An Overview of Mental Health on Stress Among Students in USM

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ABSTRACT

Mental health of higher education students is deteriorating at an alarming rate. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a severe psychological impact on students, who are constantly burdened with various learning tasks as well as online lectures. This study explains the influencing factors that affect the mental health of students in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). We conducted an online survey via Google Forms. A total of 150 USM students participated in the online survey. The data gained was interpreted using IBM SPSS Statistic Software to produce meaningful results. The potential causes of stress among USM students that will be discussed briefly in this research are health issues, academic problems, financial difficulties, and family problems. We also consider the Covid-19-pandemic effects on the factors elaborated in this research. Stress can be treated and must be well managed so that it will not become worse. There are many ways and activities that can be done to avoid being stressed.

Keywords: Academic, Covid-19, School problems, Students, USM
INTRODUCTION

The global impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, stemming from a newly identified coronavirus, has been significant since its discovery in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. The World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020, underscoring the widespread nature and severity of the disease. The response to this global health crisis extended to various countries, including Malaysia, where the government implemented the Malaysian Movement Control Order (MCO) as a preventive measure.

Enacted on March 18, 2020, the Malaysian MCO was designed to disrupt the chain of coronavirus transmission within the country. The order imposed stringent restrictions on public activities and movements, encompassing a broad spectrum of events, such as religious, cultural, social, and sporting gatherings. Notably, supermarkets, convenience stores, and grocery outlets providing essential goods were not exempt but were unable to operate normally, contributing to the overall effort to curb the virus's spread.

Moreover, the MCO mandated the closure of all business premises and places of worship, emphasizing the comprehensive approach taken by the Malaysian federal government to contain the pandemic. The severity of the measures was underscored by the imposition of legal consequences for non-compliance. Individuals violating the MCO faced stringent penalties, including imprisonment for up to six months or a fine of RM1,000, as outlined in a study by Musa et al. in 2021. This underscores the government's commitment to enforcing public health measures to safeguard its population during this unprecedented global health crisis.

The pandemic has brought numerous challenges to global higher education, affecting students and educators. Higher education requires to address issue related to online teaching (Singh et al., 2021). Most countries closed their higher learning institutions to protect students from the deadly disease (Hu & Kee, 2022). The negative impact of the pandemic, on the other hand, is not limited to the national economy but also to the lives of the people. For instance, the education sector was also impacted during the pandemic, with all schools and universities around the world closing for a few months. Online classes were introduced as the number of cases increased. Aside from that, the services sector made use of online platforms. Employees were notified they must work from home. Learning from home has also led to various mental problems for students, such as anxiety, depression, and stress (Hu & Kee, 2022). All of these changes have had an impact on the mental health of students, particularly those in higher education. Anwar, Kee, Salman, and Jabeen (2022) reported that the pandemic had impacted people’s psychological well-being. The pandemic also somehow impacted students online learning (Munir, Anwar & Kee, 2021).

Covid-19 provides an endeavour to social distance measures and societal intellectual and physical health, in addition to college students (Khan et al., 2020; Mpungose, 2020). As a result, every undergraduate and graduate student has been adversely affected, impeding the learning of over a thousand million students in 129 countries worldwide (UNESCO, 2020; Mostafa, 2021). Face-to-face education has typically been phased out in favour of online options within the majority of countries (UNESCO IESALC, 2020), which has been a difficult task to implement (Mahmood, 2020). The shutdown of higher education institutions caused by the pandemic outbreaks has had an unexpected effect on students' lives and education, according to Kapasia et al. (2020). Covid-19 has influenced students in a multitude of ways, including financial, time management, health and academics.

The shift from adolescent to early adulthood occurs during the college years (Arnett, 2000; Baghurst & Kelley, 2014). Transitioning successfully is difficult for college students, especially those in higher education. Life stresses can exacerbate these issues, which vary by student.
depending on external conditions and psychological resiliency (Heffer & Willoughby, 2017). Stress has become an inevitable psychological and emotional factor affecting students’ performance in the higher education context (Kee et al., 2022). While some stress is acceptable and can even be motivating in some situations (Robotham & Julian, 2006), excessive stress is detrimental to one's health and academic performance (Cohen, Murphy, & Prather, 2019).

Therefore, the aim of this study is to undertake a survey-based assessment of the effect of the pandemic and lockdown on mental health of students among higher education students in Malaysia. We are curious to know the core causes as well as pandemic-related stressors and the most effective ways to prevent stress from conquering students that lead to other mental health issues while dealing with pandemic-related stress.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Health issues**

Health, as articulated by the World Health Organization in 2006, transcends the mere absence of illness and debility; it constitutes a dynamic state of physical, psychological, and social well-being. In essence, being healthy is not merely the lack of ailments but a holistic condition that encompasses various facets of an individual's life. The paramount importance of health in our lives cannot be overstated; it serves as a foundation for overall well-being, influencing our daily experiences and interactions. The realization that health is our foremost priority underscores its pivotal role in providing a stable platform for a fulfilling life.

While the detrimental impact of stress on health is widely acknowledged, there is a lesser-known reciprocal relationship where health issues can contribute to heightened stress levels. Individuals grappling with illnesses find themselves navigating a complex web of adjustments, regulating everything from dietary habits to daily activities. The challenges of adhering to medical advice and prescriptions can, in turn, induce stress, compounding the difficulties faced by those already contending with health issues. The intricate interplay between health and stress is a nuanced aspect that merits attention in understanding the holistic nature of well-being.

The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic has introduced an additional layer of complexity to the relationship between health and well-being. The implementation of stringent measures, such as quarantine, has disrupted normal activities and significantly impacted mental and physical health. As regulations and their consequences unfold, there is a foreseen increase in levels of depression, loneliness, and engagement in potentially harmful behaviors such as increased alcohol and drug use, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to delve into the multifaceted effects of health issues on the mental health of higher education students, recognizing the intricate connections between physical well-being and the broader spectrum of mental and emotional states.

**H1:** Health issues are positively related to stress.

**Academic problems**

The paramount focus for higher education students revolves around academic performance, with success in examinations and the attainment of commendable grades serving as the primary yardsticks employed by lecturers, parents, and students themselves to gauge their educational progress. The pursuit of these academic objectives often compels students to burn the midnight oil, sacrificing adequate rest in the process. Jain and Singhai (2017) highlight the multifaceted expectations placed on students, not only to excel academically but also to actively engage in extracurricular activities, reflecting the contemporary ideal of
students as well-rounded individuals. This expectation poses a challenge as students strive to balance their academic commitments with a diverse range of activities.

Compounding the academic landscape, the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic has ushered in a new era of online education, conducted through platforms such as WebEx and Google Meet. This transformative shift requires students to adapt to a novel learning environment, presenting both positive and negative implications for their studies. Gautam (2021) notes that online learning provides the flexibility for students to progress at their own pace within familiar surroundings. The convenience of accessing course materials through e-learning platforms ensures that students can engage with the content at their preferred times. However, amidst these advantages, the drawbacks of online learning and other academic challenges warrant comprehensive exploration in the ensuing research. Delving into these complexities will shed light on the nuanced dynamics between the evolving educational landscape and the academic experiences of higher education students.

H2: Academic problems are positively related to stress.

Financial difficulties
Acknowledging pandemic outbreak gives a huge impact on various segments, counting the Indonesian economy due to impediments within the financial pace (Putri et al., 2021). Amidst the pandemic era, the global economic landscape has been severely impacted, giving rise to widespread financial concerns among families. This economic downturn has extended its ripple effects to higher education students, intensifying apprehensions about their financial planning. Students are tasked with covering substantial expenses, including semester tuition fees and various other costs throughout the academic term. The magnitude of these financial obligations has heightened the financial strain experienced by students worldwide. Zwart (2021) underscores the prevalence of financial stress among university students, emphasizing its pervasive influence on every facet of their well-being. In response to these financial challenges, students often seek opportunities for scholarships, and for those unable to secure such funding, the prospect of taking on student loan debt becomes a consideration. Kristy, Anita & Scott highlight the unique challenges posed by student loan debt, particularly within the context of a challenging economic environment. The looming specter of financial crises can have a cascading effect on students' academic pursuits, introducing additional sources of worry and stress that may, in turn, impact their overall studies adversely.

The intricacies of how financial difficulties intersect with the mental health of higher education students form a critical focal point in this research. The burden of financial stress, coupled with the potential inability to find viable solutions, poses a significant threat to students' mental well-being and, consequently, their academic performance. The forthcoming exploration in this study will delve into the nuanced connections between financial challenges and the mental health of higher education students, shedding light on the multifaceted impact of economic uncertainties on the educational landscape.

H3: Financial difficulties are positively related to stress.

Family problems
Throughout the various stages of life, individuals typically invest a significant portion of their time in the company of their families. For higher education students, the support provided by their families is instrumental in fostering confidence and equipping them to navigate the challenges inherent in pursuing their academic and personal goals. An analysis of data gleaned from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health reveals a compelling correlation: adults who experienced positive family relationships during their formative years exhibit a significantly reduced likelihood—ranging from 48 to 66 percent—of encountering mental health issues later in life as reported by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This underscores the profound impact that familial bonds can have on an
individual's mental well-being, emphasizing the crucial role of family support in shaping one's overall psychological health.

Despite the pivotal role of family in fostering mental well-being, it is essential to acknowledge the diverse nature of family dynamics. Not every family is characterized by happiness and unconditional support. In the era of globalization, instances of parents subjecting their children to physical and mental abuse have become unfortunately prevalent. Each family has a unique history, and the memories associated with familial relationships can vary widely. In light of these complexities, this study seeks to delve into the ways in which diverse family backgrounds, including instances of abuse, influence the mental health of higher education students. By exploring the nuanced interplay between family dynamics and mental health outcomes, the study aims to contribute valuable insights into the broader understanding of the impact of familial contexts on the psychological well-being of students in the contemporary global landscape.

H4: Family problems are positively related to stress.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

**Figure 1. Research Model**

![Research Model Diagram]

Figure 1 outlines the research framework, depicting health issues, academic problems, financial difficulties, and family problems as independent variables. Stress is identified as the dependent variable, representing the overarching outcome influenced by the interplay of these factors. This visual representation guides the study in exploring the relationships and impacts of health, academics, finance, and family dynamics on participants' stress levels.

The survey aimed to assess and collect data on stress levels among students at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and was conducted using Google Forms as the primary data collection tool. The questionnaire employed a structured format based on the 5-point Likert scale, providing respondents with a range of response options from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," each corresponding to numerical values from 1 to 5. This scale allowed for a nuanced and quantifiable understanding of the participants' perspectives on stress-related issues.

To maximize the survey's reach and participation, we strategically distributed the Google Forms questionnaire across various social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook. These channels facilitated broad access for students to engage with the survey, ensuring a diverse and representative sample of respondents. The decision to leverage social media channels reflects a contemporary and widely accessible approach to data collection, acknowledging the prevalence of these platforms in students' daily communication and information-sharing practices.
The survey successfully garnered insights from a total of 150 USM students who actively participated in providing their responses. The use of Google Forms and the Likert scale not only streamlined the data collection process but also allowed for a structured analysis of the gathered information, paving the way for a comprehensive exploration of stress levels among the surveyed student population.

RESULT

Table 1. Summary of Respondent’s Profile (N=150)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>70.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen Z: Born: 1997-2012 (Age: 10-25)</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>86.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen X: Born: 1965-1980 (Age: 42-57)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's Degree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monthly Household Income</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B40: RM4,850 and below</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>70.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M40: RM4,851- RM10,970</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T20: RM10,971 and above</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Have you ever felt stress?</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>94.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Are you able to handle your stress?</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>77.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of the survey participants. A substantial majority of the respondents were women, constituting 70.7% of the total. Additionally, 86.7% of the participants fell within the Gen Z age range (10 to 25 years old), and 72.7% identified as Malay. A noteworthy proportion of the respondents, accounting for 72.7%, were either currently pursuing or had already completed their Bachelor's degree, indicating a population with a high level of education. The majority of the participants belonged to the B40 income group, comprising 70.7% of the sample. The survey revealed a significant prevalence of stress among the respondents, with 94.7% reporting experiencing stress, while 77.3% indicated an ability to effectively manage their stress.

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis, Cronbach’s Coefficients Alpha and Zero Order Correlations

All Study Variables
Based on the information provided in Table 2, each of the items corresponding to the five variables was assigned a position on a 5-point Likert scale within the questionnaire. The calculated Cronbach’s alpha values for health issues (α = 0.694) and financial difficulties (α = 0.691) signify a noteworthy level of internal consistency among the items within each variable. The proximity of these alpha values to 0.7 indicates a substantial and meaningful relationship between the individual items comprising health issues and financial difficulties. In contrast, the calculated Cronbach’s alpha values for family problems and academic problems did not exhibit a statistically significant level of internal consistency, falling below the threshold of 0.7. Despite this, it is important to note that the correlation coefficient for all the relationships remains positively related, suggesting an overall positive association among the variables, even though the internal consistency for family problems and academic problems did not meet the conventional threshold.

Table 3. Summary of Regression Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Stress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health Issues</td>
<td>-0.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Problems</td>
<td>0.709**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Difficulties</td>
<td>0.014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 presents the multiple regression analysis. Health issues, academic problems, financial difficulties and family problems were independent variables while stress was classified as dependent variable. According to the table above, stress was statistically linked to both academic problems and family problems. The relationship between academic problems and family problems was positively correlated to stress with beta values of 0.709 and 0.243. Hence, H2 and H4 were supported. While the value of R2 is 0.425, this suggests that 42.5% of the variation in stress is connected to and explainable with academic problems and family problems. This shows that academic problems and family problems were the main factors of stress among university students. Academic problems recorded the highest beta with 0.709. Health issues and financial difficulties did not significantly influence stress among university students. Thus, H1 and H3 are not supported.

**DISCUSSION**

Health issues does not significantly affect stress among students in USM. The significant reason for the result might be that students can overcome health issues since the majority of students cared about their lifestyle because they are exposed to getting health-related information from a lot of reliable sources. The trend of working out during lockdown has helped them to control their stress as exercising could really help them. Based on our recent survey, even though COVID-19 has affected the health of their family members, it has no effect on their health. Other than that, our survey, showed that students have experienced stress, and they were able to handle their stress. Most of them do not often feel angry and disappointed over things that are out of their control. Therefore, it clearly supported our hypothesis; health problems are negatively correlated to perceived stress.

Furthermore, in terms of academic issues, this study revealed that it has had a notable effect on students in USM. The data showed that large number of students found academic problems to be the most serious stress-related issues. This is due to the fact that academic tasks is always associated with stressful duties (Agolla & Ongori, 2009). As we all know, COVID-19 has caused all education sectors worldwide to be forced to close. Over 1.2 billion children are not enrolled in school worldwide. As a consequence, education has undergone notable revolution, with the remarkable rise of e-learning, in which teaching is done online and on digital platforms (World Economic Forum, 2020). Students mentioned difficulties with online learning, such as being unable to focus in class, difficulties with online-based learning, and difficulty working in groups using online communication platforms. As a result, this study found that academic problems were positively related to perceived stress.

Next, the results showed that financial difficulties do not significantly affect stress among students in USM. Even though majority of our respondents are from B40 families with an income of less than RM4,850, it does not impact the students. In our observation, students in this era are exposed to a lot of part-time jobs which gives lucrative returns, and some even got the opportunity to have scholarship supporting their lives while studying. Other than that, studying at a higher level during this pandemic has given us the opportunity to reduce the cost of buying books because we have alternatives references which we could get books or references for free from the Internet such as e-books and journals. As in Malaysia, students are given financial aid by the government, E-Pemula costing RM300 million which benefits
almost 2 million youth in Malaysia (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2022). Therefore, the hypothesis in this research is acceptable.

Lastly, the result has proven that family problems have a significant impact on stress among students in USM. One of the reasons could be a shattered family. The divorce rate is expected to be at least 44.2 percent in 2022 (Miles Mason, 2022). This issue can have a negative impact on the children in a variety of ways, including their school performance. Changes in family dynamics, such as divorced parents, may cause children to feel neglected or unloved, causing them to lose focus and cause stress among students. Rather than dwelling on these difficulties, openly acknowledge that everyone stumbles, so concentrate on providing the child with what they require. Thus, family problems may have a positive impact on stress on higher education students.

CONCLUSION

The research investigates the relationship between independent variables (health issues, academic problems, financial difficulties, and family problems) and independent variables (stress among USM students). We conducted a survey through Google Forms (consisting of multiple sections) to gather information on the topic. Our target of respondents was USM students. Besides, we also gathered other relevant information from reliable sources such as online books and journals. We used the IBM SPSS Statistic Software to interpret the data gained from Google Forms. Based on the research, we can conclude that academic problems and family problems strongly affect stress among students at USM. Health issues and financial difficulties are also factors of stress among the students, however, based on the multiple regression analysis these are not the strong factors leading to stress.

Since we have identified that academic problems are one of the strong factors of stress among USM students, the student council department should come up with plans to reduce the academic burden on students. Students may be stressed due to multiple assignments, tests, and tasks due around the same dates. Hence, the USM council can make a proposal to the management of USM to have due dates of each course on different weeks so that students can focus on each assignment on different weeks and produce better work quality and results.

The next powerful factor leading to stress among USM students is family problems. Family plays an important role in providing mental support for students and preventing mental health issues. Parents should be concerned about their children’s mental health such as not venting anger their anger on their children. Venting anger on children may make them feel depressed as they are scolded over something, not their fault. Hence, parents should be more considerate about their children since they are small as this develops a habit in the future. Lastly, we hope that our findings inspire future research on factors influencing student stress, as they are the seeds of a fruitful future.

REFERENCES


