

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIETARY HABITS AND
MENTAL HEALTH AMONG YOUNG ADULTS AGED 18 YEARS OLD IN
SUNGAI BULOH VOCATIONAL COLLEGE**

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ABSTRACT

Mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and stress, are becoming more common among young adults, and dietary habits have been linked as a significant factor. However, researchers have not extensively studied the connection between dietary habits and mental health among young adults, especially those in vocational institutions. Therefore, this study aims to assess the dietary habits and mental health status of young adults aged 18 at Sungai Buloh Vocational College and to explore the relationship between dietary habits and mental health. A cross-sectional study was conducted with 205 participants selected through purposive sampling. A self-administered questionnaire with 22 items on dietary habits, paired with the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), was used to gather data. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics and the Chi-square test in SPSS version 29.0. The results showed that 64.4% of participants practiced good dietary habits, with a mean score of 16.1 ± 1.9 ; however, high consumption of fried foods and frequent breakfast skipping were also noted. Regarding mental health, most participants were within normal ranges for all categories of depression (53.2%), anxiety (42.9%), and stress (66.8%). These findings suggest a relationship between dietary habits and depression ($\chi^2 = 12.51$, $p = 0.014$, Cramér's $V = 0.25$), anxiety ($\chi^2 = 19.30$, $p = 0.001$, Cramér's $V = 0.31$), and stress ($\chi^2 = 13.40$, $p = 0.009$, Cramér's $V = 0.26$). In conclusion, maintaining healthy dietary habits may promote better mental health and overall well-being during this critical life stage.

Keywords: dietary habits, mental health, DASS-21, young adult

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Mental health is a state where an individual can engage in daily life without problems, including working with some efficiency and effectiveness, and contributing to the community in some capacity (World Health Organisation, 2022). Mental health encompasses not only psychological disorders but also emotional and social well-being, as it influences an individual's thoughts and feelings before they act. The Malaysian Youth Development Research Institute reported that in 2022, six, three, and one in ten youth aged between 15 and 40 years old experienced mild to severe depression symptoms, moderate to severe anxiety symptoms, and high stress, respectively (Institute for Youth Research Malaysia & United Nations Children's Fund, 2023). Additionally, data from the Malaysian Youth Mental Health Index indicates that approximately one in ten youth aged 15 to 30 is prone to committing suicide. According to statistics released by the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM), there were 609 suicide incidents involving students in 2019, which increased to 631 cases in 2020. The figure continues to rise to a concerning level, with 468 cases recorded from January to May 2021 (Noor, 2021).

For the following year, the Malaysian Youth Mental Health Index 2023 (MyMHI) report said the average score for those aged between 15 and 30 was 71.91 out of 100 (moderately satisfactory), and it shows the early signs of developing mental health problems. This data could show how severe mental health cases are in Malaysia every year, especially among young adults, as it also leads to death. Thus, sustaining good mental health is vital to achieving positive outcomes, especially for vocational students in Malaysia who experience stressors from constantly changing lifestyle factors, such as changes in their diet that may ultimately affect their academic performance and social life (Zhang et al., 2024).