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Refugees' Post-Arrival and Displacement-Related Perceptions in Malaysia and Portugal

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Abstract

Countries receiving refugees can vary dramatically in their policies toward this group (e.g., recognition of refugee status, legal protections), but the role of the receiving country context for refugee adaptation process is under investigated. This cross-sectional study (*N* = 318) investigates refugees' perceptions of the forcedness of their displacement and perils related to it, perceived discrimination, and subjective well-being in two different country contexts: Portugal and Malaysia. Results showed perceptions of discrimination and displacement-related perils were significantly higher among refugees in Malaysia, while subjective well-being and perceptions of forcedness were significantly higher for refugees in Portugal. For both groups, perceived discrimination and perceptions of forcedness had a significant and negative relation with subjective well-being but were not associated with related perils. In contrast to theoretical predictions, perceptions of forcedness, related perils and country-context did not moderate the relationship between perceived discrimination and subjective well-being. We propose that the differences between refugees in Malaysia and Portugal are a product of specific social and political factors. Limitations, practical implications, and future research avenues are discussed.

Keywords: refugees, asylum-seekers, perceived discrimination, perceptions of forcedness, related perils, subjective well-being, Malaysia, Portugal.

Refugees' Post-Arrival and Displacement-Related Perceptions in Malaysia and Portugal

Conflict, human rights violations, persecution, public disorder, and violence have become the reality of over 120 million forcibly displaced people in 2023, which includes 37.4 million asylum-seekers, refugees, and people in refugee-like situations (UNHCR, 2024a). Driven by increasing conflict, the refugee[2] population tripled compared to 2013. 2023 saw the highest number of registered conflicts since 1946, with 59 state-based conflicts in 34 countries. The primary contributors were the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, with more than an estimated 122,000 battle-related deaths in 2023 (Rustad, 2024). Inevitably, due to these conflicts, people are forcibly displaced and have limited say in the manner of migration and limited choice in their country of destination. Upon arrival in a receiving country[3], refugees continue to face a myriad of post-arrival stresses in addition to carrying the physical and psychological burdens of forced displacement. Nevertheless, the context of the receiving country can play a substantial role in the psychological adaptation of refugees.

A receiving country's context refers to the environmental and situational characteristics that may influence refugee adaptation, such as socioeconomic conditions, policies, public discourse, access (or lack thereof) to public services, and legal support. For instance, in countries that lack policies supporting refugees (e.g., Malaysia), one can expect more causes for post-arrival stresses, such as discrimination, poverty, unemployment, and other distressing circumstances. Such factors could disrupt and delay refugees' adaptation. In contrast, countries with policies and programmes supporting refugee integration[4] (e.g., Portugal) may constitute a more favourable context for refugees' psychological adaptation and subsequently, in rebuilding their lives anew.

The increasing complexity of conflict globally and the diversity of refugees call for a more nuanced understanding of psychological processes to ensure that refugees have a better chance of successfully adapting to the receiving society. Thus, the current research examines the role of receiving country context and its association with refugees' psychological adaptation, i.e., the attainment of psychological and emotional well-being. Specifically, we compare two country contexts: Malaysia and Portugal. These two countries were selected due to their opposing approaches to managing refugee reception: Portugal adheres to international norms with structured refugee integration policies, while Malaysia lacks refugee management policies and legal frameworks, and frequently violates international laws, including nonrefoulement.

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[2] Throughout this paper, the term "refugee" refers to and includes asylum-seekers, externally and forcibly displaced people, people with temporary protection or refugee-status, and all people in refugee-like situations.

[3] The term "receiving countries" will be used instead of "host countries" because "host" implies a host-guest relationship, whereas "receive" refers to the incoming refugee migration flow without the implications of power dynamics or political leanings. Thus, receiving countries could include resettlement countries and transit countries.

[4] Integration refers to structural integration, which is the social and systemic support for the inclusion and participation of refugees in the receiving society (Ager & Strang, 2008). In this study, integration does not refer to acculturation research, where integration is the migrant's preference in maintaining heritage culture and adopting the receiving culture (Berry, 2005).

Refugee Situation in Malaysia and Portugal

Portugal

Portugal is a signatory of the United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (UNHCR, 2015), which means it implements policies and programmes that support refugee integration into society. Portugal is a resettlement country with a pathway for refugees to attain citizenship. As one of the top five countries in the Migration Integration Index (MIPEX), Portugal adopts a comprehensive integration approach by guaranteeing equal rights, opportunities, and security for migrants (Solano & Huddleston, 2020). Generally, the public is encouraged to view migrants as equals, potential neighbours, and fellow citizens.

In 2024 (UNHCR, 2024b), Portugal was home to 65,194 refugees and 2,158 asylum-seekers, with the largest population originating from Ukraine (53,919), followed by Nigeria (2,380), Syria (966), Morocco (965) and Afghanistan (915). Despite its open approach to migrants, in 2023, Portugal received only 0.2% of the asylum applications compared to other European nations such as Germany (29.2%), France (14.6%) and Spain (14.2%) (EUAA, 2024). In this study's sample, the largest ethnic group consists of Ukrainians and Afghans.

Malaysia

Malaysia is not a signatory of the United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. As such, the refugee status is not recognised; therefore, refugees have no security or protection and limited access to public services and basic rights, such as education, healthcare, and employment. The non-recognition of refugees means Malaysia does not offer a pathway to residency or citizenship. Along with human trafficking victims and stateless people, they are categorised as "illegal immigrants", in which disinformation and dehumanisation of "illegal immigrants" characterise political and public discourse. Thus, it is common for refugees to experience disrespect, coercion, and threats from the locals, as well as abuse, arbitrary detention, and forced deportation from the local authorities (Bauchner, 2024). In other words, Malaysia can be described as a context that is objectively highly discriminatory toward refugees.

Malaysia is a transit country, one of the countries along the refugees' migration route and is generally not considered the "final" destination. As a major transit country in Southeast Asia, Malaysia's United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) receives asylum applications, processes these claims, confers refugee status, and resettles refugees in other countries. In 2024 (UNHCR, 2024b), Malaysia is home to an estimated 10,000 refugees, with the majority from Myanmar (127,664), followed by Pakistan (4,298), Somalia (1,855), Afghanistan (1,319) and Sri Lanka (692). Due to various social, political and contextual factors, there might be an innumerable number of unregistered refugees.

For this study, the researcher established a collaboration with a non-government organisation (NGO) in Malaysia whose beneficiaries are an ethnic group from Myanmar called Zomi. Zomi is a trans-border ethnic group, bearing different names in different nations yet practising and sharing similar cultures and traditions. From 2000 to 2010, the number of Zomi refugees was at its highest, with an estimated 20,000 Zomi in the USA, and another 30,000 in the rest of the world (S.Pau, 2015). In 2024, an estimated 30,000

Zomi refugees and asylum-seekers live in Malaysia, with an estimated 200 new arrivals per month. (S.S. Mung, personal communication, November 5, 2024).

Post-Arrival Demands and Stressors: Perceived Discrimination

Upon arrival in the receiving country, refugees continue to face a myriad of post-arrival demands and stresses in addition to carrying the physical and psychological burdens of forced displacement. Post-arrival demands and stressors refer to the challenges and pressures faced by refugees after arriving in the receiving country, which may include language barriers, loss of social status, loss of social network, unfamiliar legal procedures, and xenophobia (Yakushko, 2010).

However, almost all migrants and ethnic minorities report perceptions of discrimination, the subjective experience of unfair treatment (Schmitt et al., 2014). Perceived discrimination is an established predictor of psychological well-being and social inclusion. For example, perceived discrimination is correlated with stress symptoms among Vietnamese refugees living in Finland (Liebkind et al., 2004) and is associated with adverse mental health among refugees in Australia (Ziersch et al., 2020). Refugees' adaptation will likely be frustrated if they perceive high levels of discrimination from the receiving society, which, we propose, is more likely in countries without legal protections for refugees and with objectively discriminatory policies toward this group, such as Malaysia.

Perceptions of Forcedness and Related Perils

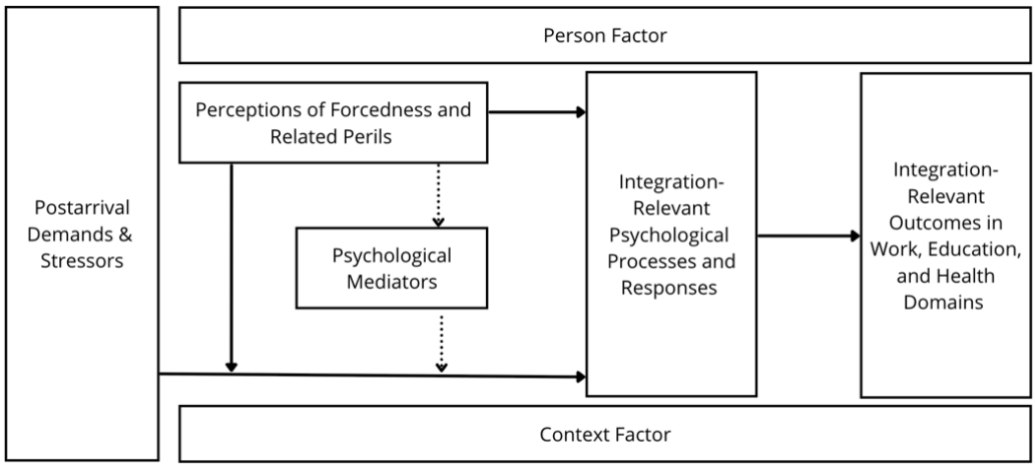
Recent approaches to refugee adaptation, such as the PARI model (Psychological Antecedents of Refugee Adaptation; Echterhoff et al., 2020; Figure 1) have emphasised the critical role of the perceptions of forcedness and its related perils, common psychological factors experienced by most refugees. Forcedness refers to a perception that displacement was driven by external factors, for instance, because migration is considered a safer option than remaining in their countries. Related perils, in turn, refer to dangerous or distressing events associated with forced displacement. Refugees face dangers in their home countries, such as political violence (Schmeidl, 1997) and abuse from authorities (Kobia & Cranfield, 2009). They also encounter dangers during their migration journeys, such as human trafficking (Wilson, 2012) and violent pushbacks (Bužinkić & Avon, 2020). As shown in Figure 1, the PARI model proposes that these two factors, perception of forcedness and related perils, may affect refugees' capacity to cope with post-arrival stresses, such as perceived discrimination, which is essential for psychological adaptation to a new environment. Both perceptions of forcedness and related perils are central to the theoretical model, Psychological Antecedents of Refugee Adaptation (Echterhoff et al., 2020) in Figure 1, which addresses the unique characteristics of refugee migration and its relationship with integration-relevant psychological processes.

Psychological Adaptation of Refugees

Most migrants and refugees have a desire and are motivated to rebuild their lives in a new environment (Ryan et al., 2008). According to (Ward & Szabó, 2019), psychological adaptation is the outcome of coping with migration or displacement-related stresses (e.g., discrimination, language barrier) and the achievement of psychological and emotional well-being that could be positive (e.g., life satisfaction, subjective well-being) and negative (e.g., depression, anxiety).

Figure 1

Psychological Antecedents of Refugee Adaptation by Echterhoff et al., 2020



The psychological adaptation of voluntary migrants has been extensively studied in psychology, but less so for refugees. Studies have found that when refugees successfully adapt, their subjective well-being and life satisfaction will generally increase (Hynie, 2017). On the contrary, refugees who cannot cope will have difficulties adapting and face additional challenges of prolonged mental health issues and isolation (Correa-Velez et al., 2010). However, when assessing adaptation, most refugee studies focus on clinical aspects such as PTSD, depression, or anxiety and have limited consideration for positive indicators of refugee psychological adaptation. This study uses subjective well-being to assess psychological adaptation and its relationship with perceived discrimination in different country contexts.

The Current Study

The current study examines the role of country contexts, perceived discrimination, perceptions of forcedness, and related perils and their relationship with refugees' psychological adaptation using subjective well-being. We hypothesise that perceived discrimination, perceptions of forcedness and related perils, each have a negative relationship with subjective well-being. Specifically, we expect that perceptions of discrimination are higher and subjective well-being lower in Malaysia, a country without recognition or protections for refugees, than in Portugal, a country with existing protections and pathways to citizenship.

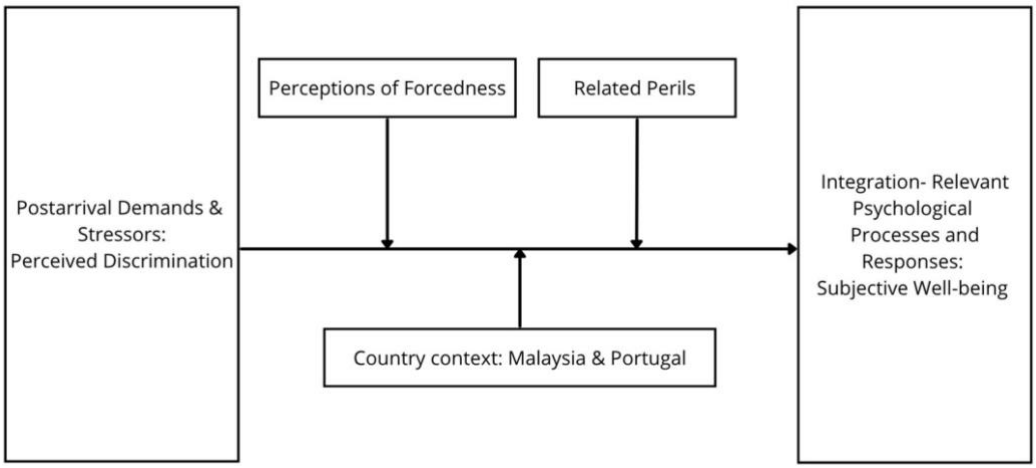
Further, we hypothesise a moderating effect of the receiving country, where refugees in Malaysia have a stronger negative relationship between perceived discrimination and subjective well-being compared to refugees in Portugal. Refugees in Malaysia lack protection and lack access to public services, which may not only intensify their subjective perceptions of being discriminated, but also reinforce the negative relationship between these perceptions and subjective well-being because in a context in which no protection is granted, any experience that can be seen as discriminatory is likely to cause particularly high levels of stress. In contrast, refugees in Portugal may also perceive discrimination, but being aware that local policies protect them may limit the extent to which these perceptions affect their well-being. Therefore, being based in Portugal, the relationship between perceived discrimination and subjective well-being is expected to be weaker.

Additionally, as proposed by the PARI model (Echterhoff et al., 2020), we hypothesise that the perceptions of forcedness and related perils will have a positive moderating effect on the link between perceived discrimination and subjective well-being, that is, higher perceptions of forcedness and related perils will amplify the negative relationship between perceived discrimination and subjective well-being. When refugees perceive their displacement experiences as highly forced and dangerous, their psychological resources to cope with additional demands, such as perceived discrimination, may be more easily drained, which may amplify the negative impact of perceived discrimination on their well-being. In contrast, when refugees perceive lower forcedness and dangers in their displacement, they may retain a sense of autonomy and agency, which enables them to adapt better and buffer the harmful effects of perceived discrimination on their well-being.

Designed to test predictions derived from the PARI model (Figure 2), this study focuses on refugees perceived discrimination and its effects on their psychological adaptation in two different countries, Malaysia and Portugal. Additionally, we examine the moderating effects of perceived forcedness and the perils related to it on the link between perceived discrimination and psychological adaptation.

Figure 2

Perceived discrimination and subjective well-being moderated by country context, perceptions of forcedness and related perils



Methods

Participants

This study was part of a larger project (Tai et al., 2022). Participants were adult refugees of a minimum age of 18 years from the Zomi ethnic group in Malaysia and refugees of diverse origins in Portugal. Convenience and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants in Malaysia and Portugal through referrals by collaborating NGOs and connected individuals (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). As such, Zomi refugees in Malaysia were recruited for the study due to the close connection between the researcher and the beneficiaries of the collaborating NGO. These sampling strategies help reach a "hidden" population, vulnerable groups disincentivised or unmotivated to participate in research due to fear and distrust (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997).

The total sample consisted of 318 participants, including 241 Zomi refugees from Myanmar based in Malaysia and 77 refugees based in Portugal. In Portugal, participants originated from 14 countries, most from Ukraine (51.9*%, N* = 40) and Afghanistan (16.9*%, N* = 13). The remaining respondents, 31.2% *(N* = 24), originated from Albania, Angola, Cameron, Congo, Gambia, Guatemala, Guinea, India, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, and Venezuela. The participants were recruited with the support of various NGOs in Malaysia and Portugal. Sociodemographic information is available in Table 1.

In the total sample, 69.7% *(N* = 221) were male, with a majority between 18-29 years (45.3*%, N* = 143). 87.1% *(N* = 277) practice a religion, with 69.8% *(N* = 222) practising Christianity. 44.4% *(N* = 107) stayed in Malaysia between 6 to 10 years, while participants in Portugal stayed for less than 1 year (68.8*%, N* = 53). For refugees in Malaysia, 40.6% *(N* = 98) have at least a secondary-level education, while most participants in Portugal have a university-level education (58.4*%, N* = 45).

Procedures

The questionnaire was created and distributed using Qualtrics. The survey link was distributed via email, social media groups, group chats, and newsletters with the help of one collaborating NGO in Malaysia and three NGOs based in Portugal. In addition, trained native speakers from collaborating NGOs helped collect data in refugee homes, community centres, processing centres and via social media. The trained native speakers were prepared to answer questions and further explain the research.

Before taking the survey, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, informed that their responses were voluntary, anonymous, and confidential, and requested to provide informed consent. The researcher and the trained native speaker answered questions throughout the study.

After completing the questionnaire, the participants were further debriefed, with a debriefing note provided at the end of the survey. Participants did not receive any compensation or reward. Data collection occurred from May 13th to July 31st 2022 in Malaysia, and May 2nd to August 31st 2022 in Portugal.

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants in Malaysia and Portugal

Variables	Total (*N* = 318)		Malaysia (*N* = 241)		Portugal (*N* = 77)	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Gender						
Women	91	28.7	45	18.7	46	59.7
Men	221	69.7	190	79.1	31	40.3
Other gender	3	0.9	3	1.2	0	0
Prefer not to tell	2	0.6	2	0.8	0	0
Age range						
18 – 29 years	143	45.3	132	55.2	11	14.3
30 – 39 years	124	39.2	87	36.4	37	48.1
40 – 49 years	37	11.7	18	7.5	19	24.7
50 – 59 years	8	2.5	1	0.4	7	9.1
60 – 80 years	4	1.3	1	0.4	3	3.9
Years in receiving country						
Less than 1 year	64	20.1	11	4.6	53	68.8
Between 1 to 5 years	88	27.7	70	29.0	18	23.4
Between 6 to 10 years	113	35.5	107	44.4	6	7.8
Between 10 to 20 years	46	14.5	46	19.0	0	0
More than 20 years	7	2.2	7	2.9	0	.0
Practises a religion						
Yes	277	87.1	234	97.0	43	55.8
No	41	12.9	7	2.9	34	44.2
Religion						
Christian	222	69.8	205	85.1	17	22.1
Islam	16	5.0	0	0	16	20.8
Orthodox	5	1.6	0	0	5	6.5
Sikhism	1	0.3	0	0	1	1.3
Other religion	15	4.7	14	5.8	1	1.3
Not specified	59	18.6	22	9.1	37	48.1
Levels of education						
Primary	83	26.1	81	33.6	2	2.6
Secondary	114	35.8	98	40.6	16	20.8
College	16	5.0	7	2.9	9	11.7
University	56	17.6	11	4.6	45	58.4
Other forms of education	49	15.4	44	18.3	5	6.5

Materials

All materials were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee at Iscte-IUL, Portugal, and followed the American Psychological Association's (APA) recommendations for human research protection (American Psychological Association, 2025). The original measures were in English. For refugees based in Malaysia, the measures were translated into Zomi using the translation/back-translation method. For refugees based

in Portugal, the measures were translated into Farsi, Portuguese, Spanish, and Ukrainian via the translation/back-translation method. Languages were selected based on recommendations from collaborating NGOs.

Measures

Sociodemographics

Participants answered sociodemographic questions. These questions include their age, country of origin, gender, ethnicity, religion, education level, and years in the receiving country.

Perceived Discrimination

Perceived discrimination was assessed using the 4-item scale (Lutterbach & Beelmann, 2021). The scale used a 5-point Likert scale to indicate agreement, ranging from 1 “Strongly Disagree” to 5 “Strongly Agree”. A higher score indicates more perceived discrimination from the receiving society. Sample items include “I was treated without respect by Malaysians” and “I was offended by Malaysians”.

Perceptions of Forcedness

Perceptions of forcedness were assessed with the 4-item scale (Echterhoff et al., 2020). The original scale consists of 6 items, but in this study, two items were dropped to improve scale reliability from 0.52 to 0.79. The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 is “Strongly Disagree” and 5 is “Strongly Agree”. Higher scores indicate higher perceptions of forcedness. Sample items include “I was forced to leave my home country” and “I could determine for myself the course of my migration”.

Related Perils

Related perils were assessed using the 8-item scale (Echterhoff et al., 2020). The original scale consists of 16 items covering perils experienced in the home country and during migration. To reduce the possibility of survey fatigue, we only used the subscale referring to perils experienced in the home country. The scale used a 5-point Likert scale to indicate the frequency of occurrence, ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Some sample items include “I experienced massive dangers to my life in my home country” and “I feared massive restrictions on my liberty in my home country”.

Subjective Well-Being

Participants’ subjective well-being was assessed using the WHO-5 Well-Being Index (Topp et al., 2015). The scale uses a 5-point Likert measure to indicate the participant’s frequency of occurrence, ranging from 1 “At no time” to 5 “All the time”. Sample items include “My daily life has been filled with things that interest me” and “I have felt cheerful and in good spirits”. A higher score indicates higher subjective well-being.

Results

Below, we first present reliability statistics, descriptives, and independent t-tests comparing refugees in Portugal and Malaysia (Table 2). Then, we report bivariate Pearson correlations (Table 3). Finally, we present the results of the linear regression

and moderation analysis conducted to determine the relationship between the predictors (perceived discrimination, perceptions of forcedness and related perils), the outcome variable (subjective well-being) (Table 4) and the moderating effects of the variables of interests (perceptions of forcedness, related perils, and context) (Table 5). Frequencies, reliability, linear regression, and moderation analysis were performed using R version 2024.09.0+375 (RStudio Team, 2024) and the PROCESS for R version 4.3.1 (Hayes, 2024).

Participants in Portugal (M = 2.92, SD = 0.93) scored higher in subjective well-being than participants in Malaysia (M = 2.61, SD = 1.00), $t(316) = -2.36$, $p < .05$. There was also a significant difference in perceived discrimination between refugees in Malaysia (M = 2.61, SD = 1.00) and refugees in Portugal (M = 1.42, SD = 0.55), $t(316) = 9.99$, $p < .000$. That is, refugees in Malaysia reported more perceived discrimination and less subjective well-being compared to refugees in Portugal.

Further, refugees in Portugal (M = 2.73, SD = 0.91) scored higher on perceptions of forcedness than refugees in Malaysia (M = 2.46, SD = 0.91), $t(315) = -2.25$, $p < .05$). In contrast, refugees in Malaysia (M = 4.00, SD = 0.92) scored higher on related perils compared to refugees in Portugal (M = 2.84, SD = 1.06), $t(315) = 9.23$, $p < .000$. Reliabilities (Cronbach's a), means (M), standard deviations (SD), t-tests (t), and p-value (p) results are presented in Table 2.

Bivariate analyses showed that, as expected, perceived discrimination and subjective well-being had a significant negative correlation. Also, there was a significant and negative correlation between perceptions of forcedness and subjective well-being and a significant and positive correlation between perceived discrimination and related perils. The remaining correlations were not significant.

Next, we tested whether the perceptions of forcedness, related perils, and the receiving country context moderate the link between perceived discrimination and subjective well-being. The moderators and their interactions were tested separately using PROCESS macro for R (Model 1). We found no moderating effects for either of these variables (Table 4).

Table 2

Reliabilities, Means, Standard Deviations, t-Tests, and p-Values Results

Variables	No. of Items	Total α	Malaysia ($M \pm SD$)	Portugal ($M \pm SD$)	t(df)	p
Subjective Well-Being	5	0.86	2.61 (1.00)	2.92 (0.93)	-2.36 (316)	<.05
Perceived Discrimination	4	0.80	2.61(0.99)	1.42(0.55)	9.99(316)	< .001
Perceptions of Forcedness	4	0.79	2.46(0.91)	2.73(0.91)	-2.25(315)	<.05
Related Perils	8	0.92	4.00(0.92)	2.84(1.06)	9.23(315)	< .001

Table 3

Correlations for all Variables

	Variables	1	2	3	4
1	Subjective Well-Being		-0.152**	-0.244***	-0.086
2	Perceived Discrimination			-0.005	0.440***
3	Perceptions of Forcedness				-0.069
4	Related Perils				

Note. Significance level: $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Table 4.

Moderation Analysis for Country-Context, Perceptions of Forcedness and Related Perils on the Relationship Between Perceived Discrimination and Subjective Well-Being

Variables	Moderator 1: Country	p-value	Moderator 2: Perceptions of Forcedness	p-value	Moderator 3: Related Perils	p-value
Constant	2.92 (0.18)	< .001	3.08 (0.40)	< .001	2.89 (0.45)	< .001
Perceived Discrimination	-0.12 (0.06)	.06	0.09 (0.15)	.53	-0.03 (0.24)	.89
Moderator	0.01 (0.36)	.99	-0.02 (0.15)	.89	0.03 (0.12)	.80
Interaction Term	0.11 (0.21)	.60	-0.10 (0.05)	.08	-0.03 (0.06)	.64
Model R^2	0.029		0.092		0.025	
ΔR^2 for the Interaction Term	0.001	.60	0.009	.08	0.001	.64
Model $F(df)$	3.14	< .05	10.67 (3, 315)	< .001	2.70 (3, 315)	< .05

Note. Interaction term refers to the interaction between Perceived Discrimination and the respective moderator. Country was dummy-coded (0-Malaysia, 1-Portugal).

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to examine and compare the psychological adaptation process of refugees in two country contexts: Malaysia and Portugal. Specifically, the study examined the relationship between perceived discrimination and subjective well-being and the moderating effects of perceptions of forcedness, related perils, and country of reception.

While this study focused on the psychological adaptation of refugees in Malaysia *(N* = 241) and refugees based in Portugal *(N* = 77), these sample sizes were unbalanced, and the results should be interpreted with caution.

As expected, we detected significant differences between refugees in the two contexts for all variables, and the mean differences were as expected. Given the non-recognition of refugees, it was not surprising that refugees in Malaysia would face higher

levels of perceived discrimination and lower levels of subjective well-being than refugees in Portugal. Additionally, refugees in Malaysia reported higher levels of related perils compared to refugees in Portugal, which might suggest that the refugees in Malaysia had experienced multiple and prolonged human rights violations in their country of origin, Myanmar, before displacement. The result is in line with past and current reports from the region (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Myanmar had been under military rule and experienced continuous internal conflict since gaining independence in 1948 (Maizland, 2022). The decades of internal conflict could explain the higher levels of related perils compared to refugees in Portugal, many of whom came from areas with relatively recent conflicts. Specifically, our data were collected within six months of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (February 2022), and slightly more than half of our sample in Portugal was from Ukraine. The recency of the conflict at the time of their displacement might suggest that these participants had less exposure to conflict-related perils than those from Myanmar.

In contrast, refugees in Portugal reported higher levels of perceptions of forcedness, which might also be attributed, in part, to the recency of the conflict in Ukraine and its suddenness. Participants from this region, faced with the sudden and unexpected need to flee, might have perceived the displacement as more forced than those from Myanmar because of the sharp contrast with the times before the conflict.

Further, we found a significant and negative relationship between perceived discrimination and subjective well-being, aligned with the broadly accepted phenomenon that discrimination has a harmful effect on psychological well-being, particularly with migrants and ethnic minorities (Bierwiaczonek et al., 2025; Schmitt et al., 2014). People are motivated to be accepted, included, and have their group identities valued by society at large. Perceived discrimination implies rejection, exclusion and disrespect of refugees, which threatens the need for inclusion and belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Hence, it is not surprising that perceived discrimination was negatively related to subjective well-being, even more so for refugees who, due to forced displacement, constitute a particularly vulnerable group.

Likewise, we found a significant and negative relationship between the perceptions of forcedness and subjective well-being, which is generally aligned with refugee well-being research (Essex et al., 2024). Events leading to forced displacement are perceived to be driven by external forces (Echterhoff et al., 2020). Forced displacement takes away a person's agency in planning, preparing, and embarking on their migration. Being forcibly displaced and arriving in a foreign country with unfamiliar people and language constantly reminds refugees of their losses, loved ones, and culture, all of which are beyond their control (Vromans et al., 2017).

Considering the highly contextual and complex nature of forced displacement, this could explain the negative relation between perceptions of forcedness and subjective well-being. Unexpectedly, our findings revealed no significant relationship between related perils and subjective well-being. This suggests that refugees may not perceive the dangers experienced in their country of origin directly influencing their subjective well-being in the receiving country.

In contrast to what we expected based on the PARI model (Echterhoff et al., 2020), we found no moderating effects of perceptions of forcedness, related perils and country of reception on the relationship between perceived discrimination and subjective

well-being. This null finding might suggest that perceived discrimination jeopardises refugees' subjective well-being regardless of location and, more importantly, of the conditions of the receiving country. Policies existing in Portugal do not seem to be enough to protect refugees against the negative effects of perceived discrimination. The lack of a moderating effect of perceptions of forcedness and related perils might, in turn, indicate that the violence faced in their country of origin was perceived differently from discriminatory behaviour in the receiving country. It is, however, noteworthy that an arguably more extreme displacement experience – characterised by more peril and more forcedness – does not seem to make refugees more vulnerable to negative experiences of discrimination in the receiving country.

While country-level policies seem to make a difference in refugees' adaptation, practitioners and policymakers may need to focus on and develop targeted interventions to reduce the negative effects of perceived discrimination and buffer refugees' memories of forced displacement.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, the sample sizes between refugees in Malaysia *(N* = 241) and refugees in Portugal *(N* = 77) were unequal. The smaller Portugal sample translated into less statistical power, which could make it harder to detect true effects. Furthermore, comparing an ethnically homogenous group, Zomi refugees in Malaysia, with a heterogeneous group of refugees in Portugal made the interpretation of results challenging. Furthermore, this is a cross-sectional study, meaning the outcomes would have likely been influenced by the events at the time of data collection. For this study, data in Portugal were collected within six months after Russia invaded Ukraine. Thus, the results will have been influenced by events that occurred during data collection.

Second, this study focused on testing specific variables included in the PARI model (Figure 1) and did not test other variables that might be crucial for refugees, such as sociocultural factors, uprooting stress, post-traumatic stress and cultural distance.

Finally, collecting data from vulnerable groups for a cross-cultural study is known to be complex and challenging. Vulnerable groups often face barriers such as stigma, mistrust, and fear of exploitation. Therefore, vulnerable groups are not incentivised to reveal information or are hesitant to participate in research, particularly if it concerns a sensitive topic or a topic they fear may expose them to dangers (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). In accessing vulnerable groups, researchers often face logistical challenges, including limited access to refugees and ethical concerns around privacy and consent. These challenges are usually managed through non-random snowball and convenience sampling. While enabling access to hard-to-reach populations, these sampling methods are prone to selection bias, leading to homogeneity and over-representation of the sample, like the Malaysia sample. The lack of control over recruitment makes it difficult to determine sample size, like the Portugal sample. Thus, the challenging nature of data collection with vulnerable groups poses the most significant limitation to this study.

Future Research

Our findings point to an important role of perceived discrimination, perceptions of forcedness and related perils, and country context in refugees' subjective well-being,

suggesting that it is important to investigate further the contextual factors that influence psychological adaptation. Further research would be well-advised to look more closely at different contexts of refugee reception, as defined by country-level policies and general attitudes toward refugees. In gaining a more subtle understanding of context, research could employ mixed methods to uncover qualitative nuances and complement quantitative patterns in refugees' adaptation experiences. While this is a cross-sectional study, future research could delve into how refugee adaptation processes evolve over time and in different contexts with a longitudinal study.

Furthermore, research should examine specific refugee groups rather than diverse groups. Here, we examined the psychological adaptation of Zomi in Malaysia. However, other groups (e.g., the Afghans, Rohingyas, and Somalians) are likely to have their own needs due to their unique displacement contexts and their group-specific cultural factors. Although conducting such cross-cultural research with refugee samples is particularly difficult, we argue that it is necessary to achieve a full understanding of refugees' adaptation experiences in the new environment.

Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of understanding the role of the receiving country in refugees' psychological adaptation. Our analysis revealed that all measured variables showed a clear difference between the receiving countries, possibly due to the contrasting approaches and policies towards refugees in Malaysia and Portugal. However, these approaches and policies do not seem sufficient to protect refugees' subjective well-being from the effects of post-arrival stressors, such as perceived discrimination. Further research is needed to gain a more nuanced understanding of the role of the receiving country context on refugees' psychological adaptation.

With the growing complexity and prevalence of protracted conflicts, the global number of asylum-seekers and refugees is expected to continue rising. This trend underscores the important role of receiving countries in addressing the presence of refugees and fostering an inclusive and harmonious coexistence. Deliberate and concerted efforts from all parties are essential to uphold the human rights of those who have lost so much and only wish to seek a life of safety and dignity.

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