

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED STRESS AND STUDENT'S MENTAL HEALTH: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract: Past researchers identified a strong relationship between perceived stress and students' mental health. Although various studies have been conducted on the stress related factors, a thorough review of the literature highlights some research gaps. Firstly, there are few studies that discuss the role of emotional intelligence as the personal resource to buffer the relationship between perceived stress and students' mental health. Secondly, past researchers basically investigate only the direct effects between various stress related factors and other individual outcomes. However, less research has been done on identifying the mechanisms which may help to explain these relationships. Thus, this study focuses on outlying the propositions on the role of perceived stress as a potential mediator between stress related factors of academic pressure, family pressure, side activity pressure and financial pressure; and one aspect of individual outcomes (students' mental health). Besides, emotional

intelligence is proposed as the potential moderator than buffer the relationships. The relationships among the variables are discussed through the lens of Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. Lastly, suggestions for future studies are proposed.

Keywords: *Perceived Stress, Emotional Intelligence, Mental Health*

Introduction

In an era where things are constantly changing has urged today's generation to be adaptable, well-organized and multitasking. As work needs to be completed quickly and effectively, heavy study loads with tight deadlines such as assignments and examinations as well as extracurricular activities, personal commitments and social activities require students' close attention and time. Therefore, students have to be good in balancing multiple tasks and managing their precious time in order to successfully complete their academic life. However, mental health among university students has become a growing concern as anxiety and depression among students are reported at higher rates in recent years (Kellot, 2024).

According to the Ministry of Health (2020), mental health problems account for about 37% of all disability in the country, underscoring how deeply it affects. National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2015 reported that 29.2% of Malaysians aged 16 years and above suffered from mental health problems, i.e., almost one in three adults grappled with these issues. Collectively, this data emphasizes the fact that mental health problems in Malaysia qualify all age categories and have far-reaching social and economic consequences, thereby demanding urgent attention and comprehensive intervention plans (Chan et al., 2021). Within this wider perspective, students are the most concerning group as they are exposed to stress contributing factors such as academic pressures, financial pressures, family pressures and side-activity pressures (Slimmen et.al, 2022) making them more vulnerable to mental health issues.

In order to improve mental health among students, the understanding on how perceived stress and sources of stress affect students' mental health and what factors can moderate the negative effects of stress on students' mental health need to be increased (Slimmen et.al, 2022). These can help to identify which factors contribute most thus providing insights for identifying suitable preventive interventions. Although extensive research has been conducted to study the effects of perceived stress on mental health conditions, previous researchers mostly neglected the role of personality factor in their studies. According to Hagger (2009), different individuals have different responses to the same situation. Aforesaid, individuals' mental health outcomes depend on how they cope with the stressors. People with high emotional intelligence are more capable to regulate their emotions while comprehending those of others, which has profound effects on their overall mental health and well-being (Kellot, 2024). Recognizing this knowledge gap, this study intends to propose emotional intelligence (EI) as the moderating variable that buffers the negative impact of perceived stress on a student's mental health.

Literature Review

Stress Related Factors, Perceived Stress and Mental Health

Lazarus and Folkman (1986) describe stress as the way individuals deal and respond to environmental pressures and expectations that can be threatening while perceived stress refers to the moment the situations are judged to be stressful (Cohen et.al, 1994). Past researchers have found several contributors to students' poor mental health such as academic stress, financial pressures, family pressures and lack of time to do social activities. Emond et.al (2016) defined academic stress as the pressures arising from an educational environment that relates to various academic related issues such as tight deadlines, examinations and workload. The drastic change on the education landscape due to Covid-19 pandemic where colleges started to implement online learning may raise the academic pressures on students who may struggle to study independently (Grubic et.al, 2020).

Meanwhile, Doloh and Redzuan, (2023) defined financial stress as the intense pressures and difficulty to manage and meet financial obligations because of having a lack of financial resources. Danahy et.al (2024) revealed that exposure to financial related stressors such as student loan debt and lack of emergency savings may increase the financial pressures among students. According to Brytne et.al (2006), family pressure is contributed by several family circumstances such as the disagreement with parents, lack of trust and high expectations from parents, strict home rules, etc. Meanwhile, having lack of time for leisure and side activities also lead to a negative mental health outcome (Denovan and Macaskill, 2017). Leisure activities basically refer to the things that people perform when they are not bound by the responsibilities of their job, family, or society; hence, it does not include the basic needs for a living such as sleeping, working and housework (Takiguchi et.al, 2022).

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is defined as the capacity to recognize, evaluate, and communicate emotion; access and/or produce emotions when they support thought; comprehend emotion and emotional knowledge; and control emotions to foster both intellectual and emotional development (Mayer and Salovey, 1997). According to Williams (2022), emotional intelligence describes the capacity to recognize, comprehend, control, and affect one's own emotions as well as those of others. Improving social connections, managing stress, and overall mental health outcomes have all been associated with high emotional intelligence. Therefore, considering students in college deal with a variety of challenges, emotional intelligence may serve as a buffer or moderating factor to lessen the detrimental effects of stress on mental health.

Although emotional intelligence (EI) is established as an essential factor for mental health, research on EI as a moderator is still scarce. In most previous researches on EI, the focus has been on it as either a predictor (Ishaq et al., 2020; Shafait et al., 2021) or a mediator (Li et al., 2024), citing examples demonstrating that students with higher EI often reported experiencing good mental wellbeing. However, it is yet to be determined if EI somehow buffers the adverse ramifications of stressors, academically, financially, or from family pressures, upon mental health.

Debates on Predictors of Mental Health

Despite numerous studies existing with respect to mental health predictors, findings across literature remain inconsistent. Pascoe et al. (2020), Dopmeijer (2021) and Barbayannis et al. (2022) found that academic and performance pressures are the strongest factor predicting stress and poor mental health paradigms. Others argue that financial constraints or family pressures have the greater bearing (Brit et al., 2017; Deng et al., 2022). Another debated variable is gender in the context of mental health outcomes: depending on the resolution, some studies suggest female students rated higher on stress, anxiety, and depression (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Anniko et al., 2019), while Mayya et.al (2022) found otherwise. Some studies found no statistically significant difference as per gender (Eisenbarth, 2019). Where perceived stress is held constant between stressors and wellbeing, it gives balanced evidence to be a mediator (Acoba, 2024). Even so, that mediation strength is questioned, with evidence ending with partial mediation on one side and full mediation on the other.

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMSC)

In accordance with Lazarus and Folkman's (1987) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMSC), people's stress levels are significantly influenced by how they perceive or respond to an incident rather than the event itself. Additionally, the model asserts that an individual's level of stress is directly correlated with how they perceive that stress: either it can result in positive outcomes, like improved performance, or it can become a threat that makes them want to leave the situation or even affect their mental health. Differences in how individuals perceive the situations around them may be caused by different personality traits (Lim et al., 2023). In short, from the TMSC perspective, several personality characteristics can divert university students from experiencing stress. In which, by having personality traits such as emotional intelligence, students will direct the stressful conditions to a favourable outcome that can prevent themselves from intense stress thus reducing the negative outcome of their mental health. This is because emotional intelligence will act as the personal resources that help them surpass and cope with the experienced stress.

Proposition Development

Stressful events may lead to a decrease in mental health if the individuals lack the personal resources that can mitigate the perceived stress. According to He et.al (2018), perceived stress has a significant impact towards students' mental health. Recent evidence from past researchers (i.e Kellot, 2024) shows that university students' stress levels have gradually increased. Several factors such as academic and performance pressures seem to be the most influential determinants of students' perceived stress (Dopmeijer, 2021; Mitchell, 2020). Besides that, past researchers also found a strong correlation between perceived stress, family circumstances (Huda et.al, 2021), lack of side activities and leisure (Denovan and Macaskill, 2017) as well as financial situation (Brit et.al, 2017). Besides that, Slimmen et.al (2022) found a moderating effect of personality and coping style in the relationship between stress related factors and mental health and well-being. Several studies also show the important roles of emotional intelligence in which students with high emotional intelligence regulate their emotions well and help them toward stress thus leading to a better way of managing stress (Patrick et.al, 2017). Based on the above literature review and theoretical discussion, we proposed the following as the hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Academic pressure significantly influences students' mental health.

Hypothesis 2: Family pressure significantly influences students' mental health.
Hypothesis 3: Side activity pressure significantly influences students' mental health.
Hypothesis 4: Financial pressure significantly influences students' mental health.
Hypothesis 5: Perceived stress significantly influences students' mental health.
Hypothesis 6: Perceived stress mediates the relationship between academic pressure and students' mental health.
Hypothesis 7: Perceived stress mediates the relationship between family pressure and students' mental health.
Hypothesis 8: Perceived stress mediates the relationship between side activity pressure and students' mental health.
Hypothesis 9: Perceived stress mediates the relationship between financial pressure and students' mental health.
Hypothesis 10: Emotional Intelligence weakens the effects of perceived stress onto students' mental health.

Proposed Theoretical Framework

Below is the proposed theoretical framework for this study. The relationships between independent variables and dependent variables are expressed in Figure 1. The potential mediating and moderating effects are also being illustrated.

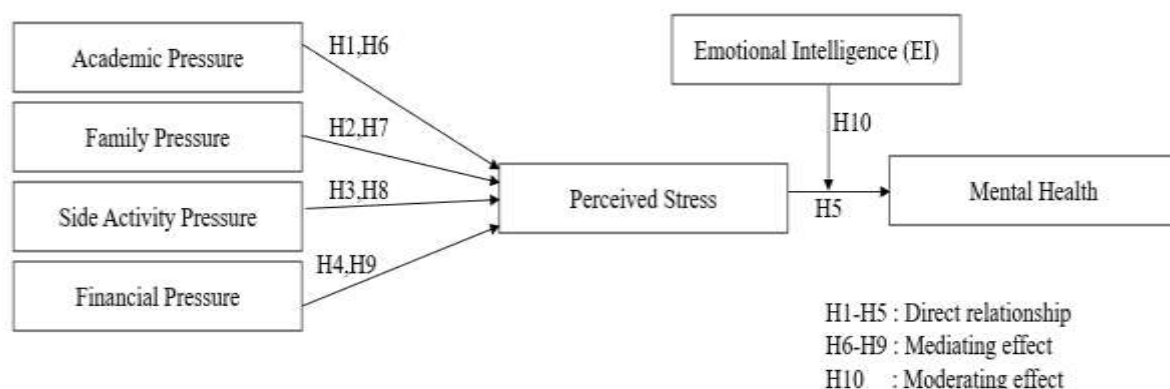


Figure 1: Proposed Relationship Between Underlying Stressors, Perceived Stress, Emotional Intelligence and Mental Health.

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research approach, utilizing a cross-sectional research design to analyse the effect of perceived stressors on university students' mental health. Data will be collected through a structured questionnaire using validated measurement scales and items adapted from existing literature to assess academic pressure, family pressure, side activity pressure, financial pressure, perceived stress, emotional intelligence, and mental health. The target population will consist of undergraduate and postgraduate students from private and public universities. Respondents' perceptions will be scaled using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Data will be collected by convenience sampling through both online and offline modes. The minimum sample size shall be 300 respondents, keeping in view statistical power for Structural Equation Modelling (SEM).

Descriptive statistics and reliability testing will be conducted using SPSS while SEM can be performed using SmartPLS or AMOS in validating the proposed model and test the proposed hypotheses.

Discussion and Conclusion

Stress has become one of the critical topics to be discussed in today's fast paced era (Atkinson, 2020). Researchers (i.e, Atkinson, 2020; Slimmen, 2022; Kellot, 2024) have examined how stress negatively impacts students' academic performance, students' engagement, commitment, mental health, etc. As can be understood from the lens of TMSC by Lazarus and Folkman (1985), when students perceive the pressures around them as stressful, their attitudes, emotions and behaviours will negatively react thus leading to a negative effect towards their mental health. The presence of emotional intelligence will help the students to manage their stress better thus improving their mental health condition. Taking all together, academic pressure, family pressure, side activity pressure and financial pressure; are expected to predict students perceived stress, and perceived stress has been recognized as one of the strong predictors of various mental health related outcomes such as anxiety, depression and isolation. Thus, the proposed relationship is that perceived stress mediates the relationship between stressors that come from academic pressures, family pressures, side activity pressures and financial pressures; and students' mental health. Meanwhile, emotional intelligence acts as a moderator in buffering the negative effect of perceived stress and students' mental health.

Since the moderating effect of emotional intelligence between perceived stress and mental health among students has been less discussed, this study fills the research gap. In which, stressors (academic pressure, family pressure, financial pressure and side activity pressure), perceived stress, emotional intelligence and mental health has been discussed in a single framework. To confirm the proposed moderated mediation model in this study, empirical studies are strongly recommended. Besides, as there is little literature discussing the dimensions of emotional intelligence (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management), with regard to stressors, perceived stress and mental health, there is a need for more research on these relationships.

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