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A Study on the Prevalence of Mental Health Problems Among University Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study aimed to evaluate the prevalence of mental health issues among Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) students and the factors influencing stress levels. A cross-sectional study involving 384 students was conducted. The Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21) was utilized to gauge students' levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. Results showed that approximately 5.8% (n = 22), 8.3% (n = 32), and 4.6% (n = 18) of male students experienced moderate to extremely severe symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, respectively. In contrast, 22.9% (n = 88), 40.7% (n = 81), and 16.3% (n = 63) of female students exhibited moderate to extremely severe symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, respectively. Furthermore, the findings indicated a positive and significant relationship between anxiety, depression, and stress levels. The findings show that anxiety and sadness are highly related to students' stress levels. Other characteristics, including gender, faculty, and semester, have no significant association with stress levels. This study's limitations are the small sample size and sample selection. These outcomes offer valuable insights into university students' perceptions of mental health challenges in Malaysia.

Keywords

Mental Health, Depression, Anxiety, Stress, Students

1.0 Introduction

Mental health presents a significant challenge to public health and social development in contemporary society. There has been a notable increase in mental health issues among university students in recent years (Hamzah et al., 2019; Sheldon et al., 2021). In Malaysia, the prevalence of students experiencing mental health problems has doubled from 10% in 2011 to 20% in 2016 (Hamzah et al., 2019; Fauzi et al., 2021). According to Hersi et al. (2017), mental health encompasses "the successful performance of mental functions in terms of cognition, mood, and behavior that results in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with others, and the ability to adapt, change, and cope with adversity."

University students face numerous challenges, including adjusting to a new environment, maintaining high academic performance, balancing coursework, and personal responsibilities, and encountering negative experiences like bullying (Ahmad et al., 2022; Zapana et al., 2019). As a result, university students are more susceptible to experiencing depression, anxiety, and stress (Azhar et al., 2023). Despite these challenges, there is limited research on the prevalence and impact of mental health problems among university students, particularly in Malaysia (Abdel Wahed et al 2017, Chan et al, 2017, Amir Hamzah et al, 2019, Fauzi et al, 2021). Therefore, this study aims to assess the prevalence of mental health problems

among students at Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Perak, Tapah Campus, by examining the relationship between these factors.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Mental health

As per Hersi et al. (2021), mental health is described as "the effective functioning of mental processes related to cognition, mood, and behavior, leading to productive activities, satisfying relationships, and the capacity to adapt, grow, and cope with challenges." The mental well-being of students has emerged as a major focus in public health, as it empowers individuals to manage life's pressures, realize their potential, learn efficiently, work effectively, and make positive contributions to their communities.

2.2 Mental health issues

Mental health issues and disorders represent a significant public health challenge. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health problems encompass a wide array of conditions affecting mood, cognition, and behavior, varying in severity from mild to severe. Examples include depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, and substance abuse disorders. Left untreated, these conditions can severely impact an individual's functioning and quality of life.

WHO reports that one in seven children and adolescents globally experience mental health problems, accounting for 13.0% of the disease burden in this age group. Ahmad et al. (2022) highlights the varied mental health problems faced by Malaysian students in 2021, reporting that 30% experienced severe or very severe depression, 41% had anxiety, and 20% dealt with stress. Furthermore, according to the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS), the prevalence of depression among adolescents in Malaysia has increased, with rates reported at 26.9% in 2022, 18.3% in 2017, and 17.7% in 2012.

2.3 Stress

Stress is defined as the body's overall response to different demands or challenging circumstances in the environment (Rosenham & Seligman, 1989; Selye, 1974). It is more than just a stimulus or a reaction; rather, it is a mechanism through which we perceive and cope with environmental threats and challenges (Myers, 2005). Stressors, as described by Lazarus (1990), are personal or environmental factors that trigger stress. In essence, stress includes the emotional disruptions or adjustments caused by stressors.

2.4 Anxiety

Anxiety is defined as the anticipation of future threats (M.A., 2015). It is considered a normal emotion, distinct from fear, which is the emotional response to a real or perceived immediate threat.

Allen et al. (1995) characterized anxiety as an unpleasant feeling of fear and apprehension, marked by discomfort arising from anticipating danger, the unknown, or something unfamiliar. They argue that anxiety becomes pathological when it reaches an extreme level disproportionate to the stimulus, disrupting an individual's quality of life, emotional well-being, and ability to function day-to-day.

Anxiety disorder is classified among the top five diseases affecting adolescents. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it is also a symptom of depression and the second leading cause of suicide

among young people aged 15 to 19. Anxiety can present in various forms, such as generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, or panic disorder, affecting students' mental health and overall well-being.

2.5 Depression

Depression is a prevalent mental health issue among adolescents worldwide. It can manifest through symptoms such as sadness, guilt, low self-esteem, a lack of happiness, and dissatisfaction with their surroundings. Moreover, depression can lead to individual problems such as sleep disturbances, appetite changes, fatigue, and feelings of hopelessness, which may result in thoughts of suicide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), depression affects 1.1% of adolescents aged 10-14 years and 2.8% of those aged 15-19 years. In Malaysia, the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2019 reported a depression prevalence of 2.1% among those aged 15 to 19 years old, with an overall 26.9% of adolescents in Malaysia reporting experiencing depression.

2.6 Reason this increasing this mental health

Several factors contribute to the mental health challenges faced by university students. Firstly, academic pressure and workload play a significant role. The transition to university often involves a more demanding academic environment, which can lead to stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy, especially when coupled with high expectations from oneself or others (Allen et al, 1995, Abdel Wahed & Hassan, 2017, Azhar et al, 2023). Additionally, social factors such as loneliness, homesickness, and difficulties in forming new relationships can impact mental health (Fauzi et al, 2021, Sheldon et al, 2021). The lack of a support system and feeling isolated can exacerbate existing mental health issues or trigger new ones (Shamsuddin et al 2013).

Moreover, financial pressures can also contribute to mental health problems among university students. The cost of tuition, accommodation, and living expenses can lead to financial stress, which can in turn affect mental well-being. Furthermore, lifestyle factors such as poor diet, lack of exercise, and inadequate sleep can also play a role in mental health (Chan et al 2017, G.B et al 2019, Hamzah et al 2019, Fauzi et al 2021). These factors, when combined, can create a challenging environment for students, making them more susceptible to mental health issues.

It is important for universities to recognize these factors and provide support services to help students cope with the challenges they face. This can include counseling services, mental health awareness campaigns, and initiatives to promote a healthy lifestyle. By addressing these factors, universities can help create a supportive environment that fosters mental well-being among students (Raaj et al 2021).

2.7 The impact of mental health problem

Mental illness ranks as a leading cause of disability and health loss in Malaysia, accounting for 8.6% of total disability-adjusted life-years (DALYs) (Raaj et al., 2021). The escalating prevalence of mental disorders in Malaysia is linked to a growing economic burden. An economic analysis estimated that mental health issues in the workplace cost the Malaysian economy RM14.46 billion in 2018 (Raaj et al., 2021). Globally, mental health concerns are a significant issue, projected to represent nearly 15% of disability-adjusted life-years lost to illness by 2020. Mental disorders not only impact individual productivity but also have economic repercussions due to treatment costs (Hassan et al., 2018).

Furthermore, mental disorders impose a substantial economic burden on individuals and societies worldwide. In Canada, the economic burden of mental illness is estimated at around \$51 billion per year, covering healthcare costs, productivity loss, and declines in quality of life (Smetanin et al., n.d.). In China, mental disorders also carry a significant economic burden (Xu et al, 2016).

In addition, prior studies highlighted that mental health problems among university students can have lasting effects on their future careers. Consistent with the argument, a report from the Left-leaning Resolution Foundation highlighted the significant scale of mental health challenges among young workers in the UK. The report noted that 20-somethings are now more likely to be off work sick than adults in their 40s, reflecting soaring rates of depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder in the UK. Authors of the report expressed concern over this trend, stating that it is detrimental to the economy, with approximately 5% of young adults currently signed off ill.

3.0 Research Method

3.1 Study design and participants

This cross-sectional study was conducted in March 2023 on the Tapah campus of the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). A total of 368 students participated in this study. On the UiTM Tapah campus, there are a total of two faculties and one college: Faculty of Applied Science, Faculty of Accountancy and College of Computing, Informatics and Media. This study's inclusion criteria were Malaysian undergraduate students, and the exclusion criteria were international undergraduate and postgraduate students.

3.2 Data collection procedure and instrument

The data was collected using a self-administrated structure which contains three sections. First section contains questions related to socio-demographic information, second section is the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21),

The DASS-21 is a self-reported questionnaire which 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. Table 1 shows the five categories of stress, anxiety, and depression. The DASS-21 has gained worldwide appeal because of its durability, practicality, and ease of operation.

Table 1: Cut-off scores for the mental health level (12)

Subscale	Stress	Anxiety	Depressions
Normal	0 – 7	0 – 4	0 – 5
Mild	8 – 9	5 – 6	6 – 7
Moderate	10 – 13	7 – 8	8 – 10
Severe	14 – 17	9 – 10	11 – 14
Extremely severe	≥ 18	≥ 11	≥ 15

3.3 Data processing and analysis

For data processing and analysis, IBM SPSS version 25.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, New York, United States) was applied. The analysis of qualitative variables was presented in frequency and percentage.

4.0 Results

4.1 Background Characteristics of students

Table 2 summarizes the background characteristics of the students. The percentages of male and female students were 23.4% (n = 90) and 76.6% (n = 295), respectively. Over half of the students who responded to the survey are from Semester 2 (n = 236 or 61.3%). In term of faculties, approximately 45.5% (n = 175) were from FSG, 33.0% (n = 127) were from FSKM, and 21.6% (n = 83) were from FP. By educational level, 61.3% (n = 236) were from Semester 2, 24.4% (n = 94) and 6.2% (n = 24) were from Semester 1.

Table 2: Background characteristics of students

Variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	295	76.6
Male	90	23.4
Level of Education (semester)		
1	24	6.2
2	236	61.3
3	7	1.8
4	94	24.4
5	18	4.7
6	6	1.6
Faculty		
FP	83	21.6
FSG	175	45.5
KPPIM	127	33.0

4.2 Prevalence of mental health problems

Table 3: Prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress among students

Subscale	Male (n = 90)		Female (n = 295)		Total (n = 295)	
	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Stress						
Normal	58	15.1	162	42.2	220	57.3
Mild	9	2.3	45	11.7	54	14.1
Moderate	11	2.9	49	12.8	60	15.6
Severe	8	2.1	27	7.0	35	9.1
Extremely severe	3	0.8	12	3.1	15	3.9
Anxiety						
Normal	39	10.1	95	24.7	134	34.8
Mild	19	4.9	43	11.2	62	16.1
Moderate	3	0.8	46	11.9	49	12.7
Severe	14	3.6	30	7.8	44	11.4
Extremely severe	15	3.9	81	21.0	96	24.9

Depression						
Normal	65	16.9	203	52,7	268	69.6
Mild	7	1.8	29	7.5	36	9.4
Moderate	14	3.6	30	7.8	44	11.4
Severe	2	0.5	19	4.9	21	5.5
Extremely severe	2	0.5	14	3.6	16	4.2

Table 3 shows the results of the DASS-21 scale scores. The scores of depressions, anxiety, and stress were classified into two categories based on their prevalence: those with “normal” to “mild” scores had no mental health problems, while those with “moderate,” “severe,” and “extremely severe” scores had mental health problems (Shamsuddin et al 2013, Nahas et al, 2019, Raaj et al, 2021). For stress among male students, 2.9% (n = 11), 2.1% (n = 8) and 0.8% (n = 3) had moderate, severe, and extremely severe symptoms, respectively. For female students, 12.8% (n = 49), 7.0% (n = 27) and 3.1% (n = 12) had moderate, severe and extremely severe stress symptoms, respectively. For anxiety, male students reported that 0.8% (n = 3), 3.6% (n = 14) and 3.9 % (n = 15) had moderate, severe and extremely severe anxiety symptoms, respectively. Meanwhile anxiety among female students recorded 11.2 % (n = 46) had moderate, 7.8% (n = 30) had severe, and 21.0 % (n = 81) had extremely severe anxiety symptoms. For depression among male students, 3.6% (n = 14), 0.5% (n = 2) and 0.5% (n = 2) had moderate, severe and extremely severe symptoms, respectively. For female students, 7.8% (n = 30), 4.9% (n = 19) and 3.6% (n = 14) had moderate, severe and extremely severe depression symptoms, respectively.

4.2 Multiple Regression on Determinants of Stress Level

Table 4: Multiple Regression Results on Determinants of Stress Level

Variables	Stress Level
Gender	.180 (.641)
Faculty	-.215 (-1.319)
Semester	.083 (.799)
Anxiety	.585** (.000)
Depression	.320** (.000)
R-Square	76.9
Adjusted R-Square	76.6

Note: **Significant at 5% level, ***Significant at 1% level

Table 4 shows the output of the regressions to examine if gender, faculty, semester, anxiety, and depression dimensions are significantly associated with stress level among university students. The current study found that anxiety and depression influenced the stress level of university students.

5.0 Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the stress level of Malaysian university students and the factors that predict such intentions. The study used a sample of 385 undergraduate students from public university in Malaysia. The findings show that anxiety and depression are highly related to students' stress levels. Other characteristics, including gender, faculty, and semester, have no significant association with stress levels.

This study's limitations are the small sample size and sample selection. The respondents of this study were limited to one Malaysia public universities. As a result, it may not be appropriate to generalize these results to the entire population. It is anticipated that future studies will work around these limitations.

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Sekian, terima kasih.

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Saya yang menjalankan amanah,

Setuju.

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