

THE NEED OF PEER COUNSELLING TOWARDS MENTAL HEALTH AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY, SELANGOR

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Abstract: *University students globally face significant mental health challenges. Peer counselling, offering support like professional counselling, bridges gaps in mental health resources, enhancing coping skills and social connections. This approach addresses barriers like stigma and limited access to traditional mental health services. The specific objectives were to determine the prevalence of stressors, the effect of mental health, the common stressors, the preference coping mechanism related to stress/psychological issues, help-seeking behavior and the barrier to seeking help for psychological issues. A quantitative, descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among 784 students in a public university, Selangor from December 2023 and May 2024. The research tool used in this study is the self-administrated questionnaire, developed and validated for this research. Most of the respondents preferred to seek help from their peers (40.2%; n: 315) compared to the professional counselor (28.7%; n: 225). The most barrier seeking help were concerns about what others think (83.3%) and feelings of shame (79.5%). Current findings showed most students prefer talking to their peers over seeking professional counselling, though stigma and shame often prevent them from seeking help at all. Encouraging peer counselling could help reduce stigma and make it easier for students to seek help.*

Keywords: *Students, Stressors, Coping Mechanism, Help-Seeking and Barriers*

Introduction

University students globally face significant mental health challenges, including high rates of depression, anxiety, and stress. Studies from countries like the UK, the US, and Malaysia highlight these issues (Brown, 2018). In Malaysia, low socioeconomic status and self-stigma are major barriers to seeking mental health support (Ibrahim et al., 2019). To address this, universities are exploring peer counselling, where trained students provide support to their peers. This method helps bridge the gap between formal mental health services and the needs of students. Research shows peer support can enhance coping skills, social connections, and empowerment. However, more studies are needed to understand what makes these interventions effective (Conley et al., 2020). Mental disorders affect about 20% of students annually, often starting in their early 20s. Despite high prevalence, many students do not receive the help they need due to stigma, low mental health literacy, and limited resources (Dessauvague et al., 2022). Peer counselling offers a promising alternative, but its effectiveness in places like Selangor, Malaysia, needs further research. Understanding the specific mental health issues and risk factors among students in Selangor can help develop better support strategies. Nurses play a crucial role in this effort, using research insights to create tailored interventions, promote mental health awareness, and advocate for better access to resources. This comprehensive approach aims to improve students' mental health and overall well-being.

The study aims to determine the prevalence of stressors, the effect of mental health, the common stressors, the preference coping mechanism related to stress/psychological issues, help-seeking behavior and the barrier to seeking help for psychological issues.

Literature Review

There are six points will be discussed in literature review.

The Prevalence of Stressor Among University Students

Recent research underscores the global scope of mental health challenges faced by university students, with varying prevalence rates reported across different regions. In the context of Malaysia, a growing body of research has begun to shed light on the mental health landscape among university students. A study by Tan et al. (2023) investigated the prevalence of mental health issues among Malaysian university students, revealing that approximately 45% of students reported experiencing mental health problems. This study utilized a comprehensive survey method to capture a representative sample from multiple Malaysian universities, highlighting significant concerns regarding student well-being in this region. Comparatively, this prevalence rate is situated between the higher rates observed in the United States and the lower rates reported in the United Kingdom. For instance, Lipson et al. (2022) found that around 60.2% of university students in the U.S. experience mental health issues, while Campbell et al. (2022) reported a 35% prevalence rate in the UK based on a systematic review of cross-sectional studies. These findings underscore the importance of addressing mental health issues in the Malaysian higher education system, indicating a need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms to enhance student well-being.

The Effect of Mental Health

Recent research into the mental health of university students highlights various contributing factors and manifestations of emotional issues. In a study conducted by Brobbey (2020) in Cape Coast, the results indicated that distraction during lectures had a significant impact on emotional problems, with 24.02% of students reporting this as a major contributing factor. Although this study was specific to Cape Coast, similar dynamics are likely to be relevant in other academic

contexts, including Malaysia. In a related vein, Aperocho et al. (2021) explored communicative behaviors associated with emotional problems among students, finding that students often become less communicative and more withdrawn when experiencing emotional difficulties, as evidenced by a mean score of 2.51 on their scale. This behavior is a critical indicator of emotional distress that may also be observed among Malaysian university students. A recent study by Tan et al. (2023) on Malaysian university students found that 45% of students reported experiencing mental health issues. While the specific impacts of lecture distraction and changes in communicative behavior were not detailed, the general findings underscore the need for further research into how such factors affect Malaysian students. Addressing these issues is crucial for developing effective support systems tailored to the unique challenges faced by students in Malaysia.

The Common Stressors Among University Students

Previous research has identified academic stress as a significant factor affecting university students. Omar et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative study at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) using the Academic Stress Inventory to assess stress levels among students. Their findings indicated that academic stress was a primary source of distress, with a total mean score of 3.51 on the inventory. This result highlights the substantial impact of academic pressures on students' well-being at UTM. Similarly, Aperocho et al. (2021) reported that academic stress was a prevalent stressor among students, evidenced by a mean score of 2.51. This study also identified emotional stress as a significant factor, with a mean score of 2.32. These findings suggest that while academic stress is a major concern, emotional stress also plays a notable role in the overall stress experienced by students. Comparing these results underscores the pervasive nature of academic stress across different educational settings and highlights the importance of addressing both academic and emotional stressors to improve student well-being.

The Preference Coping Mechanism Related to Stress/Psychological Issues

Landrosh et al. (2019) identified several common coping mechanisms among college students, with listening to music emerging as the most frequent strategy, reflected in a mean score of 3.08 (SD = 0.70). This was followed by socializing with friends or family (mean score = 2.88, SD = 0.83) and sitting alone in a quiet place (mean score = 2.83, SD = 0.81). These results underscore a preference for both social and solitary activities to manage stress. Comparatively, a recent study by Ahmad et al. (2023) on Malaysian university students revealed some similarities and differences in coping mechanisms. The study found that, similar to Landrosh et al. (2019), listening to music was a prevalent coping strategy among Malaysian students, indicating its universal appeal. However, the mean scores for other coping mechanisms differed: socializing with friends or family had a mean score of 3.05 (SD = 0.75), slightly higher than the score reported by Landrosh et al., while sitting alone in a quiet place had a mean score of 2.70 (SD = 0.78), lower than the score found in the U.S. study. Additionally, the Malaysian study highlighted that engaging in physical activities and participating in religious or spiritual practices were also significant coping strategies, with mean scores of 3.00 (SD = 0.80) and 2.95 (SD = 0.85), respectively. These comparative findings suggest that while there are commonalities in the use of music and socialization as coping strategies, there are also cultural variations. Malaysian students place greater emphasis on physical and spiritual practices compared to their U.S. counterparts, reflecting diverse cultural contexts and preferences in stress management strategies.

The Help-Seeking Behavior Among University Students

Leonard (2022) conducted a quantitative study at Brigham Young University (BYU) to explore the help-seeking behaviors of students facing difficulties. The study utilized instruments adapted from Gibbons et al. (2019) and revealed that approximately 45.3% of students had sought assistance from professional counselors. In contrast, a larger proportion, 66.1%, reported turning to their peers for support during challenging times. This indicates a notable preference for peer support over professional counseling among BYU students. In a related study, Theural and Witt (2022) examined help-seeking preferences among university students and found that a significant majority, 55.49% ($n = 101$), preferred seeking help from peers rather than from mental health professionals, who were sought by only 6.59% ($n = 3$) of the respondents. This study also employed a quantitative approach and highlighted a similar trend in the preference for peer support over professional intervention. Both studies underscore a prevalent tendency among university students to favor peer support over professional counseling. Leonard's (2022) research reflects this trend within the context of BYU, where peer support was more commonly utilized, while Theural and Witt (2022) provide broader evidence of this preference across different university settings. These findings suggest a need for universities to consider enhancing peer support systems and integrating peer-based approaches into their mental health services to better meet student needs.

The Barrier of Seeking Help for Psychological Help

Theural and Witt (2022) investigated barriers to seeking help for psychological issues among university students using a quantitative study approach. The study utilized the 30-item Barriers to Access to Care Evaluation (BACE) scale to assess various obstacles students face when seeking psychological support. The findings revealed that the most significant barrier was concern about others' perceptions, with 26.37% ($n = 48$) of students identifying this as a major impediment. This was followed by feelings of embarrassment or shame, reported by 21.98% ($n = 40$) of the participants. These results highlight that fear of social judgment and personal discomfort are substantial barriers preventing students from seeking necessary psychological support. Understanding these barriers is crucial for developing interventions aimed at reducing stigma and encouraging students to seek help more readily.

Research Methodology

Sample

This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional quantitative design to explore the factors affecting undergraduate students at a public university in Selangor. Respondents were selected using a convenience sampling technique, which facilitated the collection of data from a sample of 784 students. The data were gathered through online questionnaires, ensuring a broad reach and ease of access for participants. The inclusion criteria for the study required respondents to be aged 19 years and older and enrolled as full-time students at the university. Students who had already been diagnosed with a mental illness were excluded from participation to avoid confounding variables related to pre-existing conditions. Upon providing consent, eligible respondents completed the questionnaire, which was designed to capture relevant data on the study's focus.

Measure

The questionnaire used in this study was adapted from a previous instrument developed by Gibbons et al. (2019) and was self-administered by respondents. It was structured into five sections, each targeting different aspects of student experiences and attitudes.

Section One

This section gathered demographic and background information with 13 questions. It covered characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, generational status, availability of peer counseling programs, semester, faculty, educational level, transfer status, hometown area, Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA), socio-economic status, and types of financial aid received.

Section Two

This section focused on the history of mental health and included five questions regarding recent experiences of mental or emotional problems. It also assessed stressors encountered by students through 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from low to high stress). Additionally, respondents were asked to rank 11 potential mental and emotional health issues on campus from the most to least significant.

Section Three

This section examined preferred coping mechanisms for stress and psychological issues, consisting of 17 questions. Respondents rated their use of various coping methods on a 3-point scale: 1 (I never use this method to cope with stress), 2 (I sometimes use this method to cope with stress), and 3 (I usually use this method to cope with stress).

Section Four

This section explored help-seeking behavior and was divided into two parts. The first part, concerning preferences for seeking support, included nine questions about whether students would prefer to seek help from peers or professional counselors. The second part focused on help-seeking behavior, with seven questions rated on a 3-point scale: 1 (I never go to), 2 (I sometimes go to), and 3 (I usually go to).

Section Five

The final section addressed barriers to seeking help for psychological issues. It comprised seven binary (“Yes” or “No”) questions aimed at identifying obstacles students face when seeking psychological support.

Results

Socio-demographic characteristics

The study's respondents were predominantly Malay (93.9%) and enrolled in a degree program (97.1%) at a public university in Selangor. The average age of participants was 20.73 years (SD = 1.11), with most students aged 21 years (41.8%). The sample included a mix of academic semesters, with the highest representation in the 1st semester (36.9%). A significant majority of students (89.4%) reported that their university offers a peer counselling program. Most students were from urban areas (46.3%) and identified as being from the B40 socio-economic group (61.9%). The majority had a CGPA of 3.5 or above (50.5%) and had applied for student loans (65.3%). In terms of generational status, 66.5% were second-generation university students. The study found a low percentage of transfer students (3.3%) and a broad distribution across various faculties, with the largest groups in Business Management (29.7%) and Accountancy (20.9%).

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (n: 784)

Variables	Mean	SD	Frequency	Percentage
Age	20.73	1.11		
19 years old			131	16.7
20 years old			162	20.7
21 years old			328	41.8
22 years old			128	16.3
23 years old			24	3.1
24 years old			9	1.1
25 years old			2	0.3
Ethnic				
Malay			736	93.9
Others			48	6.1
Generational Status				
First-generation			263	33.5
Second-generation			521	66.5
Does your college have peer counselling program?				
Yes			701	89.4
No			83	10.6
Semester				
1			289	36.9
2			107	13.6
3			177	22.6
4			97	12.4
5			89	11.4
6			21	2.7
7			4	0.5
Faculty				
Accountancy			164	20.9
Business Management			233	29.7
Hotel and Management			80	10.2
Education			147	18.8
Health Sciences			103	13.1
Pharmacy			57	7.3
Educational Level				
Foundation			5	0.6
Diploma			18	2.3
Degree			761	97.1
Are you transfer students from another college?				
Yes			26	3.3
No			758	96.7

Hometown		
Urban	363	46.3
Sub-urban	281	35.8
Rural	140	17.9
CGPA		
3.5 & above	396	50.5
3.0 – 3.49	333	42.5
Below 3.0	55	7.0
Socio-economic		
B40	485	61.9
M40	247	31.5
T20	52	6.6
What types of financial aid have you applied for?		
Scholarships	73	9.3
Students' loans (e.g. PTPTN)	512	65.3
Family loans	158	20.2
Other loans	41	5.2

The Prevalence of Stressor Among University Students

The study revealed that over half of the respondents, comprising 51.9% ($n = 407$), reported experiencing no persistent mental or emotional problems lasting more than two weeks. In contrast, 25.5% ($n = 200$) of the participants indicated that they had encountered mental or emotional problems within this time frame. This distribution is visually represented in Figure 1, which illustrates the proportion of students with and without persistent mental or emotional issues.

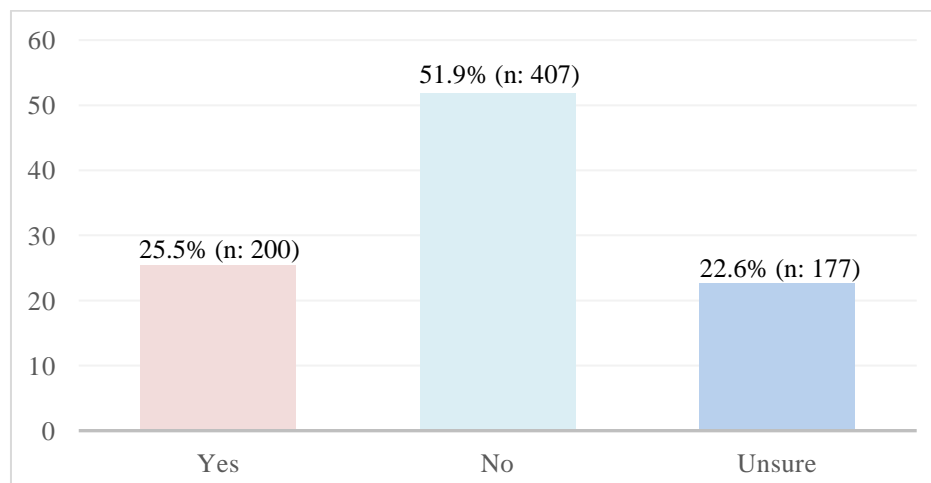


Figure 1: The Prevalence of Mental Health Among University Students

The Effect of Mental Health

A notable proportion of respondents reported that they accomplished less than they desired, with 47.1% ($n = 369$) indicating this outcome, as detailed in Table 2. Additionally, Figure 2 illustrates that nearly half of the respondents, specifically 48.5% ($n = 308$), experienced some level of interference with their social activities due to physical health or emotional problems.

These findings highlight significant impacts on both personal productivity and social engagement among the study's participants.

Table 2: The Effect of Emotional Problems (Such as Feeling Depressed or Anxious) Toward the Work or Other Regular Daily Activities

Item	Yes		No	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
Cut down the amount of time you spent on school, work, or other activities.	315	40.2	469	59.8
Accomplished less than you would like.	369	47.1	415	52.9
Didn't do school, work, or other activities carefully as usual.	187	23.9	597	76.1

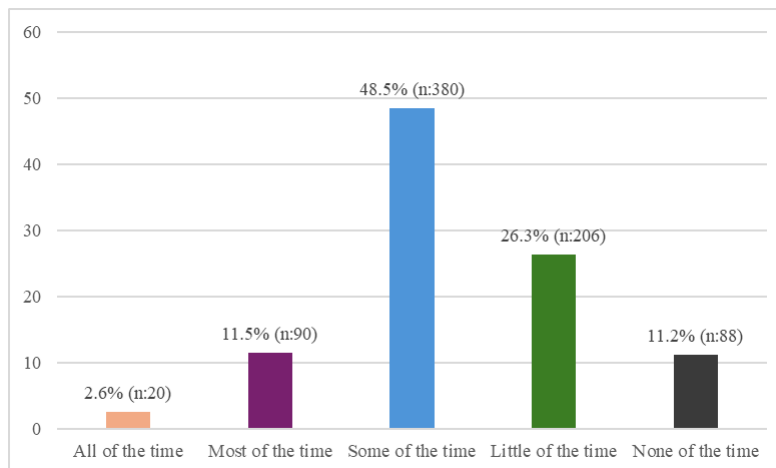


Figure 2: The Effect of Physical Health or Emotional Problems Interfered with The Social Activities (Like Visiting Friends, Relatives, Etc.)

The Common Stressors Among University Students

The survey results presented in Table 3 highlight the primary stressors experienced by university students, with academic demands being the most significant. The stressor "academic load (credits, exams, papers)" received the highest mean stress score of 3.16 (SD = 1.14), indicating it as a major source of stress for students. Following this, concerns related to "purpose-in-life issues," including decisions about majors and post-graduation plans, were the next most significant stressors, with a mean score of 2.63 (SD = 1.23). The third most prevalent stressor was related to "food, body image, and weight," which had a mean score of 2.61 (SD = 1.21). These findings underscore the critical areas where students experience stress, with academic-related issues being the foremost concern.

Table 3: The Common Stressors Among University Students

No	Item	Mean	SD
1	Coping with roommates, living conditions	2.03	1.01
2	Balancing schoolwork with job hours	2.53	1.03
3	Making ends meet financially	2.61	1.12
4	Academic load (credits, exams, papers)	3.16	1.14

5	Social needs (friends, family, etc.)	2.56	1.10
6	Health status, health issues	2.20	1.04
7	Food, body image, and weight issues	2.61	1.21
8	Transportations	2.39	1.11
9	Girlfriend, boyfriend issues (or other significant relationships)	1.85	1.08
10	Technology problems (Facebook updates, text messages etc.)	1.86	0.95
11	Purpose-in-life issues/ Figuring out what to do for a major or after graduation	2.63	1.23
12	Religion/Spirituality	1.82	0.99

The Preference Coping Mechanism Related to Stress/Psychological Issues

The survey results on coping mechanisms are detailed in the table, which includes mean scores and standard deviations for each item, reflecting how frequently respondents use each strategy. Sleep is the most frequently used coping mechanism, with a high percentage of respondents using it "usually" (76.4%) and a mean score of 2.75 (SD = 0.47). Eating is also a commonly favored coping strategy, with 64.5% of respondents using it "usually" and a mean score of 2.60 (SD = 0.58). Listening to music ranks third, with 68.9% of respondents using it "usually," resulting in a mean score of 2.63 (SD = 0.60). Other notable coping mechanisms include crying (mean score: 2.54, SD = 0.65) and holding things in (mean score: 2.53, SD = 0.63). Strategies like exercise and spending money are less frequently used, as indicated by lower mean scores and higher percentages of respondents selecting "never" or "sometimes." Conversely, less favored strategies include yelling at or blaming others (mean score: 1.53, SD = 0.68) and stopping attendance at school/work (mean score: 1.33, SD = 0.60), which are rarely used by respondents.

Table 4: The Preference Coping Mechanism Related to Stress/Psychological Issues

No.	Items	Frequency (Percentage%)			Mean (SD)
		Never	Sometimes	Usually	
1	Sleep	12 (1.5)	173 (22.1)	599 (76.4)	2.75 (0.47)
2	Exercise	189 (24.1)	420 (53.6)	175 (22.3)	1.98 (0.68)
3	Eat	39 (5.0)	239 (30.5)	506 (64.5)	2.60 (0.58)
4	Cry	66 (8.4)	229 (29.2)	489 (62.4)	2.54 (0.65)
5	Spend money	155 (19.8)	324 (41.3)	305 (38.9)	2.19 (0.74)
6	Hold things in	60 (7.7)	248 (31.6)	476 (60.7)	2.53 (0.63)
7	Yell at or blame others	452 (57.7)	251 (32.0)	81 (10.3)	1.53 (0.68)
8	Ignore the feelings and they will pass	121 (15.4)	356 (45.4)	307 (39.2)	2.24 (0.70)
9	Talk to friends or family	186 (23.7)	342 (43.6)	256 (32.7)	2.09 (0.75)
10	Avoid friends (social isolation)	167 (21.3)	348 (44.4)	269 (34.3)	2.13 (0.73)
11	Stop attending school/work	577 (73.6)	155 (19.8)	52 (6.6)	1.33 (0.60)
12	Negative self-talk	334 (42.6)	277 (35.3)	173 (22.1)	1.79 (0.78)
13	Listen to music	48 (6.1)	196 (25.0)	540 (68.9)	2.63 (0.60)
14	Clean my house	131 (16.7)	337 (43.0)	316 (40.3)	2.24 (0.72)

15	Do nothing	170 (21.7)	263 (33.5)	351 (44.8)	2.23 (0.78)
16	Crafting	463 (59.1)	207 (26.4)	114 (14.5)	1.55 (0.73)

The Help-Seeking Behavior Among University Students

The survey results, as depicted in Figure 3, indicate that a majority of respondents prefer seeking help from their peers. Specifically, 40.2% ($n = 315$) of the participants identified peers as their preferred source of support. In contrast, 28.7% ($n = 225$) of respondents favored professional counselors for assistance. This preference highlights a significant inclination towards peer support over professional counselling among the university student population.

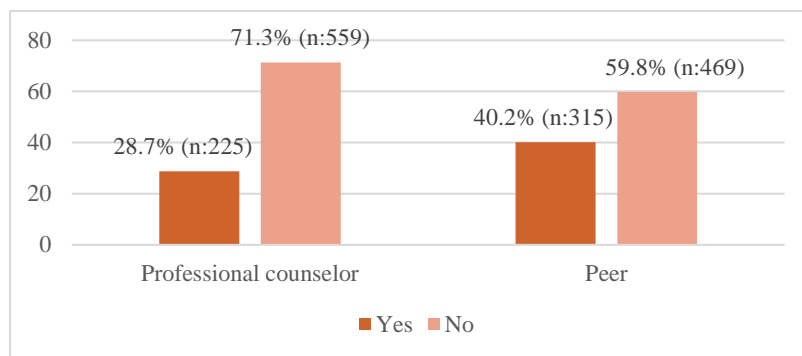


Figure 3: The Preference Individual in Need to Mental and/or Emotional Support

The Barrier of Seeking Help for Psychological Help

The survey results reveal that the most significant barrier to seeking psychological help is concern about what others might think, with 83.3% ($n = 653$) of respondents identifying this as a major obstacle. This high percentage underscores the strong impact of social stigma on students' willingness to seek assistance. In addition, a substantial 79.5% ($n = 623$) of respondents reported feeling too ashamed to seek help. This indicates that feelings of shame are a pervasive barrier, further complicating efforts to address mental health needs. These findings, as detailed in Table 5, highlight the critical role of social perceptions and self-stigma in preventing students from accessing necessary mental health support. Addressing these barriers through stigma reduction and supportive interventions is essential for improving help-seeking behaviors.

Table 5: The Preference Coping Mechanism Related to Stress/Psychological Issues

No.	Items	Frequency (Percentage)	
		No	Yes
1	Not sure of available resource	375 (47.8)	409 (52.2)
2	Too ashamed	161 (20.5)	623 (79.5)
3	Worried about what other people think	131 (16.7)	653 (83.3)
4	No support from friends and family to get treatment	221 (28.2)	563 (71.8)
5	Cost associated with treatment	251 (32.0)	533 (68.0)
6	Not enough time	265 (33.8)	519 (66.2)

Discussions

The Prevalence of Stressor Among University Students

The observed prevalence of mental health problems among university students in Selangor (25.5%) demonstrates a marked contrast with higher rates reported in studies from the United States (60.2% by Lipson et al., 2022) and the United Kingdom (35% by Campbell et al., 2022). This variance could be influenced by diverse factors such as cultural norms, social environments, and healthcare system provisions across these regions. Cultural attitudes toward mental health can significantly impact the prevalence and reporting of mental health problems. In many Asian cultures, including Malaysia, there is often a stigma associated with mental health issues that may discourage individuals from seeking help or reporting their problems (Yang et al., 2021). This cultural stigma can result in underreporting or reluctance to disclose mental health issues, potentially leading to lower observed prevalence rates. The social environment also plays a critical role in mental health. Factors such as social support, academic pressure, and lifestyle can vary widely between regions. For instance, students in the United States and the United Kingdom might experience higher levels of academic stress due to competitive educational environments and high expectations, which can contribute to higher rates of reported mental health issues (Gibson et al., 2023). Recent studies support these observations. For example, a study by Farrer et al. (2023) highlights that variations in mental health prevalence across different countries can be attributed to a combination of cultural, social, and systemic factors. Similarly, research by Hu et al. (2022) emphasizes that differences in mental health reporting are influenced by both the availability of mental health resources and the societal attitudes towards mental health issues.

The Effect of Mental Health

The current study reveals that 47.1% of respondents reported not achieving their desired academic goals. This finding is notably different from Brobbey's (2020) study, where distractions during lectures were identified as the primary issue affecting 24.02% of students, with reduced academic morale and failure also playing significant roles. Additionally, Aperocho et al. (2020) found that emotional and physical health problems significantly impacted students' social activities. Recent studies further reinforce the impact of health problems on academic and social life. For instance, a study by Smith et al. (2023) found that students with mental health issues frequently experience difficulties in maintaining academic performance and social relationships. Similarly, research by Green et al. (2024) highlights that both emotional and physical health problems can significantly disrupt students' ability to engage in social and academic activities, aligning with the findings from the current study and Aperocho et al. (2020). The findings emphasize the need for universities to address the multifaceted impact of health problems on students' academic and social lives. It is crucial for institutions to develop comprehensive support systems that not only address in-class distractions and academic morale but also provide robust mental and physical health support (Eisenberg et al., 2023). Enhancing access to counseling services, creating wellness programs, and fostering a supportive campus environment are essential strategies to mitigate these issues and help students achieve their academic goals while maintaining social engagement (Johnson & Bertram, 2022).

The Common Stressors Among University Students

The current study identified academic load as the most common stressor among university students in Selangor, with a mean score of 3.16. This finding is slightly lower than the mean score of 3.51 reported by Omar et al. (2020). Despite this difference, both studies consistently

highlight academic load as a significant stressor for university students. This consistency underscores the importance of academic load in affecting students' stress levels, though methodological differences between studies should be considered. The recurrent identification of academic load as a primary stressor across different studies reflects its pervasive impact on students. Recent research continues to support the notion that academic pressures, including coursework volume and deadlines, are major sources of stress for students (Khan et al., 2022). The alignment between the current study and Omar et al. (2020) emphasizes that, regardless of minor variations in mean scores, academic load remains a critical stressor in higher education.

The Preference Coping Mechanism Related to Stress/Psychological Issues

The current study found that listening to music had a mean score of 2.63 (SD = 0.47) as a coping mechanism among university students, which is notably lower than the mean score of 3.08 (SD = 0.70) reported by Landrosh et al. (2019). Recent studies continue to support the role of music in stress management. For example, a study by Fancourt and Finn (2019) highlights that music can modulate emotional states and provide a means of coping with stress and anxiety. Similarly, research by Papageorgiou and Karageorghis (2021) demonstrates that music can be an effective tool for managing academic stress among students. These findings reinforce the notion that listening to music is a widely valued coping mechanism.

The Help-Seeking Behavior Among University Students

The current study reveals that 40.2% of respondents prefer seeking help from peers, which is lower than the 66.1% reported by Leonard (2022) and the 55.49% reported by Theural and Witt (2022). Several key factors influence why students may prefer seeking help from peers. Perceived accessibility is a major factor, as peers are often readily available and can provide immediate support (Samuel & Kamenetsky, 2022). Familiarity with peers also fosters a sense of comfort and ease, making students more likely to share their problems with individuals they know personally. Trust and confidentiality are crucial as well; students may feel that peers are more likely to understand their concerns and maintain privacy compared to formal support services (Kline & Kline, 2021). The preference for peer support underscores the importance of fostering a supportive peer environment within universities. Peer support can play a critical role in student well-being, offering emotional and practical assistance that complements formal mental health services (Cohen & Wills, 2022). Recent research continues to emphasize the value of peer support. For instance, a study by Hartley and Sutton (2023) highlights that peer support networks significantly contribute to students' resilience and stress management. Similarly, research by Sharma et al. (2023) underscores that peer support is crucial for providing emotional validation and practical advice, which can be particularly beneficial in academic settings.

The Barrier of Seeking Help for Psychological Help

The current study identifies concerns about what others think (83.3%) and feelings of shame (79.5%) as major barriers to seeking help among university students. These figures are substantially higher than the barriers reported by Theural and Witt (2022), which were 26.37% and 21.98%, respectively. Recent literature reinforces the significance of social concerns and feelings of shame in help-seeking behavior. A study by Watson et al. (2022) highlights that stigma and perceived social judgment are major deterrents for students seeking mental health support. Similarly, research by Pugh et al. (2023) demonstrates that feelings of shame and concerns about confidentiality are significant barriers to help-seeking, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to address these issues. Additionally, cultural or contextual differences between the study populations may influence perceptions of stigma and shame

related to seeking help (Burgess et al., 2020). The high levels of social concerns and feelings of shame identified in the current study suggest a need for interventions that address these barriers. Universities should consider implementing stigma reduction programs and creating supportive environments that normalize seeking help and discuss mental health openly (Klein et al., 2021). Strategies could include awareness campaigns, peer support programs, and education to reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues and encourage more students to seek help without fear of judgment.

Conclusions

The current study reveals that while many university students experience mental health problems, the prevalence is notably lower compared to rates observed in the other countries. This highlights the need for mental health support that is specifically tailored to the Malaysian context. A significant finding is that students generally prefer discussing their issues with peers rather than seeking professional counselling. However, stigma and feelings of shame frequently deter students from seeking help. Common coping mechanisms among students include sleep, eating, and listening to music.

Future Research

To further understand and address the evolving needs of university students, future research should focus on longitudinal studies that track changes in mental health, stressors, and coping mechanisms over time. Such research can provide insights into the long-term effectiveness of peer counselling programs and other interventions, ultimately contributing to more effective and adaptive support systems that foster student development and well-being.

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