

“What Wellbeing Means To Me”: Exploring How Arabic Muslim Adolescent Girls Identify and Perceive Their Wellbeing

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Received March 10, 2026; Revised April 12, 2026; Accepted April 19, 2026

Abstract The topic of adolescent wellbeing is acknowledged as a multidimensional construct influenced by social, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Although much literature exists on mental health and wellbeing in children and adolescents, little has been done to determine the understanding and definition of wellbeing in Arabic and Islamic cultural contexts. In this phenomenological study, we aimed to explore how adolescent students define wellbeing and the factors that can improve or hinder their mental health. Using a qualitative design, 32 semi-structured interviews were conducted with girls' students (13–17 years old) in Qatar, who were representatives of different social groups and different levels of Arabic ethnic backgrounds. The analysis revealed multiple aspects in relation to students' definitions and understanding of wellbeing: happiness, success, faith, richness, and health. In addition, adolescents used five core categories related to factors influencing their wellbeing, including social relations, academic performance outcomes, personal commitment to goals, fulfilling religious practices, and self-confidence. These findings can be used to address and optimize challenges in investigating young people's wellbeing and reveal the impact of social, cultural, and religious factors on the conceptualization of wellbeing in the Arabic community.

Keywords: *Mental health, Youths' mental health, Wellbeing, Spiritual wellbeing, Family and cultural context*

Cite This Article: Manal Alyamni, Shaza Farajallah, Noor Al-Wattary, Nesma Nawar, Yassin Alsawas, Mohammed Alwatar, and Abdulsalam Alahmed, ““What Wellbeing Means To Me”: Exploring How Arabic Muslim Adolescent Girls Identify and Perceive Their Wellbeing.” *American Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 14, no. 4 (2026): 114-119. doi: 10.12691/education-14-4-1.

1. Introduction

What exactly is wellbeing? In adults, mental wellness is regarded as covering both hedonic (happiness, subjective well-being) and eudaimonic (positive functioning) well-being. The Royal Society in the United Kingdom defined wellbeing as a “positive and sustainable mental state that allows individuals, groups, and nations to thrive and flourish.” Mental well-being is defined as more than the absence of mental illness, and it appears to be protective for a variety of health outcomes, including self-rated general health [1], immune response and stress response [2], and is a predictor of cardiovascular disease survival [3].

Why explore adolescent wellbeing? In terms of adolescent well-being, the true measure of any nation's standing is “how well it attends to its children, their health

and safety, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued” [4, p.1]. Adolescents' conceptions of wellbeing can thus give insights into how adolescents perceive their mental health, grasp the meanings associated with well-being, and what factors might adversely impact their mental wellbeing [5].

The significance of studying well-being has been central to government policy since the 1930s [6]. Higher levels of individual well-being at the national level are a key measure of how governments are attaining a democratic society that respects individuals' choices, needs, and goals [7]. Because wellbeing indicates how a country cares for its citizens, it is considered one of the most desired outcomes internationally [8], and nations with greater levels of well-being have more consistent economic growth, educational achievements, and social progress [7].

Measuring well-being is critical for policymakers to

have a comprehensive view of society's progress [9]. Furthermore, measuring wellbeing is critical for evaluating treatments, setting goals, identifying priorities, and assessing progress toward specified objectives [10]. Assessing wellbeing can also offer information regarding warning signs of decreased levels of wellbeing, which can then permit early intervention.

The field of research on adolescent mental health and wellbeing is expanding. However, there is a limited amount of systematic data collected directly from children and adolescents themselves regarding their wellbeing levels [11]. A comprehensive study conducted by UNICEF revealed a scarcity of research incorporating data provided by children and adolescents [4]. This highlights the need to investigate the wellbeing of children and adolescents in a culturally informed manner [12]. Additionally, there is a lack of studies exploring the concept of wellbeing as perceived by adolescents in the Arabic and Islamic culture. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap.

1.1. Background Literature

The rise of positive psychology research has contributed to the growing interest in wellbeing research [13]. Psychological wellbeing, within the context of positive psychology, extends beyond the absence of mental illness to encompass a state in which individuals recognize their abilities and effectively cope with life stressors [14,15]. The scientific literature approaches the construct of wellbeing from two theoretical perspectives: hedonic and eudaimonic.

The hedonic perspective expresses the concept of well-being as a consequence of an individual's internal state on subjective well-being, associated with high levels of positive affect, life satisfaction, happiness, and low levels of negative affect. In contrast, the eudaimonic perspective considers that well-being is a process of fulfilling individual potentials and positive functioning [16]. The most common criterion of well-being from the eudaimonic perspective includes self-acceptance, self-actualization, optimal functioning, and maturity [17].

One of the most empirically supported theories in this area is Ryff's multidimensional model of psychological well-being, which comprises six dimensions: (1) Autonomy; (2) Environmental mastery; (3) Personal growth; (4) Positive relations with others; (5) Purpose in life; and (6) Self-acceptance [16]. In this study, we investigate Muslim adolescent girls' (MAG) well-being relying on Ryff's multidimensional model and Seligman's well-being theory. Positive well-being, according to Seligman, is defined as pursuing and achieving one or more of five elements: positive emotion, engagement, meaning, connections, and accomplishment [14].

1.2. Previous Studies

Wiens *et al.* [18] conducted a study in Finland with 117 girls aged 13 to 16 investigating girls' perceptions of wellbeing. The findings highlighted four major categories: (1) feeling well and enjoying life; (2) having a beneficial lifestyle and enjoying hobbies; (3) having high self-esteem and being optimistic; and (4) good interactions with others

to accomplish successful social relationships.

Another research in Sweden investigated the concept of mental health through the perspectives of 48 adolescent girls and boys aged 13 to 16. The findings demonstrated that adolescents perceived mental health as an emotional experience that included positive and negative aspects. The main determinant of these young people's mental health was family, followed by friends [19].

A study involving Slovakian adolescents investigated the factors influencing their school well-being through 11 semi-structured group interviews with 45 students [20]. Three key themes were identified: (1) school-related factors; (2) interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers; and (3) individual-level aspects such as personal challenges and perceived resilience resources.

A qualitative meta-synthesis reviewed ten studies to explore how adolescent girls' well-being is shaped by individual factors and their broader social context [21]. The findings highlight that gender and environmental context significantly influence girls' access to resources, societal expectations, and self-perception. Although mental wellness definitions in Western psychology tend to focus on individual performance and emotional control, wellbeing conceptualizations in Islamic and Arabic cultural contexts are very relational and spiritual [21].

Aycan [22] developed an Islamically Integrated Psychological Well-Being Model according to which wellbeing is gained through the moral and spiritual chain of knowledge (*'ilm*), intention (*niyyah*), and action (*'amal*).

Ubaidah [23] examined the role of gratitude (*shukr*) as a spiritual predictor of adolescent wellbeing, finding significant positive relationships between gratitude and mental health outcomes including higher life satisfaction and lower depression and anxiety.

Rahman [24] found that Islamic practices like *salah* (prayer), *dhikr* (remembrance of God), and *tahajjud* (night prayer) improve psychological resilience, confirming that the wellbeing of adolescents in the Muslim context cannot be viewed outside of spiritual balance and moral foundation.

Despite considerable literature on mental health and wellbeing in childhood and adolescence, relatively little has been done to determine how wellbeing is perceived in Arabic and Islamic cultures. In order to fill this gap, we examined how Arabic Muslim teenage girls experience and understand wellbeing and how they relate it with social, cultural, and religious aspects, prioritizing the voices of adolescents in the Qatari context.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

This qualitative study involved 32 semi-structured interviews with students from different Arabic backgrounds attending a government school in Qatar. The participating students were selected through purposeful random sampling [25,26]. All participants were aged between 13 and 17 years; 60% of students were Qataris and the other 40% were from Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Egypt. Ethical approval and parental consent were obtained prior to data collection, as detailed in the Ethical

Approval section.

2.2. Analysis

The data were analyzed using inductive content analysis, performed based on the four steps recommended by Lindgren *et al.* [26]. The units of analysis were words or statements that related to the same central meaning. Each transcript was read in full multiple times before being systematically reduced into simplified, well-defined data segments. Information with similar meanings was grouped into subcategories, which were then combined to form main categories named using content-characteristic words. Abstraction continued until no new categories emerged, yielding the final set of themes reported in the Results section. Table 1 presents a summary of the five themes and representative participant excerpts identified through inductive content analysis.

Table 1. Summary of Themes, Subthemes, and Representative Participant Excerpts

#	Theme	Core Subthemes	Sample Participant Quote
1	Social Relations	Family support; peer relationships; sense of belonging; safety and security	"Family and friends are crucial for my happiness – I feel safe when I have them around."
2	Academic Performance	Grades and achievement; parental pride; academic perfectionism	"I want to get high grades to make my parents proud – when they are proud, I am happy."
3	Personal Commitment to Goals	Future aspirations; goal-focused coping; resilience against adversity	"I feel happy when I focus on my goal; I aim to be a doctor and whenever I work on this dream, I feel satisfied."
4	Fulfilling Religious Practices	Daily prayer (salah); closeness to God; spiritual peace; faith as coping	"Conducting my daily prayers is the main contributor for my wellbeing; I feel inner peace."
5	Self-Confidence	Self-belief; family encouragement; academic self-efficacy; identity	"They always believed in me, so I am sure I will be a successful woman in the future."

3. Results

Analysis of the qualitative data revealed clusters covering the following themes: social relations, academic performance outcomes, personal commitment to goals, fulfilling religious practices, and self-confidence.

3.1. Social Relations

All students mentioned that positive social relations are an important part of happiness and self-satisfaction. For instance, student F mentioned:

I feel that family and friends are crucial for my happiness, they support me, they are there for me, and I feel safe when I have them around.

This was supported by student N, who mentioned that:

Wellbeing to me is effective social relations; when I have good relations with everyone, I feel happy, less worried, and less conflicts can occur.

3.2. Academic Performance

Many students related their wellbeing to grades and academic achievements. Student R stated:

I feel happy whenever my grades are full; I am a perfectionist and should be the best.

Other students emphasized that:

I want to get high grades to make my parents feel proud of me; when they are proud, I am happy and satisfied.

3.3. Personal Commitment to Goals

Many students described their wellbeing and happiness in relation to their commitment to goals. Student F mentioned that:

I feel happy when I focus on my goal; I aim to be a doctor in the future, and whenever I work on this dream, I feel satisfied.

Student M mentioned that:

Having a goal in my life prevents me from any sad feeling, like when I get bullied or not having attention or appreciation from others; rather, I am focusing on myself.

3.4. Fulfilling Religious Practices

Many students emphasized the importance of fulfilling their religious practices on their mental wellbeing and inner peace. Student C indicated that:

When I feel that I am close to God, I feel safe, happy, and satisfied.

Student D mentioned that:

Conducting my daily prayers is the main contributor for my wellbeing; I feel inner peace, and I feel that I can face the different daily challenges.

Student M further stated that:

Religious practices equip me with the power of happiness.

3.5. Self-Confidence

Many students related their wellbeing to the feeling of confidence. Student A emphasized that:

I feel that I am not good enough in my studies, and that I cannot achieve what I supposed to achieve, and this feeling makes me low.

In contrast, another student mentioned that:

I was raised in a family that respects differences, and they always believed in me, so I am sure that I will be a successful woman in the future inshAllah.

4. Discussion

The results of this qualitative study provided a better insight into adolescents' understanding of wellbeing, happiness, and life satisfaction by revealing how they experience different aspects of well-being, and what they think are the most relevant factors that determine their well-being. Findings regarding the definition of wellbeing were consistent with previous studies showing no agreement on the definition of wellbeing. Students provided different explanations.

4.1. Social Relationships and Attachment

Students viewed social relations as an important predictor of their satisfaction and happiness, relating these relations to feelings of being secure, protected, and supported. There is strong evidence linking effective social engagement to mental health outcomes [27]. These results can also be explained within the ecological systems theory [28,29], which posits that individual development occurs within interactions between individuals and their environment at four nested levels: the macro system (societal and cultural belief system), exosystem (community factors), microsystem (family factors), and the ontogenic level (individual factors) [30].

La Guardia et al. [31] found that secure attachments foster well-being because they represent relationships within which a person satisfies needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Diener and Seligman [32] revealed that every very happy person had good, well-maintained social relationships. Reis and Gable [33] argued that good social relationships may be one of the most crucial sources of happiness. Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener [11] found that individuals with better levels of wellbeing are more successful in social relationships and academic performance.

4.2. Importance of Social Connectedness

Family love, support, and sense of belonging were the main aspects that lead to mental wellbeing. Most of the students mentioned that when they feel secure, loved, and supported, they feel satisfied, have more energy, and aspire to achieve more to make their family proud and happy. Once adolescents feel that they are cared for, their feeling of social security increases. La Guardia et al. [33] found that within-person variability in security of attachment was predicted by the degree to which an individual experiences satisfaction with particular partners; those with whom one experiences security are those who facilitate feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The researchers further showed that, to a considerable degree, the positive effects of attachment security on well-being were mediated by need satisfaction. Thus, it appears that secure attachments foster well-being in large part because they represent relationships within which a person satisfies needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

4.3. Academic Performance and Goals

Academic achievement serves as both a source and an expression of wellbeing among these adolescents, who often tie their sense of accomplishment to parental pride, reflecting the collectivist nature of their cultural context. These findings reflect Lyubomirsky *et al.*'s [11] argument that higher wellbeing is associated with greater academic success. They are also consistent with Ryff's dimension of "purpose in life" [16], which posits that setting and pursuing meaningful objectives provides individuals with a sense of direction, identity, and psychological protection

against adversity.

4.4. Integration of Cultural, Religious, and Social Factors

As mentioned by the majority of students in this study, the societal, cultural, and religious factors formed important aspects contributing to their wellbeing levels. In the Islamic societies, doing the daily prayers is an important part of the Muslim's daily practices. Children are raised since the age of 7 to do their prayers with their families and to build the right relationship with God. Any deviation from these religious practices might result in some levels of uncertainty as reported by students [31].

4.5. Religious and Spiritual Determinants of Wellbeing

One key discovery was that religious practice, particularly Islamic prayer (*salah*), had a significant effect on the wellbeing of students. Most girls felt less anxious, more secure, and capable of handling their emotions steadily when they continued with their religious practices [34,35]. These findings are supported by Islamic psychology literature, which suggests that wellbeing is a result of the harmony of the *nafs* (self), *qalb* (heart), and *ruh* (spirit) [35]. Empirical research indicates that Quranic recitation, *dhikr*, and *salah* minimize anxiety and promote inner peace [35]. Participants' descriptions such as feeling "safe," "peaceful," and "empowered" when praying—are consistent with these findings, and with the models developed by Aycan [22], Ubaidah [23], and Rahman [24].

5. Conclusion

This research provided significant understanding of the perception and definition of wellbeing among Arabic Muslim adolescent girls in Qatar within a culturally and spiritually based context. The findings indicated that wellbeing is a multidimensional aspect encompassing social relations, academic achievements, goal commitment, self-confidence, and fulfillment of religious practices.

The respondents viewed faith and spiritual attachment as elements of emotional stability, strength, and contentment with life. These results underline the role of cultural, family, and religious values in defining how teenagers understand the meaning of the good life, and support the fact that wellbeing in this context must be understood through the lenses of spiritual compatibility and communal belonging.

Longitudinal and cross-cultural designs can further elaborate these findings in future research to examine the interaction effects of Islamic values and social environments on adolescent wellbeing in various developmental periods. Additionally, culturally responsive care can be enhanced by integrating faith-based wellbeing models into educational and mental health care strategies that address holistic development in the context of the Muslim youth population.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Not applicable.

Funding Information

Authors state no funding involved.

Conflict of Interest Statement

Authors state no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent

Consents were obtained from the participants' parents in order to maintain the ethical standards within this study. All participants were provided with informed consent forms that highlight their voluntary participation, how the data will be used in the research, and how their confidentiality will be maintained during and after the study. Furthermore, consents were obtained from the participants' parents in order to maintain the ethical standards within this study.

Ethical Approval

The ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in Qatar (reference number –92/2019). The research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration.

Data Availability

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions related to participant confidentiality but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request

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