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Social Support and Psychological Well-Being among Students in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Lack of social support during the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a decline in students' psychological well-being. Students who cannot adapt to online learning causes stress and disruption in psychological well-being. For this reason, this study was conducted to gauge the relationship between social support and psychological well-being among students at higher education institutions (HEIs). The cross-sectional method was used in this study and was carried out in two HEIs, namely Universiti Melaka and Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah (USAS). The data of this study was collected through three instruments, namely demographic information, Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB) and Scales of Psychological Well-being (SPWB) to measure the social support and psychological well-being of students at HEIs. This study involved a total of 524 students through a purposive sampling technique. The results of the analysis found that social support has a significant relationship with psychological well-being while psychological well-being does not have a significant difference based on gender. By implication, it is hoped that this study can provide guidance to lecturers, friends, parents and various related parties in drawing up an action plan to help students at HEIs to achieve better psychological well-being.

Research Background

Stress among students in institutions of higher learning is an issue that needs to be paid attention to especially when dealing with the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) (Ramli & Dawood, 2020). The impact of the outbreak has caused students to have to deal with sudden social changes that causes them stress (Alias et al., 2021). According to Ribeiro et al (2018), stress is a common condition experienced by students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Furthermore, students in higher education institutions (HEI) need to go through a process of adaptation in terms of education and a new environment (Ramachandiran & Dhanapal, 2018). In addition to that, students face greater challenges

when they have to study in the phase of the COVID-19 pandemic which is conducted online and this has disrupted the learning process, caused difficulties in understanding the lesson and caused students to not being able to focus on the assignments given by the lecturer (Farhan et al., 2021; Soh et al., 2018). This causes stress among students and if this stress is not managed well, it can affect their psychological well-being (Yikialo et al., 2018).

Psychological well-being is seen as a self-evaluation and individual ability that involves relationships, support and work to avoid conflict, increase self-confidence and stimulate motivation in life (Arshat & Japara, 2018; Cripps & Zyromski, 2009). Low psychological well-being leads to feelings of unhappiness, dissatisfaction in life and low self-esteem which eventually leads to stress among students (Salman et al., 2022; Amato, 1994). Stress among students in institutions of higher education is often ignored to a point where students have to deal with mental health problems (Abdul Rashid et al., 2021; Farhan et al., 2021). This issue has become widespread when students had to deal with the phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many past studies discuss the problem of stress and how it affects psychological well-being among students at university (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021; Sundarasan et al., 2020; Vungkhanching et al., 2016). Sundarasan et al (2020) found that 20.4% of university students experience anxiety at a low level, 6.6% at a moderately severe level and 2.8% at a severe level. Furthermore, they also found that students who are unable to manage their stress level during the online learning process is as much as 62.1% compared to students who are able to adapt to online learning. These findings are in line with the statistics which prove that 2.3% of Malaysians aged 16 and above suffer from stress, depression and mental health problems (Public Health Institute, 2020) since the outbreak of Covid-19.

Psychological well-being is related to social support (Arshat & Japara, 2018; Zainuddin & Kutty, 2002). Social support involves the actions of important people in a person's life including relationships with family, peers and society (Thoits, 2010; Rayle, 2005). According to Arulrajah (2000), psychological well-being is influenced by the stress management style and social support of students. In addition, social support also has an influence on the cheerfulness of undergraduate students in universities. Lecturers who accept the ideas and views of students in class affects students' life satisfaction and improves the psychological well-being of students (Abdul Kadir & Desa, 2004). The role of lecturers is very significant during the pandemic to stimulate interest and motivation to learn (Zarien et al., 2019). This is because almost one billion students in 129 countries were interrupted during the online learning process, causing psychological well-being to be disturbed (UNESCO, 2020). However, online learning is now proven to influence the achievement and performance of students because they have to try to adapt to new norms (Ismail et al., 2016). The role of lecturers and classmates is very important in avoiding stress issues while learning online. It is supported by a study by Fadzil (2019) who found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, most university students spend less time with friends in public places, resulting in limited social support and relationships. According to Farhan et al (2021), students tend to study hard until the end of their studies if they get good support and encouragement from the people around them including lecturers and friends.

Objective

Study the relationship between social support and psychological well-being among HEI students.

Study the differences of psychological well-being based on the gender of HEI students.

Hypothesis

There is a relationship between social support and psychological well-being among HEI students.

There are differences in psychological well-being based on the gender of HEI students.

Past Studies

Arsat and Japara (2018) found that psychological well-being can increase if parents involve themselves in their children's lives. Adolescent males and females are reported to having similar social support and psychological well-being and did not show differences between them. This situation proves that there is no difference in treatment given by parents to their respective children. The fair treatment by the parents indirectly makes their children feel loved and subsequently has a good impact on their psychological well-being. Sharma and Khausik (2016) also found that high parental involvement in children's lives can give the impression that they spend a lot of quality time together. The results also found that parents give fair and equal treatment to all children regardless of gender. Nonetheless, in problem solving process, some studies state that females require more social support from their parents compared to males (Few, 2005).

In the year of 2000, Arulrajah conducted a study to determine the level of psychological well-being, stress perception, stress coping style and social support among university students in Malaysia. The findings of his study found that coping styles and social support show a positive relationship with psychological well-being. The findings of the study are supported by Boman, Bryman and Moller (2004) who conducted a study of the relationship between body functionality and psychological health among women with Turner Syndrome. The results of the study show that there is a significant relationship between psychological well-being and body functionality among the patients.

A study by Baharudin et al (2012); Nor et al (2011) found that children's socio-emotional and behavioral problems can also be reduced if parents have a close relationship and often involve themselves with the children. This is because, children will feel that their parents often care about all the activities they do. Good social support can contribute to psychological well-being. Failure to find and get support in life can cause depression, loneliness and fear (Eskin, 2003). Zainuddin and Kutty (2002) also stated that social support has a significant impact on students' psychological well-being. This social support can act as a motivator and self-strength in doing things on a daily basis. The achievement of goals, needs and well-being will be obtained with the presence of social support. Individuals will also have better health, an increased sense of belonging, purpose and self-esteem which will increase one's well-being (Nawi et al., 2017).

Voitkane and Miezite (2006) in their study involving 170 first-year students at the University of Latvia found that their psychological well-being was high when they received high social support. However, if faced with family problems, scholarship needs, financial burden, competition in class, and time management, it could cause students to experience stress (Ramachandiran and Dhanpal, 2018). With the presence of social support, individuals will have emotional connection, self-worth and trust. In addition to that, their self-esteem and well-being are also protected when they are faced with a situation of social acceptance on campus. Adyani et al (2019) also stated that social support has a positive correlation with psychological well-being. Students who live in a supportive environment will have self-confidence, good academic achievement and emotional and social adjustment. The level of friendliness and happiness will also increase with the support from all around them

(Karademas, 2006). Learning motivation also has implications for students in having appropriate strategies in learning activities and fostering encouragement in efforts carried out throughout their studies (Syaza na & Nasir, 2020).

Besides that, Aydin et al (2017) also stated that receiving social support from family, friends and special individuals has a positive relationship with personal development and psychological well-being. This social support does not only depend on the family, but from a variety of sources such as good relationships with other people outside home. Those who have a troubled family will have a negative impact on their development and psychological well-being. A study by Rani (2016) also found that social support has a relationship with psychological well-being. Most of the study respondents reported that they had more social support from family than from friends. Females receive more social support from family and friends than males.

Methodology

A cross-sectional method was used involving quantitative design and survey techniques. This study involved a total of 524 students of Private Higher Education Institutions in Melaka and Perak. The factors selected in this study determine the calculation of the study sample size. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), if the estimated population of the entire study is 10,000 people, then the total sample size required is 370 people. Meanwhile, Hair et al (2010) determined the sample size by using a ratio of 5:1. This means, five samples are required for each independent variable in the regression equation. Nevertheless, this number is suggested to be increased to 15 to 20 samples for each independent variable to obtain adequate statistical power. Therefore, with the existence of two variables in this study, the appropriate sample size is 40 people (2x20 people).

A set of questionnaires was distributed to the study respondents with three sections. Part A in the questionnaire contains information such as gender, race, religion, age and highest academic achievement. Part B covers the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB) questionnaire which contains 20 items. Finally, the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS) questionnaire was used to measure spiritual well-being and is placed in Section C.

Scales of Psychological Well-being (SPWB)

The Scales of Psychological Well-being was developed by Ryff in 1989. This inventory was developed to measure six factors or dimensions of human psychological well-being, namely positive relationships with others, life goals, self-acceptance, autonomy, personal development and controlling the environment. This section contains 29 items. There are 42 items or questions from the original inventory, but 13 items have been removed, namely items 13, 18, 19, 23, 27, 31, 32, 34, 36, 38, 39, 40 and 41 because the factor loading values are below the value 0.50 after being translated into the Malay version (Mokhtar and Che Aman, 2017). Each dimension has its own item. The items for the autonomy dimension are items 1, 7, 21 and 28 while the items for controlling the environment are items 2, 8, 13, 17 and 22. The items that represent the personal development dimension are items 3, 9, 14, 18 and 26. Item 4, 10, 15, 19 and 23 are for the dimension of positive relationships with others while items 5, 11, 16, 24 and 27 are for the dimension of life goals. Finally, the items for the dimension of self-acceptance are 6, 12, 20, 25 and 29. The scoring for the 29 items for the Psychological Well-Being instrument is using a Likert scale that measures the positive scale of strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), less disagree (3), slightly disagree (4), agree (5) and strongly

agree (6). However, there are six negative items, namely items 3, 5, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 22 and 25.

Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS)

The Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS) was built by Craig W. Ellison and Raymond E. Paloutzian in 1982. This instrument was developed to measure spiritual well-being based on two dimensions, namely religious well-being and psychosocial well-being. This instrument has been translated into Malay language which was developed by Imam et al. (2009). This instrument has 20 items that use six Likert scales that measure the positive scale, namely strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), slightly disagree (3), slightly agree (4), agree (5) and strongly agree (6). There are several negative items (reverse score) which are items 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 12, 13, 16 and 18.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Analysis Result

Table 1

Demographic Distribution of Study Respondents

Demography	N	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	107	20.4
Female	417	79.6
Highest Education		
SPM	121	23.1
STPM/Diploma	260	49.6
Bachelor/Masters/PhD	143	27.3

Table 1 shows the demographic distribution of the study respondents including their gender and highest education. For gender demographics, the number of male respondents involved in the study was 107 people (20.4%). Females, on the other hand, recorded a total of 417 respondents (79.6%). The demographics of higher education are divided into three, namely Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM) or Diploma and Bachelor's degree and above. The total number of respondents for the SPM category was 121 people (23.1%) and STPM or Diploma was 260 people (49.6%). For the last category which is Bachelor, Masters and PhD, the total number of respondents was 143 people equal to 27.3 percent.

Inferential Analysis Result

H1 : There is a relationship between social support and psychological well-being among HEI students.

Table 2

Pearson's Correlation Coefficient of social support with psychological well-being

Variable	Psychological well-being
Social support	.119**

Table 2 shows the results of the correlation analysis between social support and psychological well-being. The results of the analysis show that the value of the correlation coefficient is .119 ($r = .119$) and the significant value is .006 which is tested at the confidence level of .05. This significant value was found to be smaller than the confidence level ($k < .05$). This indicates that social support has a significant relationship with psychological well-being ($r = .119, k < .05$).

H2 : There are differences in psychological well-being based on the gender of HEI students.

Table 3

T-test analysis of differences in psychological well-being based on gender

Gender	N	Mean	dk	t	Sig
Male	107	8.4019	522	1.494	.136
Female	417	8.1055			

Table 3 shows the results of the t-test analysis to see the differences in psychological well-being based on gender. The mean value of the male respondents is 8.4019 and was found to be higher than that of the females which is 8.1055. In addition, the study also found that the degree of freedom value (dk) is 522, while the t value is 1.494. The significant value obtained in this hypothesis is .136 which is above .05 ($k > .05$). This demonstrates the gender of the respondents has no significant impact toward their psychological well-being. Therefore, the second hypothesis in the study is rejected.

Discussion

There is a relationship between social support and psychological well-being among HEI students

The results of this study found that there is a relationship between social support and the psychological well-being of HEI students, and they are positively correlated. These results show that the higher the social support, the higher the level of psychological well-being. Good social support from family, peers and the surrounding community helps HEI students improve stress management and can also improve students' psychological well-being. The findings of this study are supported by Arulrajah (2000) who found that good social support among HEI students can help students manage stress and improve their psychological well-being. Adyani et al (2019) also argued that social support has a relationship with students' psychological well-being. According to them, students who get social support are able to control their anxiety related to the academic issues they face. In fact, students who have social support feel happy with the environment around them to study (Karademas, 2006). Kuyumcu (2013) suggested that students who have poor psychological well-being such as having negative emotions will increase feelings of guilt and anger with the people around them.

There is no difference in psychological well-being based on the gender of HEI students

The results of hypothesis 2 show that there is no difference between male and female students on psychological well-being. The findings of this study show that the gender of the students has no impact on psychological well-being because the students handle their psychological well-being based on their abilities. Rufaida and Kustanti's (2017) study explained that male and female students will experience stress if they are in a new learning environment, and they need the involvement of friends, lecturers and family to help them solve problems they encounter. However, the study of Aydin et al (2017) found differences in psychological well-being among male and female college students. Female students show higher psychological well-being than male students (Kayabeyeser, 2013; Aydin et al., 2017). According to Kayabeyeser (2013), female students show better psychological well-being due to the fact that female students dominate the place of study and have a clearer purpose in life.

Conclusion

All things considered, this study found that social support has a relationship with psychological well-being among HEI students, and there is no difference in psychological well-being based on gender. This result shows that social support from the student's environment such as the encouragement of parents, lecturers, friends and the surrounding community will help to improve the level of psychological well-being of a student. This matter indirectly affects the students' academic performance and therefore to achieve excellent academic results. The impact of this study is to spread awareness to the HEIs to always make students aware to take care of the social relationships around them to get social support while also helping to improve the level of psychological well-being of the students. For next research and researcher, we suggest that to use mix method to explore students experience about social support and psychological well-being in their life.

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