

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**THE ASSOCIATION OF EMOTIONAL EATING WITH ANXIETY,
STRESS AND DEPRESSION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN
SELANGOR**

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JULY 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Alhamdulillah, all praise and thanks go to Allah, the Most Gracious and Merciful, for giving me the courage, resolve, and tenacity to accomplish this thesis. Without His blessings, this voyage would not have been possible.

I want to offer my heartfelt appreciation and gratitude to my respected supervisor, Encik Farezaidy Zafry, for their ongoing support, patience, and vital direction throughout the study process. His critical remarks, professional insights, and unfailing conviction in my abilities have had a significant impact on the quality and direction of my work. I also want to acknowledge all of the professors and academic staff at Centre for Dietetics Studies, Faculty of Health Sciences, Universiti Teknologi Mara, for their commitment to excellence in teaching and research. The knowledge and experiences I gathered through my academic career shaped my viewpoint and approach to doing this research. A big thank you to all the replies and participants in this study. I am truly grateful for your time, cooperation, and honest suggestions, which served as the foundation for this research. Your willingness to participate had a huge impact.

To my beloved family, especially my parents
thank you for your unconditional love, endless prayers, and constant encouragement. Your sacrifices and emotional support have been my strength throughout the most challenging moments. To my siblings, thank you for always being my cheerleader and for believing in me even when I doubt myself. To my close friends and course mates, thank you for the motivation, late-night study sessions, shared frustrations, and moments of laughter. Your companionship made this journey bearable and memorable. I am also grateful to my housemates, classmates, and everyone who offered a helping hand or a word of encouragement along the way.

Lastly, I dedicate this work to everyone who has been a part of my academic and personal journey. Your presence, whether near or far, known or unknown, has made a meaningful impact on my life. May Allah reward each of you for your kindness and support. This thesis is not only a reflection of my work but also a testament to the collective efforts, sacrifices, and encouragement of those who stood by me.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between emotional eating and psychological distress, such as stress, anxiety, and depression, among young adults in Selangor, Malaysia. Emotional eating was defined as a type of eating behavior in which people eat to cope with negative feelings rather than physical hunger. The study used a cross-sectional design with 294 participants aged 18 to 29, who were questioned via self-administered questionnaires. The instruments used were the Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire (DEBQ), the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), and the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS).

The study discovered a significant positive correlation between emotional eating and psychological distress symptoms, specifically anxiety, stress, and depression. Participants who reported higher levels of stress and anxiety were more likely to engage in emotional eating, implying that it serves as a maladaptive coping mechanism in response to emotional distress. Despite providing momentary relief, emotional eating was found to enhance psychological distress, resulting in a vicious cycle of emotional reliance on food, guilt, and deteriorating mental health.

The data show that emotional eating was not only common among young adults in Selangor, but it also has a significant negative impact on both mental and physical health. Since emotional eating does not address the underlying causes of emotional discomfort, the study underlines the importance of interventions focused on stress management and the development of healthier coping mechanisms. This study contributed to a deeper knowledge of emotional eating among young adults, emphasizing the significance of incorporating cultural and demographic aspects when treating mental health and eating behaviors.

KEYWORDS: Emotional eating, psychological distress, stress, anxiety, depression, young adults, coping mechanisms, mental health

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

The period between the age of 18 and 29, commonly known as young adulthood, is a period of crucial life transition and is marked by many other important developments, including leaving home, becoming financially independent, establishing social and professional identities. This set of developmental milestones may result in a lot of psychological stress when young adults assume new responsibilities like career development, financial management, personal and work relationships. It is also a common time in life in which there are heightened feelings, including anxiety, stress, and depression, and these factors can interfere with mental health and well-being (Keck et al., 2020). The research has continuously revealed that psychological issues, including depression, anxiety, and stress are widespread during this age range, often aggravated by the academic or work-life imbalance issues, economic hardships, and social pressures (Radzi et al., 2022).

Most young adults deal with these emotional problems by using emotional eating that is eating food because of bad emotions and not hunger. Emotional eating has happened to be defined by the intake of comfort food where one consumes those foods that are highly palatable, energy-dense foods with high sugar, fats, or carbohydrates, which help mitigate emotional distress at that moment. However, over time, this habit might lead to serious consequences for both physical health and psychological implications. Emotional eating, especially in response to persistent stress, worry, or sadness has been found to be a maladaptive coping strategy and may intensify existing mental health difficulties by causing feelings of guilt, weight gain, and increased stress (Mitravinda & Roy, 2022). Although emotional eating provides brief comfort by activating the brain's reward system, it frequently leads to a harmful cycle of emotional reliance on food, compromising the individual's mental and physical well-being.