

Gender disparities in Universiti Teknologi MARA students' mental wellness: A comparative study

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the wellbeing of people worldwide, especially the younger population, primarily students, who are ill-equipped to cope with the new norm. The need to adapt to the new learning methods has created greater difficulties. Previous research stated that altered life routine and upsetting life events have led to psychological disorders like depression, anxiety, and stress, with females experiencing higher degrees of disorder. With the objectives to further investigate the escalating students' mental wellbeing issues, the researchers focused on gender comparison among Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) students. There were 1,931 students from all UiTM campuses answered Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale 21 (DASS-21) questionnaire online to test their levels of depression, anxiety and stress while attending online distance learning (ODL) classes. Descriptive and independent t-test analyses were performed using IBM-SPSS AMOS version 24 software. The result indicated that both genders' levels of depression and stress were normal but most females experienced an extremely severe anxiety level. There also existed significant differences at 5% level of significance between the genders for anxiety and stress disorder levels. The findings are hoped to provide relevant authorities a better understanding on the appropriate intervention approaches focusing on gender to alleviate the COVID-19 impacts and prevent potential declines in the students' wellbeing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mental stress that affects a large number of the world's population has been reported as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic [1]. COVID-19 can have a negative impact on people's psychological and physical well-being as it could create a serious mental health crisis among them [2]. The strict lockdown measures since April 2020 faced by the Malaysians during the movement control order (MCO) phases as well as by other severely affected countries, has seen some of the most vulnerable populations of young students being most affected mentally [2], [3]. To ensure that the existing learning process in schools and universities is not disrupted, the teaching and learning sessions have been revised and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), being one of the largest public universities in Malaysia, has received no exception. Adapting

to the new norms from the conventional classroom settings to online settings has been challenging to the students, both male and female. Several preliminary studies conducted to look at the readiness and challenges experienced by students while facing online learning sessions also claimed that students are among the most affected because they have to switch from face-to-face learning practices to online [4], [5]. Questions about the pandemic with no definitive explanation, such as when it will stop and treatment methods; reduced human relationships as a result of the outbreak; and suggestions or restrictions such as staying at home as much as possible, may all have negative impacts on these young people's mental wellbeing [3]. Individuals' levels of health anxiety might be categorized as severe or modest according to the broad spectrum of health anxiety [6]. Ideally, government could initially explore less strict measures, such as voluntary self-isolation, due to the possibility of considerable detrimental protracted repercussions of quarantine on psychological health [7], [8] to minimize stress and anxiety the students experienced. However, those with minimal health anxiety can be hesitant to take the warnings about putting the outbreak within control seriously and may act in a more carefree approach [9]. All of these dramatic changes and uncertainty can directly lead to issues of psychological disorders such as depression, stress and anxiety; thus, low morale resulting in low self-esteem and loss of enthusiasm to live among these young university students [3], [10], [11].

Hence, the researchers found it interesting to further investigate the escalating mental wellbeing issues of the affected population but focusing on the gender comparison among UiTM students. Previous research proved that male undergraduates have less fear of COVID-19 compared to the female undergraduates, but the levels of depression, anxiety and stress showed no prominent gender disparities. This findings was, however, in contrast with the study conducted throughout the outbreak, which showed women to be more exposed to the mental wellbeing issues [10]. Previous research has shown that Research has also shown that females suffered more stress than males because their response to stress is different due to the different hormonal system which causes them to react more emotionally and become more exhausted on an emotional level [12], [13]. Therefore, this study was conducted to identify the levels of anxiety, stress, and depression as well as to determine their possible differences among male and female students of UiTM.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The United Nations (UN) describes the spread of COVID-19 is at risk of triggering the global mental health crisis; therefore, immediate action needs to be taken to address the psychological suffering posed by this pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) has proclaimed COVID-19 as a pandemic, causing many Malaysians to experience symptoms of depression. Depression can severely impact psychological aspects and self-esteem, both of which are critical components of success in gauging human behavior and affecting the health-care system in coping with the outbreak of this pandemic. People's sense of security may be diminished as a result of stressful trauma, reminding them of their mortality and resulting in a detrimental effect on their psychological wellbeing. This threat posed due to this corona virus affects society in general, both physically and psychologically. Children and teenagers who are barred from school, for example, face uncertainty and anxiety about their learning process. For university students living on campus in particular, the period of the MCO which was uncertain in its duration caused various confusion and worries and disrupts the flow of activities such as classes, industrial training, graduation period and student loan payments.

2.1. The effects of gender on depression, stress and anxiety

There are many cases of depression involving adolescents have been reported in the media. The latest [14] found that one in five adolescents in Malaysia suffers from male-dominated depression by 18.9 percent, while female adolescents by 17.7%. The statistics also show that two out of five teenagers will be anxious with a percentage of female teenagers at 42.3% and male teenagers at 37.1% [15]. Now subsequently, all these challenges posed by this COVID-19 pandemic had cause the young adults – students - in particular, to start experiencing depressive symptoms, such as stress and anxiety. Many believed that traumatic events can increase anxiety and stress, which later can lead to depression. According to a major study done in Boston, United States, prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, 8.5% of adults in the United States were diagnosed with depression, and as the country struggles with COVID-19, the number has tripled to 27.8% [16]. The shifting to online learning during COVID-19 pandemic reported that female students were having difficulties in the transition process and impacted their study very much compared to male student [13]. This is also supported by [17] that female students significantly suffered a high level of anxiety compared to male students. Certainly, as a result of the outbreak, females have suffered higher levels of depression, emotional distress, and anxiety than males [18], [19].

Previous studies had observed that female students are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety compared to male students [20]. A study conducted to look into the impact of potentially influencing

factors including age and gender towards the levels of depression, anxiety, and health anxiety in Turkish society during the COVID-19 pandemic [3]. The findings of the study discovered that female respondents' levels of depression, anxiety, and health anxiety were more significantly impacted compared to male subjects. This finding is concurrent with previous research [12], [21]. In their studies involving 17-18 years old respondents, they also determined that the level of depression, anxiety and stress were significantly higher in female respondents, proving that the psychological effects may be greater on women compared to men during the COVID-19 pandemic [12], [21]. Guo *et al.* [22] also supported this claim when they sought to investigate and clarify the anxiety levels of 914 university students in Poland, with regards to other influencing factors, during the COVID-19 outbreak. In relation to gender, Guo *et al.* [22] discovered that in all three dimensions being studied-physical health, anxiety, and stress—female students have more significant association with higher anxiety, stress and depression levels during the period of pandemic.

On that note, it has become a common view that the pandemic has resulted in substantial percentages of poor mental health impacts and psychological anguish among the overall populace [23], [24] and the more alarming fact is that the epidemic's negative psychological effects have been more pronounced among young adolescents. The COVID-19 outbreak has been associated with a multitude of circumstances known to increase anxiety and psychological stress, including being cut off from family and friends, losing their job and salary, not knowing what government countermeasures would be taken, and not knowing what the future holds [25], [26]. These findings were predicted as public health crises may have an impact on people's health, welfare, and security as well as societies, and in both those who become infected and the wider public. These impacts may result in a variety of emotional responses, harmful actions and failing to comply with the standard operating procedure stated by the government [27].

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The sample comprised of 1,931 students from one of the largest public universities in Malaysia, UiTM with the majority of the respondents was female (83.74%) and the rest was male (16.26%). The respondents were those who enrolled in the online distance learning (ODL) mode and they participated on a voluntary basis by answering the questionnaire online. The questionnaire was divided into four parts: Part A consisted of questions on respondents' background; Part B consisted of questions on depression (seven items); Part C consisted of questions on anxiety (seven items); and Part D consisted of questions on stress (seven items). The questions in Parts B, C and D were adopted from the depression, anxiety and stress scale 21 (DASS-21) where the response to each item is reported on a four-point scale, with a score of 0 representing "not at all applicable to me", and a score of 3 "applies to me, or most of the time." Table 1 shows the degrees of severity of the depression, anxiety and stress based on the total score obtained [28].

The reliability test to signify the consistency of the internal component was tested on the depression, anxiety and stress data reveals that the Cronbach's Alpha value obtained (depression=0.925, anxiety=0.908 and stress=0.911) exceeded the required level of at least 0.7 [29]. The data analyses were conducted using IBM-SPSS AMOS version 24 software including descriptive analysis and an independent t-test. Preliminary assumption testing indicated that each of the disorder category were approximately normally distributed (skewness value of depression=0.563, skewness value of anxiety=0.504, and skewness value of stress=0.314) so that the independent t-test can be proceeded [30]. The study focused on the following research hypotheses: i) There exists a significant difference on depression level between male and female UiTM students during ODL session (H1); ii) There exists a significant difference on anxiety level between male and female UiTM students during ODL session (H2); iii) There exists a significant difference on stress level between male and female UiTM students during ODL session (H3).

Table 1. Category of depression, anxiety and stress level

Level/Disorder	Depression	Anxiety	Stress
Normal	0–4	0–3	0–7
Mild	5–6	4–5	8–9
Moderate	7–10	6–7	10–12
Severe	11–13	8–9	13–16
Extremely severe	≥ 14	≥ 10	≥ 17

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In total, 1, 931 UiTM students aged between 18 to 53 years old were involved in the study coming from different campuses, study levels and fields. Their depression, anxiety and stress levels during the ODL session are shown in Table 2. Results revealed that a majority of them was categorized as having normal level of depression disorder (517, 26.77%) and stress disorder (897, 46.45%). In contrast for anxiety disorder,

most of them experienced extremely severe level (666, 34.49%) which may lead to higher stress level or depression level in the future. Previous studies [12], [21], [22] found that the female respondents were significantly associated with higher level of depression, anxiety and stress compared to males. In addition, only the anxiety and depression levels were significantly higher among females compared to the males during the COVID-19 pandemic [3]. Therefore, this study would focus on this issue and may justify if different finding is found.

Table 2. Number of respondents based on depression, anxiety and stress level

Level/Disorder	Depression	Anxiety	Stress
Normal	517	607	897
Mild	295	235	242
Moderate	486	233	361
Severe	288	190	258
Extremely severe	345	666	173

Firstly, Table 3 shows the depression, anxiety and stress level of both genders. The result indicated that males and females were in normal level of depression and stress disorder, consistent to the overall result as stated in Table 2. Yet, a different result was found for anxiety disorder where majority of males were categorized as having normal anxiety level during the ODL session, but most of the females were having extremely severe anxiety level. The difference occurred at each level of disorder would be tested significantly. Next, Table 4 shows the findings of independent t-test analysis which resulted a significant difference at 5% level of significance between the males and females for anxiety and stress disorder level. Therefore, the second and third hypotheses (H2 and H3) were supported. The significant results revealed that the females experienced higher level of anxiety compared to males with almost two points, which was consistent with the result from Table 3. Subsequently, there was also enough evidence to reveal that females faced higher level of stress compared to males with more than one point. These two significant results were supported by previous studies [12], [21], [22] which were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Meanwhile, the result also showed that there was no enough evidence to support first hypothesis (H1) since the significance value obtained was greater than 5% level of significance ($p\text{-value}=0.163$). Therefore, this study found that there is no significant difference in students' depression disorder between males and females during ODL session.

Table 3. Number of respondents based on depression, anxiety and stress level by gender

Level/Disorder	Depression		Anxiety		Stress	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Normal	96	421	131	476	174	723
Mild	49	246	45	190	35	207
Moderate	69	417	31	202	57	304
Severe	50	238	31	159	27	231
Extremely severe	50	295	76	590	21	152

Table 4. Independent t-test according to gender

Variable	t-value	p-value	Mean difference	Standard error difference	95% Confidence interval of the difference	
					Lower	Upper
Depression	-1.396	0.163	-0.453	0.325	-1.090	0.184
Anxiety	-5.629	0.000	-1.815	0.322	-2.449	-1.181
Stress	-3.921	0.000	-1.286	0.328	-1.929	-0.643

5. CONCLUSION

The pandemic has brought about a significant rise of psychological well-being concerns and psychosocial stress and what is more striking is that the pandemic's detrimental mental health impacts have been more prominent among younger groups. With the objective to examine the differences on anxiety, stress, and depression levels among male and female students in UiTM, apparently it was found that female students experienced a greater level of anxiety, stress and depression, as opposed to their male counterpart. This result was congruent with previous research which reported that female students faced a greater stress level due to the pandemic and affected their mental health very much. To sum up, this study's findings show the increased prevalence of anxiety and depression amongst UiTM students during the outbreak, and female students experienced more severe anxiety symptoms than male students.

The result emphasized the need of providing a support system to alleviate the impacts of the pandemic on these students, particularly develop an appropriate interventions and approaches to minimize any deterioration in students' health. Therefore, apart from the existing well-being program readily available in the institution, further future research could be conducted to identify and develop specific program or training focusing on gender that could later be used to prepare and assist these groups of students control and overcome their different levels of anxiety and stress in times of distress; thus, reducing the possibility of depression among them. This study is non-clinical and limited to respondent's own self-assessed measurement of levels of depression, anxiety, and stress using the DASS-21 instrument. Therefore, the results could not confirm whether or not the respondents were suffering from distress.

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