). It implies that those with high level SWB will be more productive, so that they can contribute positively to their organization, societies and also to the country. There are several factors that contribute significantly to the SWB of the individual. As the lifestyle is changing with the rise in the cost of living, it is crucial to assess how people feel and cope with the current challenging life.  It shown that, a survey on subjective well-being among the Malaysian citizens is important to be studied since it will assess the current life being experienced especially in facing the rising cost of living nowadays. The findings from the survey may serve the policymakers in making good policies. It can be used as an input for the government in implementing more holistic and effective public policies which benefits the society in assisting them to improve their well-being while facing the current challenges of life.

## III.    PROCESS IN DEVELOPING THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT

A survey on subjective well-being among Malaysian citizens known as MyCSWS will be conducted. Therefore, to carry out this survey, questionnaire named as the Malaysian Citizen Subjective Well-Being Survey

Instrument (MyCSWS$_i$) has been developed. The MyCSWS$_i$ is a self-reported instrument used to assess happiness of the people on certain domains in the context of Malaysia. The development of MyCSWS$_i$ involved several stages as shown in the following FIGURE 1. This article only discussed some of the stages involved. A discussion begins with the operational definition on subjective well-being concept applied for the survey conducted. Then, it proceeds with identification of domains and indicators to be included in the instrument, choice of rating scale and content validity with the experts. The other process including pilot study, assessment of validity and reliability indexes, development of final research instrument until the stage of data collection will be discussed further in the next article.
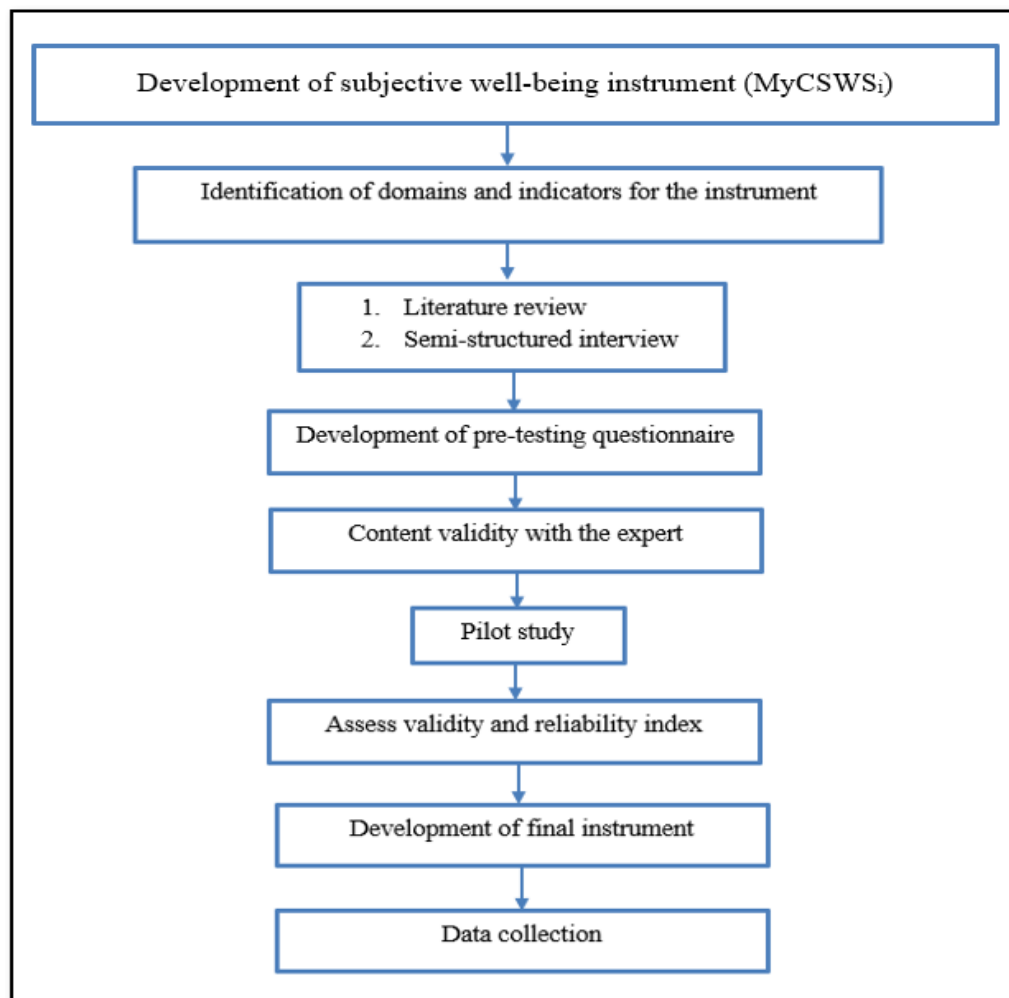


**Figure 1:** Process in Developing the Survey Instrument

### 1) Operationalization the Concept of Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being (SWB) is a broad concept, where one's well-being were measured subjectively through their own experience in life on each indicators of specific domains. In this study, SWB has been operationalized as a general evaluation of one's happiness towards several domains in his/her life. Thus, the instrument was developed to assess current happiness of the respondents on each indicators of the respective domains. Based on the review by Azizan et al. (2018), it was found that the questions related to SWB such as life satisfaction on related domain were formulated in such a way that of "How satisfied are you ….". Some of these examples are: "In general, how satisfied are you with your life?", "How satisfied are you with your sleep, "How satisfied are

you with your job as a whole, everything taken into consideration", "How satisfied are you with your current overall pay level?" and "How satisfied are you with your economic conditions?" (Power & Kuyken, 1998; Kuyken, 1995; Nielsen et al., 2009; Clark et al., 2009; Greenberg, 1990). For the happiness, examples of the formulated questions asked to respondents made by previous researchers are: "How would you rate your happiness at the moment? "How would you rate your own general happiness?" and "How would you rate your current level of happiness?" (Andrew, 2009; Uchida & Oishi, 2016; Yamamura et al., 2015). Therefore, in developing the instrument namely MyCSWS$_i$, the respondents were asked to evaluate their happiness level in the respective indicators with the following statement:

In general, how would you rate your level of happiness with …

### 2) Identification of Dimensions of Subjective Well-Being and its Indicators

The result obtain from the subjective well-being survey will become an essential information which can assist policy makers. Based on the information obtained, further action can be taken by the organizations involved and related government agencies to fulfil the expectation and need of the society. Therefore, it is important to identify suitable indicators that meet the current needs of the people to ensure the usability and the success of the policies made. This is because inappropriate indicators lead to inefficient and ineffective policy making. To develop the MyCSWS$_i$, first, the general and specific content of this survey instrument has been identified through reviewed the related literatures and semi-structured interview with selected target group of respondents. These processes will further explain in the next article of publication. The input obtained from the literatures and semi-structured interview have been synthesized to develop the first draft of pre-testing questionnaire. The questionnaires of the survey consist two sections. First section is demographic profile. Second section is to examine respondents' happiness on several indicators of eight domains, which contain of 101 questions in total. It should be noted that, in formulating the questions or statements it is crucial to focus on the principles of wording. Such question with double-barreled, ambiguous word, recall-dependent, leading and loaded questions should be avoided (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The related domains and its indicators included in MyCSWS$_i$ are shown below:

**Table 1:** Domains and Indicators of MyCSWS$_i$

| Personal Indicators |
| --- |
| 1.    … your overall level quality of life? |
| 2.    … your overall life achievement? |
| 3.    … your overall standard of living? |
| 4.    … quality of your health in general? |
| 5.    … your physical health conditions? |
| 6.    … your mental health conditions? |
| 7.    … your overall quality of sleep? |
| 8.    … your ability to perform your daily activities? |
| 9.    … your present financial condition (this statement refers to overall of your income, expenditure to fulfill your needs or living requirements and saving)? |
| 10.  … your overall financial commitment (this statement refers to your compulsory expenditure to fulfill |

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| your needs or living requirements)? |
| 11. … your financial management (this statement refers to your ability to manage your income, expenditure and saving)? |
| 12. … your time management? |
| 13. … the quality time did you have for your own self (spend your time doing things that you like)? |
| 14. … your safety at your home? |
| 15. … your overall spirituality conditions? |
| **Family and Friends Indicators** |
| 16. … your family standard of living as a whole? |
| 17. … your relationship with your family as a whole? |
| 18. … your relationship with your friends as a whole? |
| 19. … the quality time did you have to spend with your family? |
| 20. … the quality time did you have to spend with your friends? |
| 21. … your marriage relationship? |
| 22. … the moral support given by your family in achieving your life goals? |
| 23. … the moral support given by your friends in achieving your life goals? |
| 24. … the moral support given by your family in facing any difficulties and challenges in your life? |
| 25. … the moral support given by your family in facing any difficulties and challenges in your life? |
| **Community Engagement Indicators** |
| 26. … your overall engagement with the community in your neighborhoods area? |
| 27. … your relationship with the people in your neighborhoods area? |
| 28. … the quality time did you have to involve with the activities organized in your neighborhoods area? |
| 29. … the sense of belonging to local community? |
| 30. … the acceptance of the community towards people of diverse backgrounds (e.g., race, religion) |
| **Working Life Indicators** |
| 31. … the overall of your working life? |
| 32. … the cleanliness of your workplace environment? |
| 33. … the working culture practiced in your workplace? |
| 34. … your workloads? |
| 35. … the pay did you get with the amount of work given to you? |
| 36. … the pay did you get to support the current cost of living? |
| 37. … the safety in your workplace? |
| 38. … the overall facilities provided in your working place? |
| 39. … the compensation schemes provided by your organization? |
| 40. … your relationship with your top management? |
| 41. … your relationship with your colleagues? |
| **Environment Indicators** |
| 42. … the environment condition of your residential areas as a whole? |
| 43. … the safety in your neighborhood's areas? |
| 44. … your safety being out alone in your neighborhoods during the day? |

| 45. … your safety being out alone in your neighborhoods at night? |
| --- |
| 46. … the cleanliness in the surrounding area where you live? |
| 47. … *the levels of air pollutants* around your *residential areas?* |
| 48. … *the levels of noise pollutants* around your *residential areas?* |
| 49. … *the levels of water pollutants* around your *residential areas?* |
| **Facility and Infrastructure Indicators** |
| 50. … the overall facilities and infrastructures provided around your residential areas? |
| 51. … the road safety around your residential areas? |
| 52. … the road conditions around your residential areas? |
| 53. … the overall maintenance of the road around your residential areas? |
| 54. … availability of affordable housing in the state where you live? |
| 55. … the employment opportunities provided in the state where you live? |
| 56. … the availability of places for leisure activities near your housing areas? |
| 57. … the accessibility of public transport in your residential areas? |
| 58. … the accessibility of public health services (e.g., clinics and hospitals) near to your residential areas? |
| 59. … the accessibility of public education near to your residential areas? |
| 60. … the accessibility of police stations near to your residential areas? |
| 61. … the accessibility of fire stations near to your residential areas? |
| 62. … the availability of public parking spaces in the city where you live? |
| 63. … availability of places of worship and places for religious activities (e.g., mosques, temples, churches etc.,) in the city where you live for diversity of religion in Malaysia? |
| 64. … the traffic congestion in the city where you live? |
| 65. … the quality of the internet connection in your residential areas? |
| 66. … the quality of service for electricity supplies in your residential areas? |
| 67. … the quality of service for treated water supplies in your residential areas? |
| **Cost of Living Indicators** |
| 68. … the overall cost of living? |
| 69. … your monthly household financial commitment? |
| 70. … the market price of house? |
| 71. … the market price of land? |
| 72. … the market price of vehicle? |
| 73. … the amount you need to spend on your housing loan in a month? |
| 74. … the amount you need to spend on your rental of house in a month? |
| 75. … the amount you need to spend on your vehicle loan in a month? |
| 76. … the amount you need to spend on fuel of vehicle in a month? |
| 77. … the amount you need to spend on tolls in a month? |
| 78. … the amount you need to spend on healthcare or medical treatment? |
| 79. … the amount you need to spend on your own educational expenses (if you currently further you study)? |
| 80. … the amount you need to spend on raising your children? |

| | |
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| 81. | … the amount you need to spend on your children's educational expenses? |
| 82. | … the amount you need to spend on public transportation? |
| 83. | … the amount you need to spend on the groceries? |
| 84. | … the amount you need to spend at food and beverage outlets? |
| 85. | … the amount you need to spend on broadband/internet access? |
| 86. | … the amount you need to spend on utility expenses (e.g.: electricity, water etc.)? |
| 87. | … the amount you need to spend on leisure activities? |
| 88. | … the amount you need to spend on vehicle maintenances? |
| 89. | … the amount you need to spend on income tax? |
| 90. | … the amount you need to spend on zakat/religious provision/donations? |
| 91. | … the amount you need to spend on the needs of your parents and relatives? |
| 92. | … the charge of Goods and Services Tax (GST) imposed on you as implemented by the government previously? |
| 93. | … the charge of Sales and Service Tax (SST) imposed on you as implemented by the government nowadays? |
| 94. | … your ability to put aside some amount of money from your monthly salary for the emergency cases or the unexpected event? |
| 95. | … the burden of debt that you carry? |
| 96. | … your ability for saving on a monthly basis consistently? |
| **Government Service Delivery and Good Governance Indicators** | |
| 97. | … the quality of service received by most of government agencies that you are dealing with as a whole? |
| 98. | … the commitment showed by the government to improve the quality of life of the citizens of Malaysia? |
| 99. | … the efforts made by the government to increase the number of affordable housing? |
| 100. | … the efforts made by the government to increase the job opportunity? |
| 101. | … the efforts made by the government to reduce burden of cost of living? |

*3) Rating Scale*

During the questionnaire development, apart from identifying the important dimensions and indicators to be included, it is also vital to wisely decide on the rating scales to be used. Survey research can take many forms of rating scales such as, Likert scale, dichotomous scales, category scale, numerical scale, itemized rating scale etc. (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Numerous studies conducted in the last decades have shown that the characteristics of rating scale used such as types of rating scales, labels of rating scales and number of response categories with either odd or event response alternative might influence the quality of the measurement instrument (Allahyari et al., 2016; Cicchetti et al., 1985; Daher et al., 2015; Eutsler & Lang, 2015; Osteras et al., 2008; Preston & Colman, 2000; Revilla et al., 2014). Hence, researchers also need to emphasize on the suitable rating scales (i.e., types of rating scales, labels of rating scales and number scale points) which can fulfil its psychometric properties so that it can maximize both validity and reliability of the survey instrument. The MyCSWS$_i$ instrument has been developed based on 6-point Likert scale. Where respondents were asked to mark their

sincere response on their happiness level at the present moment on the respective indicators with a scale of 1 to 6 or NA. In other words, they only need to circle one of these categories on each of the indicator provided in the MyCSWS$_i$ as shown below.

**Table 2:** Rating Scale in MyCSWS$_i$

| Very Unhappy | Unhappy | Neither Happy or Unhappy (Neutral) | Moderately Happy | Happy | Very Happy | Not Applicable |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | NA |

*4) Content Validity of the Items*

Content validity with the selected experts have been done, prior to the pilot study. The selection of experts is based on their experience, involvement, and publications made on studies related to the well-being and quality of life. An invitation letter was sent to the potential experts asking their willingness to participate in the development of the MyCSWS$_i$. Prior to their involvement, the experts were asked to complete the attached consent form and return it through the email. The experts who have agreed to participate need to validate the instrument and provide us with their views and noteworthy input on which domains and indicators measure the people's subjective well-being in the context of Malaysia. All Feedbacks obtained from the experts help to identify the important domains and indicators to be included in the instrument.

In this study, there are several limitations arise. First, is a constraint faced in getting feedback from the experts and respondents in conducting a semi-structured interview. Originally, this study planned to conduct Delphi consensus study among the experts. As with this technique, rich of information will be gained on the important domains and its items from the experts. Unfortunately, delayed feedback from the experts to involved within the time period (June 2019-August 2019) given was happened. Therefore, the instrument used in this study has only validated by three experts who have experienced in the well-being survey. Two experts are from two different public universities (UiTM and UM), and another one expert is from industry (LPPKN).

## IV. CONCLUSION

Developing a survey instrument that fulfil psychometric properties required several important steps to be followed. As Radhakrishna (2007) remarked, a systematic development of a valid and reliable questionnaire is a must to reduce many measurement errors. This article describes preliminary process involved in developing a survey instrument used to assess subjective well-being among the Malaysian people known as MyCSWS$_i$. By following the processes mentioned earlier, at the preliminary development of the instrument there are eight domains have been identified and 101 questions been included in the instrument. Where respondents were instructed to indicate their happiness level on 6-point Likert scale (1 = Very Unhappy, 6 = Very Happy) to each indicator provided. However, in developing the survey instrument, besides semi-structured interview, it is also being suggested that to conduct a focus group with a people from various background (i.e., ethnicity, classification of household income etc.). This is because, diversity of respondents' background involved in a focus group enable researcher to gain more accurate information which can represent Malaysian people as a

whole. In addition, Delphi consensus study with the experts also been recommended, by giving them more time to indicate their willingness to involve. This will provide us more useful information in constructing the survey instrument.

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