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Do Academic Performance, Gender and Financial Difficulties Influence the Depression Level Among the Undergraduate Accounting Students in Malaysia?

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Abstract

This study investigates the academic performance, gender and financial difficulty as determinants of depression level among Malaysian undergraduate accounting students. This study used the survey method of research, and data was gathered using questionnaires. A total of 110 undergraduate accounting students from a public university in Malaysia participated in the study. The findings of this study show that good academic performance has a negative and significant relationship with depression level, implying that higher academic performance might decrease the depression level. Findings of this study provides valuable insights to parents, educators, policymakers, administrators and other stakeholders who are concerned about the importance of university students' academic performance and its influence on depression levels.

Keywords

Academic Performance, Gender, Financial Difficulties, Depression, University Student

1.0 Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO), in 2019, estimated 280 million people, including 5% of all adults, experienced depression and depression is more common among women than men. WHO defines depressive disorder, or depression as a common mental health condition that can happen to anyone. It is characterized by a low mood or loss of pleasure or interest in activities for long periods of time and can cause difficulties in all aspects of life, including performance at school, productivity at work, relationships with family, friends and community. Similarly, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders described depression is as a sad or irritable mood or a sense of emptiness, accompanied by physical and cognitive changes that severely impair an individual's ability to function, following heart diseases.

In Malaysia, a national survey conducted in 2020 by the Malaysian Ministry of Health revealed that nearly one in three Malaysian adults aged 16 and above (29.2 percent) suffer from a mental health condition, a significant increase from 11.2 percent in 2006. More recently, the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (2022) (refer https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/media/4421/file/UNICEF_MyMHI2023_ENG_Final.pdf) reported that 6 in 10 Malaysian Youth (Middle Youth, aged 15-40 years) experienced mild to severe depressive symptoms. The Malaysian Youth Mental Health Index 2023 study is a collaboration between the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Malaysia. In addition, it is widely recognized that depression is intricately connected, either directly or indirectly, to seven of the primary causes of death in developed countries, significantly adding to the overall burden of suffering within these populations (Fink et al., 2021). Along the similar line, in March 2023, the

World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 1 in every 4 people was affected by mental disorder at some point in their lives, reporting that depression alone accounted for 4.3% of the global burden of disease and was among the largest single cause of disability worldwide.

Thus, given such alarming statistics, it is important and timely to examine the key determinants that affects depression level among students in a higher learning academic setting, particularly in Malaysia. Hence, this study aims to expand prior works by examining the impacts of gender, academic performance and financial difficulties on depression level among Malaysian undergraduate accounting students. As such, the following are the objectives of the study:

- i. To determine if there will be a significant relationship between academic performance and depression among undergraduate accounting students
- ii. To determine if there will be a significant different in gender in response to depression among undergraduate accounting students
- iii. To determine whether undergraduate accounting students with financial difficulties will be more depressed than those without financial difficulties.

The remainder of the paper is presented as follows. The following section reviews the relevant literature on depression level. The third section provides a discussion on the research method. Meanwhile, the fourth section lays out the findings and empirical results. The fifth section concludes the study whilst the final section suggests recommendations for future research.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Gender and Depression Level

The traits of depression level may be influenced by their demographics like gender. Research examining the intersection of gender and depression among university students presents mixed findings. Prior studies often highlighted that female undergraduates are more likely than males to experience depression (Yue et al., 2024; Wilzer et al. 2024; Gao et al., 2022). Meanwhile, other studies suggest that male students may be more susceptible to depressive disorders. A study by Gao et al (2022) reported that male undergraduate students in China showed a growing prevalence of depression. Additionally, certain research highlights the protective role of femininity against depression symptoms in university-educated individuals (Gibson et al., 2016). In contrast, previous research also suggests that while there are differences in the prevalence and incidence of depressive disorders between genders, these differences are not considered substantial (Grant et al., 2002). In terms of attitudes towards seeking psychological help, research indicates that female university students experiencing depression issues often exhibit more favorable attitudes towards seeking assistance, while male counterparts may underutilize mental health services due to negative perceptions regarding psychological openness (Chandra and Minkovitz, 2006; Komiya et al., 2000; Mackenzie et al., 2006; Rith-ajarian et al., 2019). These discrepancies underscore the complexity of gender differences in depression among university students and the need for further investigation. Accordingly, we posit with the following hypotheses:

H1: Gender is significantly related to the depression level of undergraduate accounting students.

2.2 Academic Performance and Depression Level

Research has extensively investigated the intricate dynamics between academic performance and depression levels among undergraduate students. Studies conducted during this period consistently

highlight a robust correlation between diminished academic achievement and elevated levels of depression. For instance, a longitudinal study by Eisenberg (2019) revealed a reciprocal relationship, wherein depression not only stemmed from academic stressors but also exacerbated them, resulting in a detrimental cycle. The students' academic performance was commonly measured based on their cumulative grade point average (CGPA) assigned on a scale from 0.0 to 4.0 scores. Thus, lower CGPA scores indicate poorer academic performance. Furthermore, meta-analytical reviews conducted by researchers like Ibrahim et al. (2019) synthesized findings across various student demographics, unveiling nuanced influences outcomes. Moreover, intervention studies, including those by Zeng et al. (2021), explored diverse support mechanisms, ranging from counseling services to mindfulness interventions, and showcased their efficacy in ameliorating the adverse effects of academic success on depression. According to the most recent study by Alhamed (2023), depressive symptoms among undergraduate health profession students, are often exacerbated by academic stress and sleep disturbances.

This robust body of literature underscores the imperative of holistic approaches to student well-being within educational contexts, offering comprehensive insights into the multifaceted interplay between academic performance and depression levels among university students. Students grappling with academic difficulties often experience heightened stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy, all of which can exacerbate depressive symptoms. Moreover, setbacks or perceived inadequacies in academia may lead to feelings of hopelessness and self-doubt, further fueling depression. Thus, the connection between academic performance and depression underscores the importance of fostering a supportive and balanced academic environment that prioritizes student well-being alongside achievement. Hence, this study hypothesizes as follows:

H2: Academic performance is significantly related to the depression level of undergraduate accounting students.

2.3 Financial Difficulty and Depression Level

For many students, the burden of financial strain can lead to feelings of hopelessness, contributing to the development or worsening of depressive symptoms. For instance, Moffateh (2021) described that lack of adequate financial support, low family income and poverty during childhood are risk factors of depression in students of undergraduate courses in developed and developing countries. The constant worry about making ends meet can also detract from their ability to focus on their studies, further compounding feelings of distress and inadequacy. Additionally, financial constraints may limit access to resources that could alleviate depressive struggles, such as therapy or recreational activities, intensifying the sense of isolation and despair. Overall, the intersection of financial difficulties and depression among university students underscores the importance of implementing comprehensive support systems and resources to address both the economic and mental health needs of this vulnerable population. Previous studies (González & Vives2019; Guan et al., 2022) found out that having high financial stress was associated with a higher prevalence of depression. Thus, this study hypothesizes that:

H3: Financial difficulty is significantly related to the depression level of undergraduate accounting students.

3.0 Research Methodology

Data for analysis were gathered from a sample of students from Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, in Malaysia. 110 respondents were the undergraduate accounting students invited to participate in the study as volunteers. They were informed that the study was scientific and that they would not be identified at any time, as the data collected was anonymous. The choice of participants was made using a convenient sampling technique.

3.1 Data Collection, Procedures and Instruments

The data was collected using a self-administrated structure which contains four sections. The first section contains questions related to socio-demographic information (see Table 2) and the second section covers the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21). Next, the third section relates to general belongingness and the four section is on emotional intelligence. The DASS-21 has gained worldwide appeal because of its durability, practicality, and ease of operation. The DASS-21 is a self-reported questionnaire which was developed to measure state of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms using 21 items (21). The scores of each mental health problem are calculated by summing the scores and multiplying them by two. However, it must be pointed out that this study focuses on the statistical result concerning only the depression level. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a depressive episode can be categorized as mild, moderate, or severe depending on the number and severity of symptoms, as well as the impact on the individual's functioning. Table I shows the cut -off score for depression level.

Table 1: Cut-off score for the Depression level

Subscale	Depressions
Normal	0 – 5
Mild	6 – 7
Moderate	8 – 10
Severe	11 – 14
Extremely severe	> 15

4.0 Data Analysis and Findings

For data processing and analysis, IBM SPSS version 25.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, New York, United States) was applied.

4.1 Demographic of Respondents

The demographic and background characteristics of the current sample is shown in Table 2. The analysis of qualitative variables was presented in frequency and percentage.

Table 2: Socio-Demographic and Background Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	30	27.30
Female	80	72.70
Age		
18 – 19	6	40.40
20 – 21	100	53.90

22 – 24	4	5.80
Course enrolled		
Diploma In Accountancy	67	60.90
Diploma In Accounting Information System	43	39.10
CGPA		
2.00 – 2.49	3	2.70
2.50 – 2.99	15	13.6
3.00 – 3.49	52	47.3
3.50 – 4.00	40	36.4
Financial Difficulties		
No	58	52.7
Yes	52	47.3
Working Part Time		
No	94	85.5
Yes	16	14.5
Main Source of Finance		
Family and zakat	1	0.91
Financial support from family	49	44.54
Loan (eg PTPTN)	47	42.73
Scholarship & Sponsorship (eg from JPA, MARA, Yayasan)	10	10.01
Zakat	2	1.82

4.2 Prevalence of Depression Level

Table 3: Prevalence of depression scores among undergraduate accounting students

	Male (n=30)		Female (n=80)		Total (n=110)	
	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Depression						
Normal	16	14.5	27	24.5	43	39.1
Mild	3	2.7	13	11.8	16	14.5
Moderate	5	4.5	18	16.4	23	20.9
Severe	4	3.6	15	13.6	19	17.3
Extremely severe	2	1.8	7	6.4	9	8.2

Table 3 above shows the results of the DASS-21 scale scores. The scores of depressions were classified into two categories based on their prevalence: those with “normal” to “mild” scores had no depression problems, while those with “moderate,” “severe,” and “extremely severe” scores had depression problems. For depression level, male students indicated that 4.5% (n = 5), 3.6% (n = 4), and 1.8% (n = 2) experienced moderate, severe, and extremely severe depression symptoms, respectively. Conversely, among female students, 16.4% (n = 18) recorded moderate depression, 13.6% (n = 15) had severe depression, and 6.4% (n = 7) experienced extremely severe depression symptoms.

4.3 Correlation Analysis

According to Coakes (2005), correlation is an analysis that helps researchers identify whether one variable is related to another by examining the relationship between two variables in a linear fashion. Thus, for this study, a correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships among variables, namely gender, academic performance and financial difficulties of Malaysian undergraduate accounting students towards

depression level. A Pearson correlation test was used to ascertain whether there are any multicollinearity problems among the variables in this study. In general, multicollinearity exists when the independent variables are highly correlated to each other (Midi et al., 2010), and the values of the coefficients are 0.8 or 0.9 and above. Table 4 furnishes the summary of the correlation analysis results between the variables. The statistics show that the correlation values among the variables range between 0.022 and 0.348. These values indicate that there is no multicollinearity among the variables in this study as none of the correlations is higher than 0.8.

Table 4: Correlation Analysis

Variables	Degree of Depression	Gender	Academic Performance	Financial Difficulties
Degree of Depression	1			
Gender	-0.139	1		
Academic Performance (CGPA)	-0.348**	0.022	1	
Financial Difficulties	0.210*	0.074	-0.191	1

The first hypothesis of this study states that there will be a significant relationship between gender and depression levels. Our findings revealed that gender demonstrates a negative correlation with depression ($r = -0.139$) among the undergraduate accounting students. However, this correlation is not statistically significant, suggesting that gender alone may not be a robust predictor of depression in this context. As such, this finding also aligns with Grant et al., (2002) which have found a non-significant difference in the prevalence of depression between genders. However, the findings of the study fail to support the significance of gender as a predictor of degree of depression as evidenced in many other previous studies (Yue et al., 2024, Liu et al., 2019c; Wilzer et al. 2024; Gao et al., 2020).

Our second hypothesis states that academic performance is significantly related to the depression level of undergraduate university student. Our results based on the statistical analysis also indicates a significant negative correlation between academic performance and degree of depression ($r = -0.348$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, this indicates that students who perform poorer academically are likely to experience higher degree of depression. This result is consistent with other past studies on depression level among university students (Islam, 2018; Yue et al. 2021; Deng et al., 2022). They found out that there was a noticeable correlation between poor academic performance and higher levels of depression.

Finally, the result of the financial difficulty exhibits a significant positive correlation with depression ($r = 0.210$, $p < 0.05$), highlighting the impact of financial stress on undergraduate accounting students' depression level. Our study indicated that the greater the financial difficulties, the higher is the depression score. This finding is consistent with prior research (Ettman et al., 2022 and Mamun et al., 2021) which highlighted that financial hardships significantly contribute to higher depression scores.

4.4 Multiple Regression on Determinants of Depression Level Among Undergraduate Accounting Students

Table 5 shows the output of the multiple regression results to examine if gender, academic performance, and financial difficulties factors are significantly associated with depression level among the university undergraduate accounting students. In the current study, gender was not found to be significantly associated

with depression levels, as indicated by the non-significant negative coefficient (-.440) although gender differences on depression response do exist. Thus, our result is parallel with one study by Grant et al., (2002) that found no differences on the effect of gender on depression or depressive mood. In contrast, the current study established that academic performance is an important determinant on the degree of depression among undergraduate accounting students.

The academic performance measured using the Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) exhibits a significant negative association with depression, with a coefficient of -.564 at a 1% significance level, suggesting that higher academic performance is linked to lower depression level. These findings support our second hypothesis that academic performance is significantly related to students' depression level. Hence the result is parallel with Mirza et al., (2021) and Pokhrel et al., (2020) who found out that those medical students who were satisfied with their academic performance were less likely to be depressed.

Finally, financial difficulties exhibited a positive association (.439), though not statistically significant, implying a trend where greater financial difficulties might increase the degree of depression. The multiple regression model explains 16.3% of the variance in depression levels, with an adjusted R-square of 14.0%, indicating a modest explanatory power. Thus, our result is also consistent with Guan et al., (2022) and Ettman et al., (2021).

Table 5: Multiple Regression Results on Determinants of Depression Level among Accounting Students

Variables	Degree of Depression
Gender	-.440 (-1.613)
Academic performance (CGPA)	-.564*** (-3.472)
Financial Difficulties	.439 (1.769)
R-Square	16.3
Adjusted R-Square	14.0
Note: **Significant at 5% level, ***Significant at 1% level	

5.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of our study highlights and provides significant evidence on the impact of academic performance as determinant of depression level among undergraduate accounting students. The results of our study established that higher academic performance might decrease the depression level of undergraduate accounting students. The study also confirmed that poor academic performance is an important determinant for higher depression level which aligns with the existing literature. Thus, it emphasizes the need for comprehensive support systems within higher educational institutions. By addressing the relevant strategies and interventions to improve academic performance of these university students, university administrators, educators, counsellors and psychologists can better support students' mental well-being and manage their depression level. It is therefore argued that these so-called prevention programs and effective counselling clinics would help to gradually mitigate depression level among undergraduate accounting students as well as undergraduates across many other disciplines too.

However, our study fails to prove that gender and financial difficulties are strong determinants of depression level among undergraduate accounting students although some previous studies did so. Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. The limitation of this study is its small size of sampling as only one public university in Malaysia participated as the respondents in this research. Hence, it might not accurately represent students' depression level from other universities. Likewise, these findings might be unsuitable to be generalized to the whole population as this study was carried out at a single public institution in Malaysia. Therefore, no attempt is made to generalize these findings on the whole population and future research are expected to overcome this limitation

6.0 Recommendations

For future research, the following recommendations could help build on the current study's findings and address its limitations:

- 1) **Expand the Sample Size and Diversity:** Future studies should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample, encompassing multiple universities across different regions of Malaysia or even internationally. This would enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how academic performance influences depression levels across various contexts.
- 2) **Incorporate Longitudinal Study Designs:** Implementing a longitudinal study design would allow researchers to observe changes in academic performance and depression levels over time. This approach could provide deeper insights into the causal relationship between academic performance and depression, as well as identify potential long-term effects of academic pressures on students' mental health.
- 3) **Explore Additional Determinants and Mediating Factors:** Future research should explore other potential determinants of depression, such as social support, student's academic workload, or personal cognitive and coping mechanisms. Additionally, investigating mediating factors like stress, anxiety, or self-esteem could offer a more nuanced understanding of how academic performance interacts with these variables to impact depression levels among university students.

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Sekian, terima kasih.

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Saya yang menjalankan amanah,

Setuju.

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