

Well-being across Borders: A Ryff's Model - based Study of Psychological Well-being among Keralite Migrant Youth

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Abstract

Kerala, a southern Indian state with a longstanding migration culture, has recently witnessed a rise in youth migration to Western countries. This study examines the psychological well-being of Keralite migrant youth aged 18 to 29, focusing on emotional and mental health challenges encountered abroad. While migration is often driven by educational and career aspirations, it can also lead to emotional distress, cultural dislocation, and identity-related struggles. Grounded in Carol D. Ryff's multidimensional model of well-being and Self-Determination Theory, the study adopts a descriptive research design and quantitative approach. Data was collected from 60 Keralite migrant youth residing across European countries, selected through systematic random sampling. A structured questionnaire was used, comprising three sections: (A) socio-demographic details, (B) Ryff's 42-item Psychological Well-Being Scale assessing six dimensions of well-being, and (C) a self-developed tool exploring migration-related experiences such as cultural adjustment, stress, support systems, and language barriers. Findings indicate that while many youth reported enhanced autonomy and personal growth, a significant portion experienced emotional isolation and cultural challenges. Higher psychological well-being was associated with educational attainment and frequent family contact. The study highlights the need for culturally sensitive mental health interventions and pre-migration orientation programs to better support young migrants in navigating the psychological demands of migration.

Keywords: *Psychological Well-being, Migration, Migrant Youth, Kerala, European Countries, Post-migration Challenges*

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1. Introduction

Kerala stands at the crossroads of a major migration shift. Once dominated by male labour migration to Gulf countries, the state now sees a growing trend of youth migrating to Western nations particularly European countries in pursuit of higher education and professional growth. According to the Kerala Migration Survey 2023, youth now represent over 11% of the total emigrant population, with student migration rising significantly since 2018.

While migration offers global exposure, academic advancement, and socio-economic mobility, it also presents critical psychological and emotional challenges. Young migrants often face unfamiliar cultural environments, academic and social pressures, and a lack of familial support, all of which can affect their mental health and overall well-being.

Well-being is a multidimensional concept encompassing emotional, physical, social, and psychological aspects (Dodge et al., 2012). It is not merely the absence of distress but the presence of positive functioning, resilience, purpose, and life satisfaction (Keyes, 2002). Two major perspectives frame the study of well-being: the hedonic approach, which focuses on pleasure and happiness (Kahneman et al., 1999), and the eudaimonic approach, which emphasizes self-realization and psychological growth (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

This study adopts the eudaimonic perspective that refers to a conceptual approach to well-being that emphasizes meaning, purpose, personal growth, and self-realization, rather than just pleasure or happiness; grounding itself in Carol D. Ryff's multidimensional model of Psychological Well-Being (PWB), which includes six core dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989). In contrast to clinical models, PWB highlights human flourishing and meaningful engagement

with life (Ryff & Singer, 2003). Complementing this, Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) emphasizes the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness as central to maintaining motivation and mental health. These frameworks are particularly relevant for young migrants undergoing a life stage marked by identity exploration and emotional sensitivity. As they adapt to new cultures, academic systems, and social structures, often while being isolated from familiar support networks, they face heightened psychological demands (Berry, 1997; Bhugra & Becker, 2005). Migration, however, can also foster growth and independence, depending on individual coping capacity and external support.

This study investigates the psychological well-being of Keralite migrant youth residing in European countries for education or employment. While migration's economic and social dimensions are well-researched, limited attention has been given to its psychological impact on youth. Hence, the core problem addressed is the lack of empirical research into how Kerala's migrant youth experience and sustain psychological well-being in transnational contexts.

The purpose of the study was to assess and understand the psychological well-being of young Keralite migrants, identify related socio-demographic and migration-specific factors, and gain insights into their emotional adaptation in host countries.

2. Objectives of the study:

- To assess the psychological well-being of Keralite migrant youth residing in Europe.
- To explore the relationship between educational qualification and level of psychological well-being.
- To study the relationship between contact with family and level of psychological well-being

3. Hypothesis:

H0: There is a significant association between education level and frequency of family contact and the psychological well-being of Keralite migrant youth residing in European countries.

By integrating Ryff's PWB model as the conceptual framework and Self-Determination Theory as the theoretical foundation, the study examines both personal and environmental factors shaping youth well-being in cross-cultural settings. Ultimately, the research advocates for the inclusion of psychological health in migration policy discourse. It calls for culturally sensitive mental health support, pre-migration orientation, and youth-focused policy measures to promote emotional resilience and holistic well-being among young migrants.

4. Review of Literature

The review of literature highlights both the psychological vulnerabilities and the potential for resilience among migrant youth. While early migration studies emphasized stress, anxiety, and acculturative difficulties, recent scholarship grounded in positive psychology explores how autonomy, purpose, and personal growth can also be fostered through migration.

Joseph and Liya (2024) found that Indian students studying abroad reported higher life satisfaction than their peers in Kerala, attributing this to increased independence and personal development. Similarly, Cherian and John (2023) observed that despite systemic support in Scandinavian countries, challenges such as social isolation and language barriers negatively impacted mental health, while participation in community activities and language training improved adjustment.

Mutharintavida and Jethwani (2023), using standardized psychological scales, identified a strong negative correlation

between acculturative stress and mental well-being. However, students with strong bicultural self-efficacy demonstrated greater psychological resilience emphasizing the moderating role of identity confidence in cross-cultural settings.

Philip and Issac (2022) revealed that spiritual and religious engagement among migrant youth in the UK and Ireland contributed significantly to emotional stability, providing belonging and moral orientation during cultural transitions. Similarly, George and Joseph (2021) found that culturally sensitive peer support and student associations helped reduce emotional distress among Malayalee international students in Australia and New Zealand.

Drawing from Berry's (2005) acculturation theory, studies consistently show that integration retaining one's cultural identity while adapting to the host culture yields better psychological outcomes than marginalization or assimilation. These findings support a shift from deficit-focused perspectives to strength-based frameworks that highlight coping resources and positive adaptation.

Despite the growing recognition of resilience factors, the literature reveals a gap in studies that explicitly apply positive psychology frameworks to Keralite migrant youth. Most research continues to focus on challenges rather than well-being outcomes such as self-acceptance, autonomy, and personal growth. This study addresses that gap by integrating Ryff's Psychological Well-Being model and Self-Determination Theory to assess how migration influences emotional health, identity formation, and social connectedness among Kerala's youth migrants.

5. Methods

This study employed a structured, quantitative approach within a descriptive research design to examine the psychological well-

being of Keralite migrant youth in European countries. The design was chosen to observe real-life migration experiences without manipulating variables, thereby capturing authentic mental and emotional states.

The target population comprised Keralite youth aged 18 to 29 who migrated for higher education or employment but did not possess permanent residency in their host countries at the time of data collection. A sample of 60 participants was selected using systematic random sampling from a list of 120 individuals provided by an educational consultancy. Every second person on the list was chosen, beginning from a randomly selected point to reduce selection bias and improve representativeness.

Data collection was conducted through a structured online questionnaire via Google Forms, consisting of two sections:

Section A: Socio-Demographic Data Sheet – Included 11 close-ended items capturing age, gender, education, destination, purpose and duration of stay, and employment status.

Section B: Psychological Well-Being Scale (42 items) – Based on Carol D. Ryff's validated tool, this section assessed six dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. A 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Agree to 7 = Strongly Disagree) was used. Half the items were reverse-scored. Subscale and total scores were calculated, and participants were grouped into high or low psychological well-being using a median split.

A pilot study and pre-testing ensured the tool's validity and reliability, leading to improvements in clarity and relevance. Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) summarized background variables, while independent sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA examined

differences in psychological well-being across demographic and migration-related factors. A significance level of 0.05 was used, and assumptions for statistical tests were verified.

Ethical clearance was obtained, and informed consent was secured from all participants, who were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Online data collection facilitated accessibility while maintaining privacy.

6. Results

This section outlines the key findings derived from the analysis of responses collected from 60 Keralite migrant youth currently residing in various European countries. The results are structured in accordance with the research objectives. Both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used to interpret the data and highlight meaningful trends and associations.

The study revealed critical insights into the psychological well-being and lived experiences of migrant youth. A significant proportion of respondents (86.7%) reported low levels of psychological well-being. However, those who maintained regular contact with their families comprising 68.3% of the sample demonstrated relatively better psychological health. The data also showed that psychological well-being varied significantly by educational attainment ($p = 0.025$), suggesting the importance of education in coping mechanisms. The primary motivations for migration were job scarcity (80%), pursuit of better educational opportunities (75%), and higher income prospects (70%). Despite these aspirations, emotional difficulties such as homesickness (65%) and lifestyle-related stress (66.7%) were widely reported. Furthermore, 51.6% of the respondents expressed challenges in building adequate social support networks in their new environments. These findings

underscore the complex interplay between structural factors and emotional resilience among migrant youth.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

	Category	Frequency(n)	Percent(%)
Age Category	18-20	4	6.7
	21-23	13	21.7
	24-26	19	31.7
	27-29	24	40
Educational Qualification	SSLC	1	1.7
	Higher Secondary	10	16.7
	Bachelors	18	30
	Masters	28	46.7
	Others	1	1.7
Frequency of Contact with family	Daily	41	68.3
	Weekly	16	26.7
	Monthly	3	5

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, focusing on age, educational qualification, and frequency of family contact. A majority of the participants (71.7%) were between 24 and 29 years of age, indicating that migration predominantly occurs during the mid-to-late twenties; a period often associated with academic transition and early career pursuit. In terms of education, 46.7% of the respondents held a master's degree, followed by 30.0% with a bachelor's degree, reflecting a trend of skilled migration among well-educated youth from Kerala. The data also shows that 68.3% of the respondents maintained daily communication with their families, highlighting strong emotional ties and the continued role of family support even after migration. Although not presented in the table, the sample included a slightly higher

proportion of females (56.7%) than males (43.3%). Most respondents came from nuclear families.

Table 2. Psychological Well-being Levels among Respondents

PWB Level	Frequency(n)	Percent(%)
Low PWB	52	86.7
High PWB	8	13.3
Total	60	100.0

Table 2 shows the distribution of psychological well-being levels among respondents, as measured by Carol Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale. A substantial majority (86.7%) of participants reported low psychological well-being, while only 13.3% demonstrated high well-being. The PWB score was based on six dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. These findings suggest that although migration may offer educational and professional opportunities, many youth face significant emotional and psychological challenges. The high rate of low PWB points to underlying stressors such as cultural adjustment difficulties, homesickness, social isolation, and lack of adequate support systems in host countries (PWB was measured using Carol Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale, with participants categorized using a median split).

Table 3. One-Way ANOVA – Psychological Well-being and Educational Qualification

Educational Background	SSLC		Higher Secondary		Bachelor's		Master's		M.Phil		Ph.D		Others		F(6,53)	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Psychological Well-being	169.0	-	173.4	21.1	193.7	25.7	183.2	29.4	172	-	159.0	-	273.0	-	2.66	0.025

F (6, 53) = 2.664, p = 0.025. A statistically significant difference was found among groups. Table 3 presents the mean psychological well-being (PWB) scores of respondents based on their highest level of educational qualification. Participants categorized under “Others” reported the highest mean PWB score (M = 273.0), while Ph.D. holders had the lowest (M = 159.0). Bachelor's degree holders also showed relatively higher well-being (M = 193.7), suggesting variation in how individuals at different educational levels experience and cope with post-migration challenges. These results imply that educational background influence psychological resilience and adjustment capacity among migrant youth.

Table 4. One-Way ANOVA – Psychological Well-being and Frequency of Family Contact

Frequency of Contact with family	Daily		Weekly		Monthly		F(2,57)	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Psychological Well-being	192.2	32.2	169.3	10.1	177.6	24	4.034	0.023

Table 4 presents the mean psychological well-being scores of migrant youths based on the frequency of contact with their family members back home. Respondents who communicated with their families daily reported the highest mean PWB score ($M = 192.2$), followed by those with monthly contact ($M = 177.6$), while weekly contact was associated with the lowest mean score ($M = 169.3$). The one-way ANOVA test indicated that these differences were statistically significant, $F(2, 57) = 4.034$, $p = 0.023$. These results suggest that more frequent communication with family, particularly on a daily basis, is positively associated with greater psychological well-being among migrant youth.

5. Discussion

The study found that a substantial majority (86.7%) of Keralite migrant youth reported low psychological well-being (PWB), reflecting the emotional toll of migration. Although migration is often driven by aspirations for better education (75%), higher wages (70%), and job scarcity in Kerala (80%), the transition poses considerable psychological challenges. Respondents frequently reported homesickness (65%), lifestyle-related stress (66.7%), and difficulty forming social networks (51.6%).

Statistical analysis revealed that educational qualification ($p = 0.025$) and frequency of family contact ($p = 0.023$) were significantly associated with psychological well-being. Those with higher education and frequent contact with family (68.3% daily) exhibited greater emotional resilience. In contrast, variables such as age, religion, duration of stay, and type of accommodation did not significantly affect PWB, suggesting

that internal coping mechanisms and emotional connectedness play a more decisive role than demographic factors.

These findings support our hypothesis that educational qualification and family contact are associated with psychological well-being, as confirmed by statistical analysis (ANOVA), which revealed significant associations educational qualification ($p = 0.025$) and frequency of family contact ($p = 0.023$) with psychological well-being among Keralite migrant youth in Europe. It also aligns with Ryff's multidimensional model of psychological well-being and Deci & Ryan's self-determination theory, both of which emphasize the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are unmet in a migration context, youth is more vulnerable to emotional distress.

While migration can lead to personal growth and global exposure, it must be recognized as a psychological journey, not just a socio-economic shift. The findings support a multi-level intervention approach, including:

- Pre-migration counselling, to prepare youth for cultural and emotional transitions
- Post-migration support, such as peer groups, mental health services, and community engagement
- Policy integration, ensuring youth-focused migration planning includes mental health components

Overall, the study highlights the need for holistic strategies that support both the external success and internal well-being of migrant youth.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the dual impact of migration on Keralite youth while it opens doors to valuable educational and economic opportunities, it also exposes them to significant emotional and psychological challenges. The predominance of low psychological well-being among participants suggests that migration, in the absence of strong support systems, can take a toll on mental health. Educational attainment and frequent family contact emerged as key protective factors, underscoring the role of both individual resilience and social connectedness. To promote healthier migration experiences, there is a clear need for comprehensive pre- and post-migration interventions, including culturally sensitive mental health services and structured support mechanisms. Social workers have a crucial role to play in this process by designing orientation programs, strengthening family engagement, advocating for migrant-friendly policies, and facilitating peer support systems. Additionally, educational and employment institutions should be equipped to address the unique psychosocial needs of young migrants.

Future initiatives by policymakers, practitioners, and community organizations must integrate psychological well-being into youth migration frameworks to ensure not just successful settlement, but also sustainable personal development and holistic well-being.

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