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The Relationship between Mental Health, Coping Strategies and Attitudes towards Seeking Counselling Services among University Students

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Abstract

Despite successfully adapting to life during the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals have experienced psychological effects. The transition to the endemic phase, which involves integrating new norms into their old lifestyle, has further impacted individuals' psychological well-being. This is particularly concerning for students who have had to cope with significant changes in various aspects of their lives. To address this issue, a correlational study was conducted to explore the relationship between mental health, coping strategies, and attitudes towards seeking counselling services among university students. A total of 201 final-year undergraduate students from a university in the Klang Valley were randomly selected to participate in the study. The participants completed an online questionnaire consisting of three instruments: the General Mental Health Question 12, the Brief COPE, and the Attitudes towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help - Short Form. The results indicated that the respondents scored low on all three variables examined. However, the study revealed significant relationships between mental health, coping strategies, and attitudes towards seeking counselling services among the students. This suggests that maintaining good mental health is associated with effective coping strategies and positive attitudes towards seeking counselling services. These findings provide valuable insights for counsellors and counselling trainees in developing recovery plans and implementing more efficient counselling approaches to promote the well-being of students.

Keywords: Stress, Coping Strategies, Attitudes Towards Seeking Counselling Services, Mental Health, Students

Introduction

The Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) has reported an increase in suicide cases, with 631 cases in 2020 compared to 609 cases in 2019. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and its associated life stressors and current issues have contributed to a further increase, with 336 suicide cases reported to PDRM as of March 2021. Mental health issues, particularly depression and stress-related conditions, are closely linked to these alarming trends. Failure to identify and provide appropriate treatment for depression can exacerbate the problem, leading to a rise in suicide cases. Good mental health, on the other hand, enables individuals

to cope effectively with life's stresses, perform daily tasks productively, and contribute positively to society (WHO, 2007).

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, mental health problems have become a significant concern, affecting various aspects of daily life and individual capabilities, especially among students (Ibrahim et al., 2020). Society as a whole has had to confront changes that have resulted in negative impacts, including increased stress and mental health problems (Halliburton et al., 2021). Students, in particular, have faced the challenge of adapting to and managing stress associated with online learning and completing assignments from home (Orgev & Kinali, 2022; Idris et al., 2021).

Research conducted at a public university in Kuala Lumpur revealed that 29.4% of students experienced mental health issues in 2019 (Islam et al., 2019). During the implementation of movement control measures in March 2020, there was a 65% increase in mental health problems, including depression, among students at a public university in Selangor (Ads et al., 2020). These findings underscore the importance of effective coping strategies in managing mental health issues.

A study by Ibrahim et al (2020) found that a significant number of students at FSK, UKM experienced high levels of stress since the Covid-19 outbreak and the transition to online learning. However, many students are reluctant to seek help from counselling services due to their busy daily routines (Theurel & Witt, 2022) and limited access to such services via smartphones and online platforms (Drissi et al., 2020).

Moreover, between March 25 and May 20, 2021, approximately 85.5% of the 145,173 calls received by government agencies were related to mental health issues requiring counselling, including stress, anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies. Health Minister Datuk Seri Adham Baba attributed the lack of access to psychological help and counselling services as one of the contributing factors. In addition, data from the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH) revealed that 1,080 cases of attempted suicide received treatment assistance at MOH hospitals in 2020 (Harian Metro, 2021). Given these circumstances, this study aims to explore the relationship between mental health, coping strategies, and attitudes towards seeking counselling services among university students. Therefore, this study outlines four specific research objectives as below:

- to identify the level of mental health, coping strategies, and attitudes towards seeking counselling services among university students,
- to explore the relationship between mental health and attitudes towards seeking counselling services among university students,
- to explore the relationship between coping strategies and attitudes towards seeking counselling services among university students,
- to explore the relationship between mental health and coping strategies among university students.

Research Methods

The research method employed in this study is a correlational quantitative approach, utilizing the survey method. It aims to provide a descriptive and correlational analysis of the

relationship between mental health, coping strategies, and attitudes towards seeking counselling services among university students.

Sample of The Study

The study was conducted at a public university in the Klang Valley, chosen due to a previous study that highlighted the high level of stress among its students (Ibrahim et al., 2020). A simple random sampling technique was employed to select a sample from the total population of 420 final-year students aged between 20 to 27 years. The sample size determination considered both Power analysis (Cohen, 1988) and Krejcie and Morgan's Table 1970. Based on Krejcie and Morgan's table, a suitable sample size for the study was determined to be 201 respondents. Setting the alpha value at 0.05 and a power value rate of 0.95, as suggested by Cohen (1992), a minimum of 138 respondents was selected. To ensure a sufficient amount of data for analysis, the researcher set a total of 251 respondents (1.25 x 201) (Mitchell & Jolley, 2012).

Demographic Information

The demographic information of the respondents is presented in Table 1. The analysis includes a total of 201 respondents, with 65 (32.2%) male respondents and 136 (67.8%) female respondents. The majority of respondents are of Malay ethnicity, comprising 139 (68.8%) individuals, followed by 38 (18.8%) individuals of Indian ethnicity and 24 (12.4%) individuals of Chinese ethnicity. The average age of the respondents ranges from 19 to 30 years, with the majority falling within the age range of 23 to 26 years (161 respondents or 79.7%). In terms of academic programs, the distribution is as follows: Psychology program (31 respondents or 15.3%), Malay language program (23 respondents or 11.4%), History program (23 respondents or 11.4%), Media and Communication program (21 respondents or 10.4%), Political Science program (19 respondents or 9.4%), Anthropology, Malay Literature, and Geography programs (18 respondents each or 8.9%), Social Work program (17 respondents or 8.4%), and Development Science program (14 respondents or 6.9%).

Regarding Overall Grade Point Average (CGPA), 105 (52.0%) respondents achieved a CGPA ranging from 3.75 to 4.00, 87 respondents (43.1%) achieved a CGPA ranging from 3.00 to 3.74, 8 (4.5%) respondents achieved a CGPA ranging from 2.25 to 2.99, and 1 (0.5%) student achieved a CGPA ranging from 2.00 to 2.24. Family income distribution shows that the majority of respondents have an income below RM4,850 (B40) (107 respondents or 53.0%), followed by family income ranging from RM4,850 to RM10,959 (M40) (68 respondents or 34.2%), and family income exceeding RM10,960 (T20) (26 respondents or 12.9%). The usage of counselling services is also indicated in Table 1, where 51 (25.2%) respondents reported having utilized counselling services, while 150 (74.8%) respondents had never received counselling services.

Table 1
Respondents' Demographic Distribution

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	65	32.2%
	Female	136	67.8%
Ethnicity	Malay	139	68.8%
	Chinese	38	18.8%
	Indian	24	12.4%
Age	19 - 22	14	6.9%
	23 - 26	161	79.7%
	27 - 30	26	13.4%
Study Program	Communication Media	21	10.4%
	Psychology	32	15.3%
	History	23	11.4%
	political science	19	9.4%
	Geography	18	8.9%
	Social work	17	8.4%
	Anthropology	18	8.9%
	Developmental Science	14	6.9%
	Malay	23	11.4%
	Malay literature	16	8.9%
CGPA	3.75 - 4.00	105	52.0%
	3.00 - 3.74	87	43.1%
	2.25 - 2.99	8	4.5%
	2.00 - 2.24	1	0.5%
Family Income	B40 (<RM 4,850)	107	53.0%
	M40 (RM 4860 – 10,959)	68	32.2 %
	T20 (> RM 10, 950)	26	12.9%
Experience attending counselling services	Yes	51	25.2%
	No	150	74.8%

Research Instruments

This study consists of four parts: Part A, Part B, Part C, and Part D. Part A focuses on collecting background information from the respondents, including gender, age, race, study program, family income, and their experience using counselling services. In Part B, the level of mental health among university students is measured using the General Mental Health Questionnaire-12 (Goldberg, 1970). This questionnaire consists of 12 items and assesses mental health using the GHQ scoring method, where positive items are scored as 0011 and negative items as 0111. A score above 4 indicates a serious level of mental health, while a score below 4 indicates normal mental health. The questionnaire demonstrates high internal consistency with a reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of $\alpha = 0.87$.

Part C utilizes the Brief COPE questionnaire developed by Carver (1997) to assess the coping strategies employed by university students when facing challenges. This questionnaire consists of 28 items that measure coping strategies across three dimensions: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance coping. Respondents rate their frequency of engaging in each coping strategy on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (does not do it

at all) to 4 (does it very often). The questionnaire demonstrates high internal consistency with a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = 0.82$.

In Part D, the Attitudes towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help - Short Form (ATSPPH-SF) questionnaire developed by Fischer and Turner (1995) is used to assess the attitudes of university students towards seeking help from counselling services. This questionnaire comprises 10 items and employs a Likert scale ranging from 0 (disagree) to 3 (agree), resulting in a total score out of 30. The questionnaire demonstrates good internal consistency with a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = 0.75$.

Results

Level of Mental Health, Coping Strategies, and Attitudes towards Seeking Counselling Services

According to Table 2, the analysis reveals that 116 (57.9%) respondents exhibit a low level of mental health. Additionally, 25 (12.4%) respondents show a moderate level of mental health, while 60 (29.7%) respondents have a high level of mental health. In terms of coping strategies, the majority of 70 respondents (34.7%) demonstrate a low level of coping strategy. Conversely, 33.6% of respondents exhibit a high level of coping strategy, and 64 respondents (31.7%) fall into the category of having a moderate level of coping strategy. Furthermore, the analysis indicates that 90 respondents (44.6%) have a low level of attitude towards seeking counselling services. Meanwhile, 55 respondents (27.2%) display a moderate level of attitude towards seeking counselling services, and 56 respondents (28.2%) possess a high level of attitude towards seeking counselling services.

Table 2

Level of Mental Health, Coping Strategies, and Attitudes Towards Seeking Counselling Services

Variable	Level	n	%	M	SD
Mental Health	Low	116	57.9%	1.52	0.29
	Moderate	25	12.4%		
	High	60	29.7%		
Coping Strategies	Low	70	34.7%	2.52	0.45
	Moderate	63	31.7%		
	High	68	33.6%		
Attitudes Towards Seeking Counselling Services	Low	90	44.6%	1.46	0.20
	Moderate	55	27.2%		
	High	56	28.2%		

Relationship Between Mental Health and Attitudes Towards Seeking Counselling Services

The Pearson correlation analysis reveals that there is a significant weak negative relationship between mental health and the attitude to seek counseling services among students ($r = -0.143$, $p < 0.05$). The correlation coefficient value of -0.143 indicates that as the level of mental health increases, the attitude towards seeking counseling services decreases. In other words, students with higher levels of mental health tend to have a lower inclination to seek counseling services.

Table 3

Relationship Between Mental Health and Attitudes Towards Seeking Counselling Services

	Attitudes Towards Seeking Counselling Services
Mental Health	-0.143*

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

The findings obtained contradict the findings by Cramer's Model (1995), which shows a positive relationship between the pressure faced by individuals and the attitude to seek counselling services.

Relationship Between Coping Strategies and Attitudes Towards Seeking Counselling Services

Table 4 presents the results of the Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis, examining the relationship between coping strategy variables and attitudes towards seeking counseling services. The findings indicate that there is no significant relationship between coping strategies and attitudes towards seeking counseling services among students. The correlation coefficient value is $r = 0.085$, with $p > 0.05$, suggesting that students are less likely to seek counseling services when facing conflicts. This finding aligns with a study conducted in France, which reported that 63% of participants expressed a lower inclination to seek professional help when confronted with emotional or mental health issues. Instead, students tend to seek support from friends, family, and internet searches rather than professional assistance (Theurel & Witt, 2022).

Table 4

Relationship between Mental Health and Attitudes Towards Seeking Counselling Services

	Attitudes Towards Seeking Counselling Services
Coping Strategies	0.085

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Relationship between Mental Health and Coping Strategies

Table 5 displays the results of the Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis, examining the relationship between mental health variables and coping strategies among students. The analysis reveals a significant relationship between mental health and coping strategies among students, as indicated by the coefficient value of $r = -0.147$, with $p < 0.05$. This suggests that students with higher levels of mental health tend to employ lower levels of coping strategies. The findings of this study align with the research conducted by Samsudin and Surat (2022), who also discovered a relationship between students' mental health and their coping strategies, emphasizing that individuals with higher levels of mental health develop their own coping mechanisms.

Table 5

Relationship between Mental Health and Coping Strategies

	Coping Strategies
Mental Health	-0.147

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that 117 students (57.9%) have a normal level of mental health, which contradicts the findings of Ibrahim et al (2020), who reported high stress levels among the majority of students since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The researcher suggests that students have successfully adapted to the current situation during the endemic phase of Covid-19. Khairul et al (2019) found that students' ability to adapt to their environment has an impact on their anxiety and stress levels. This is consistent with the observations of Pfefferbaum and North (2020), who noted that individuals were able to build resilience and cope better with psychological factors after experiencing the impact of Covid-19. Additionally, the analysis revealed that 34% of respondents had a low coping strategy, indicating that 70 university students tended to focus on emotions and problems. In contrast, the remaining 68 students (33.8%) demonstrated a high ability to cope with pressure and focused on problem-solving.

Cramer (1995) identified several factors influencing individuals' attitudes towards seeking counselling services, including self-concealment, stress, social support, and their perceptions of counselling services. However, the researcher found that the low level of stress among the respondents contributed to their reluctance to seek counselling services. The study also identified a significant negative relationship between mental health and attitudes towards seeking counselling services among students. This implies that students with higher levels of mental health are less inclined to seek counselling. Contrary to Cramer's model (1995), this study did not find a significant relationship between coping strategies and attitudes towards seeking counselling services among university students. This suggests that the inclination to seek counselling services is not necessarily related to students' problem-solving abilities. Instead, it is important to consider other factors such as students' resilience (Zakaria & Azman, 2021) and their perception and awareness of counselling services available in their environment.

Future Research Suggestion

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing scientifically grounded information on mental health, coping strategies, and attitudes towards seeking counselling services among university students. It aims to raise awareness among counsellors, particularly trainee counsellors, about the importance of mental health and counselling services for students. The findings of this study can serve as a starting point for universities to improve existing programs and create new initiatives. Collaboration between educational institutions and students can be encouraged to develop more efficient systems for accessing information related to counselling and mental health care, thereby increasing awareness and understanding of the importance of mental health and counselling services. For example, the implementation of online counselling systems and the training of students to become peer counsellors can help increase the availability of basic mental health support.

Furthermore, universities should actively identify and address mental health problems among students. This involves gaining a better understanding of students' needs and preferences in order to effectively engage their interest in seeking counselling services when needed. It is concerning that a significant proportion of students in this study (74.8%) had never sought counselling services despite experiencing mental health issues. For future studies, researchers could explore the influence of socioeconomic factors and social support on mental health problems among university students. Studies have shown that factors such as socioeconomic background and social relationships can play a role in mental disorders among students (Kumaran et al., 2022; Van de Velde et al., 2021). Examining these factors can provide further insights into the complex dynamics of mental health and help inform targeted interventions and support programs for students.

Conclusion

This study has brought new awareness to the understanding of mental health, coping strategies, and attitudes to obtaining mental health among university students in Malaysia. The findings show a trend in the level of mental health among students based on their coping strategies and attitudes towards counselling services when dealing with stress. This knowledge can prepare university students, trainee counsellors, and counselling institutes to adopt a holistic approach in assisting students in developing healthy coping strategies and recognizing the benefits of seeking counselling services during times of crisis. The impact of this study can lead to improvements in counselling services, particularly within university settings, to foster a mentally resilient generation better equipped for the challenges of the future workplace.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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