



Social Freedom, Life Satisfaction and Depression among Adults

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Received on : 14/10/2025
Revised on : 18/12/2025
Accepted on : 27/12/2025
Overall Similarity : 05% on 19/12/2025



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ABSTRACT

Social freedom the ability of individuals to express themselves, make autonomous choices, and participate freely in society has emerged as a significant psychological and social construct. Its influence extends to subjective well being, mental health, and overall life satisfaction. The present paper examines the conceptual relationship between social freedom, life satisfaction, and depression among adults. Drawing from established theoretical perspectives and empirical literature, the article argues that social freedom positively predicts life satisfaction while acting as a protective factor against depression. Conversely, limited social freedom can heighten vulnerability to psychological distress, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms. The paper also highlights socio cultural contexts, gender norms, economic conditions, and digital social environments as moderating factors shaping these relationships. Finally, implications for mental health policies, community interventions, and directions for future research are discussed.

KEY WORDS

Social Freedom, Subjective Well-being, Life Satisfaction, Depression, Autonomy, Psychological Health.

INTRODUCTION

Human well being is influenced by a complex interplay of social, cultural, psychological, and economic factors. Among these, social freedom-defined as the freedom to act, express oneself, and participate in society without undue restrictions has gained scholarly attention. Researchers acknowledge that autonomy, freedom of expression, and social participation are fundamental components of

psychological well-being (Deci, Ryan, 2000). When individuals feel free to make decisions and live authentically, they experience higher self-worth, improved positive affect, and increased life satisfaction.

Life satisfaction, a core dimension of subjective well-being, reflects an individual's cognitive evaluation of their overall quality of life (Diener et al., 1985). It is shaped by personal experiences, autonomy, relationships, environmental support, and social conditions. Meanwhile, depression remains one of the most prevalent mental health conditions globally, characterized by persistent sadness, hopelessness, loss of interest, and impaired functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Understanding the factors that influence depression and life satisfaction is critical for developing effective interventions.

This paper explores how social freedom contributes to life satisfaction and reduces the likelihood of depression. The topic is particularly relevant in societies where social norms, restrictions, or inequality may inhibit personal autonomy. It is also important in modern contexts shaped by globalization, digital communication, and shifting cultural values. The primary objective of this scholarly paper is to analyze-through theoretical discussion and review of available psychological literature-the ways in which social freedom influences life satisfaction and depression among adults. Although empirical data are not collected, the article synthesizes existing research and proposes conceptual pathways explaining these relationships.

Review of Literature

Social Freedom and Psychological Well-being

Empirical studies show that greater social freedom leads to better psychological health and lower distress (Chirkov et al., 2011). When individuals enjoy autonomy, they experience higher motivation, creativity, and emotional resilience. Societies with more open social environments report higher happiness indexes and lower rates of mental health disorders (Inglehart et al., 2013).

Theoretical Perspective

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory argues that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are basic human needs. When autonomy is threatened or restricted, mental well-being declines. Thus, social freedom directly supports psychological health.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

According to Maslow, psychological growth depends on the satisfaction of needs such as belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. Social freedom enables individuals to explore talents, form meaningful relationships and pursue personal goals leading to higher life satisfaction.

Social Stress Theory

Restricted social freedom-such as discrimination, rigid norms, or unequal rights-creates chronic stress that increases vulnerability to depression.

Social Freedom and Autonomy

Studies have found that individuals who experience higher autonomy demonstrate stronger motivation, better emotional stability, and richer interpersonal relationships (Chirkov et al., 2011). Autonomy strengthens self-esteem and reduces external pressures.

Social Freedom and Life Satisfaction

Cross-national studies show that nations with high personal freedom report higher life satisfaction scores (Inglehart et al., 2013). In contrast, environments where individuals face censorship, gender restrictions, caste limitations, or oppressive norms tend to show lower subjective well-being.

Life Satisfaction as a Mediator

Life satisfaction often mediates the relationship between social freedom and depression. People who experience freedom are more satisfied with their lives, which in turn protects them from depressive symptoms (Kahneman, Deaton, 2010).

Learned Helplessness and Lack of Social Freedom

One of the most damaging psychological outcomes of restricted social freedom is learned helplessness. When adults repeatedly experience situations where their choices have little impact, they may stop trying to change their circumstances. Over time, this leads to passivity, low motivation, and depressive symptoms.

Social environments that deny freedom—such as authoritarian families, rigid workplaces, or discriminatory social systems—reinforce helplessness. Adults raised or living in such environments may internalize the belief that effort is meaningless. This belief directly undermines life satisfaction and increases depression risk.

Breaking this cycle requires empowerment based interventions that restore a sense of agency and control.

Role of Social Freedom in Identity Formation and Mental Health

Social freedom plays a critical role in the development of personal identity during adulthood. Identity formation does not stop in adolescence; adults continuously reshape their self-concept through career choices, relationships, social roles, and personal values. When individuals are socially free, they can explore different identities without fear of rejection or punishment. This exploration promotes psychological growth and emotional stability.

In contrast, restricted social environments force individuals to suppress parts of their identity. Such suppression often results in internal conflict, identity confusion, and emotional exhaustion. Psychological research suggests that identity suppression is strongly associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms. Adults who feel unable to live authentically may experience chronic dissatisfaction, even if their external life appears stable. Social freedom allows adults to align their internal values with external behavior. This alignment, known as self-congruence, is a strong predictor of life satisfaction and mental well-being. When self-congruence is disrupted due to social pressure, depression may emerge as a response to prolonged emotional dissonance.

Social Freedom, Emotional Expression and Depression

Emotional expression is a fundamental human need. Social freedom determines whether individuals can openly express emotions such as sadness, anger, joy, or fear. In restrictive societies, emotional expression especially negative emotions is often discouraged. Adults may be expected to remain silent, strong, or obedient, regardless of emotional pain.

Suppression of emotions is linked to higher psychological distress. Studies indicate that adults who habitually suppress emotions are more likely to develop depressive symptoms, including low mood, fatigue, and feelings of emptiness. Social freedom enables emotional expression, which facilitates emotional regulation and psychological relief.

Furthermore, freedom to seek help is also crucial. In socially restrictive contexts, seeking psychological support may be stigmatized. Adults suffering from depression may avoid counseling due to fear of judgment. In contrast, socially free environments normalize mental health conversations, reducing stigma and encouraging early intervention.

Impact of Social Inequality on Freedom, Satisfaction and Depression

Social freedom is not equally distributed. Factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, caste, ethnicity, and education significantly influence how much freedom an individual experiences. Inequality reduces freedom by limiting access to resources, decision-making power, and social participation. Adults from disadvantaged backgrounds often experience restricted choices in education, employment, and healthcare. These limitations negatively impact life satisfaction and increase vulnerability to depression. Research consistently shows that social inequality is a strong predictor of poor mental health outcomes. Gender-based restrictions are particularly relevant. Women in many societies face limitations in mobility, career choice, and personal autonomy. Such

restrictions not only reduce life satisfaction but also contribute to higher rates of depression and anxiety among women.

Workplace Freedom and Adult Mental Health

The workplace is a major social environment for adults. Freedom at work-including decision-making autonomy, creative expression, and fair treatment-strongly affects mental health. Employees who feel controlled, micromanaged, or undervalued often experience burnout, dissatisfaction, and depressive symptoms. Workplace freedom enhances motivation and job satisfaction. Adults who have control over their work tasks and schedules report higher overall life satisfaction. Conversely, toxic or restrictive work environments can spill over into personal life, affecting relationships and emotional well-being. Thus, workplace policies that promote autonomy, flexibility, and respect are essential not only for productivity but also for preventing depression and enhancing life satisfaction.

Social Freedom in Relationships and Family Life

Family and intimate relationships significantly influence adult well-being. Social freedom within relationships allows individuals to express needs, opinions, and boundaries. Healthy relationships are characterized by mutual respect, autonomy, and emotional support.

In contrast, controlling or restrictive relationships can severely harm mental health. Adults who experience domination or emotional control within families or marriages often report lower life satisfaction and higher depressive symptoms. Lack of freedom in personal relationships creates feelings of entrapment and helplessness, which are core features of depression. Social freedom also affects decisions related to marriage, parenting, and lifestyle choices. When adults are forced into socially prescribed roles, their psychological well-being may suffer.

Urbanization, Modern Society and Freedom-Related Stress

Modern societies offer increased social freedom but also introduce new forms of stress. Urbanization, digital connectivity, and social media provide platforms for self-expression, yet they also create pressure to conform to idealized lifestyles. Adults may feel free in theory but restricted by social comparison, online judgment, and economic competition. This paradox of freedom-where choices increase but satisfaction decreases-can contribute to emotional overload and depressive symptoms.

Therefore, freedom alone is not sufficient; individuals also need psychological skills to manage choices, expectations, and social pressure. Mental health education plays a crucial role in helping adults use freedom in healthy ways.

Preventive Role of Social Freedom in Mental Health

From a preventive mental-health perspective, social freedom acts as a protective factor. When individuals feel empowered and valued, they develop resilience against stress and adversity. Freedom fosters problem-solving skills, optimism, and adaptive coping strategies.

Community level freedom-such as safe public spaces, inclusive institutions, and equal opportunities-supports collective mental health. Societies that invest in freedom-supportive environments reduce the long-term burden of depression and psychological disorders.

Integration with Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction reflects how individuals interpret their life experiences. Social freedom influences this interpretation by shaping perceived control, meaning, and purpose. Adults who feel free are more likely to view challenges as manageable rather than overwhelming.

Life satisfaction also helps individuals recover from setbacks. Even during hardship, socially free individuals may retain hope and motivation, reducing the severity of depressive episodes.

Additional Perspective

The relationship between social freedom, life satisfaction, and depression among adults is multidimensional and dynamic. Social freedom influences identity, emotional expression, relationships, work life, and social participation. These domains collectively shape life satisfaction and mental health.

Restricting social freedom-through inequality, rigid norms, or discrimination-creates psychological vulnerability. Enhancing social freedom, on the other hand, strengthens emotional resilience, satisfaction, and overall mental well-being.

For sustainable mental-health improvement, freedom must be understood not only as a social right but also as a psychological necessity. Policies, education systems, workplaces, and families must work together to create environments where adults can live freely, meaningfully, and mentally healthy lives.

Interpersonal Autonomy and Emotional Well-being

Interpersonal autonomy the freedom to express opinions, say no, and set boundaries is crucial for healthy relationships. Adults who lack interpersonal autonomy often engage in people-pleasing behaviors, emotional suppression, and self-sacrifice, leading to emotional exhaustion. Chronic violation of personal boundaries can result in resentment, low self-worth, and depression. Social freedom supports assertive communication and mutual respect in relationships, which improves emotional well-being and life satisfaction.

Role of Social Freedom in Coping Strategies

Coping strategies differ significantly based on perceived freedom. Socially free adults are more likely to use problem-focused coping, actively addressing stressors. They may seek information, negotiate solutions, or make changes. In contrast, individuals with limited freedom rely more on emotion-focused or avoidant coping, such as withdrawal, denial, or emotional numbing. Avoidant coping is strongly linked to depressive outcomes. Thus, social freedom indirectly shapes mental health by influencing how adults cope with stress.

Cultural and Social Factors Affecting the Relationship

- 1. Gender Norms:** In many societies, women face more restrictions in mobility, decision-making, clothing norms, education, or employment. Lower social freedom among women has been linked to increased anxiety, lower self-esteem, and higher depression.
- 2. Socioeconomic Status:** Financial constraints reduce freedom of choice. Poverty limits education, mobility, healthcare access, and social opportunities-negatively influencing life satisfaction and increasing vulnerability to depression.
- 3. Family Expectations:** In collectivist cultures, family plays a major role in decision-making. While family support can be beneficial, excessive control can reduce autonomy and increase stress or internal conflict.
- 4. Digital Freedom:** Modern society also brings new dimensions of freedom related to digital identity, online expression, and social media participation. Digital restriction or online harassment can impact mental well-being.
- 5. Cultural Expectations:** Cultures that emphasize obedience and conformity may provide stability, but they can limit self-expression and autonomy. This may suppress creativity, individuality, and mental health.

Conceptual Model Proposed

- Social freedom positively predicts life satisfaction.
- Social freedom negatively predicts depression.
- Life satisfaction negatively predicts depression.
- Life satisfaction mediates the relationship between social freedom and depression.

Importance of Autonomy

Autonomy plays a bridging role between social freedom and mental health. Adults require autonomy in

personal, social, and career decisions. When autonomy is undermined, mental health deteriorates.

Why Life Satisfaction Protects Against Depression

Life satisfaction reflects an individual's long-term view of their life. High life satisfaction serves as a psychological buffer by helping individuals maintain hope, purpose, and positivity even during stressful times. Therefore, life satisfaction reduces the likelihood of depression.

Factors influencing this Relationship Include:

- gender equality,
- cultural attitudes toward autonomy,
- socioeconomic opportunities,
- family expectations, and community support.

Social Freedom and Depression

Limited social freedom increases risk of depression due to persistent stress, hopelessness, and lack of control (Ryan, Deci, 2017). Restrictions whether based on gender, caste, class, religion, or economic conditions can lead to chronic anxiety and emotional suppression.

Social Freedom and Meaning in Life

Meaning in life is a critical component of psychological well-being. Adults derive meaning from goals, relationships, contributions, and self-expression. Social freedom enables individuals to pursue personally meaningful goals rather than socially imposed ones. When adults are forced to live according to externally imposed roles, they may experience an existential void. This lack of meaning is frequently associated with depression, emotional emptiness, and dissatisfaction. Life satisfaction increases when individuals feel their life reflects their true values and aspirations a condition made possible through social freedom.

Life Satisfaction and Depression

The relationship between life satisfaction and depression is inverse but interconnected. High life satisfaction predicts lower depression, while low life satisfaction increases vulnerability to mental health problems. Positive cognitive evaluations of life circumstances act as protective factors against depressive symptoms (Kahneman, Deaton, 2010).

Impact of Restrictive Moral and Social Policing

In many societies, moral policing restricts behavior related to dress, relationships, lifestyle, or expression. Such policing creates constant fear of judgment and punishment. Adults living under moral surveillance often experience heightened anxiety and internalized shame. Internalized shame damages self-esteem and increases depressive vulnerability. Social freedom reduces shame by validating individual differences and promoting acceptance.

Social Freedom and Mental Health Stigma

Mental health stigma itself is a form of restricted social freedom. When individuals fear social rejection for expressing emotional distress, they avoid seeking help. This delay worsens depressive symptoms. Socially free environments encourage open dialogue about mental health, normalize therapy, and support help-seeking behavior. As stigma decreases, early intervention becomes possible, improving outcomes.

How Social Freedom Reduces Depression

Freedom reduces external pressure, social fear, and psychological suppression. Socially free individuals experience:

- lower chronic stress,
- higher coping abilities,

- enhanced emotional support, and a sense of empowerment.

Limited social freedom creates emotional confinement, leading to frustration, anxiety, and long-term depressive tendencies.

Cultural and Societal Moderators

- **Collectivist Societies:** emphasize social obligations; freedom may be shaped by family expectations.
- **Gender Norms:** women may face more restrictions, increasing risk of depression.
- **Economic Conditions:** poverty reduces freedom and increases mental health burden.
- **Digital Society:** online platforms can enhance or restrict freedom depending on use.

CONCLUSION

Social freedom plays a pivotal role in shaping psychological well-being. Individuals who experience greater social freedom tend to report higher life satisfaction and lower depressive symptoms. Conversely, restrictive social environments can limit emotional expression, reduce autonomy, and heighten vulnerability to depression. The relationship between these variables is influenced by cultural norms, gender roles, socioeconomic opportunities, and personal agency.

Life satisfaction plays a key mediating role in this relationship, demonstrating that personal freedom shapes the way individuals evaluate their lives and emotional experiences. Ultimately, enhancing social freedom through policies, cultural reform, and mental-health interventions can significantly improve the well-being and mental health of individuals and communities.

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