

Perceived Social Support Among University Students in Malaysia During Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The year 2020 has made its calling to a newly diagnosed disease dragging Malaysia and most other countries into the global COVID-19 pandemic. As much as the movement control order successfully curbed the disease spread, it has also physically and mentally affects students especially of the higher educations. This study aims to assess the level of perceived social support among the university students and analyse it in relation to the sociodemographic during COVID-19 pandemic.

A cross-sectional study involving 624 undergraduates students from International Islamic University (IIUM), Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP) and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) were included. A validated Malay version self-administered questionnaire of the revised 8-item Multidimensional Scale of Social Support (MSPSS) was used to assess the social support perceived by the students. Descriptive statistics and univariate analysis were used to analyse the data.

Out of 624 respondents, majority were female (73.2%), aged less than 21 years old (54.0%), Malay (54.6%), Year 1 students (34.4%), IIUM undergraduates (62.5%), Dentistry students (46.8%), unmarried (99.2%), having household income of less than RM5000 (38.8%) and staying at home with parents (51.0%). 5.3% of the respondents have low social support while majority (49.7%) has moderate social support. It was found there is a significant association of household income with level of perceived social support.

There is association between sociodemographic and perceived social support, particularly household income likely due to the increasing burden caused by the pandemic. Thus, it is recommended for the nation to come together to aid the burden faced by those in need.

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Introduction

The World health organization (WHO) has declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020. Up to the present time, there were about 430 million cases detected with over 5.9 million deaths globally¹. Meanwhile in Malaysia alone, approximately there were 3.3 million confirmed cases with thirty-two thousand deaths².

In order to control the spread of COVID-19 infection, many countries including Malaysia

implemented strict movement control orders (MCO) as a circuit breaker due to this overwhelming COVID-19 outbreak.

Throughout MCO, non-essential businesses and stores, schools, institutions of higher education, houses of worship and mass assembly were banned from operating. These as well include social distancing, travel restrictions, quarantines, isolation and campus closures which cause students to have inclining worries about their future along with their ongoing stressors of academic life³. This new and unfamiliar enforcement has greatly influenced them in many means especially those in higher education⁴. As such, the traditional physical teaching and learning manner which was once the bread and butter of being a student was no longer an option of learning, but mostly were shifted to full online learning.

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Higher education is considered as a stressful period in students' life which they have to cope with since they are facing a variety of demands such as living away from their families and a heavily loaded curriculum. Severe and continued stressors may affect the mental health in variable degrees and may precipitate depression, anxiety and stress which may affect students' academic performance, physical health and quality of life. A previous study revealed that 11.7%, 33.6 % and 11.7% of pharmacy students have clinically significant depression, anxiety, and stress respectively⁵.

Sudden drastic changes to the learning environment of the students due to the COVID-19 situation has caused psychosocial changes to the students during home quarantine⁶. Together with this pandemic situation, the effect of COVID-19 may amplify these stresses.⁷ A study done in Malaysia among medical students using The Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21) concluded that COVID-19 led to significant mental health issues among students whereby 15.8% of the students had mild stress, 4.2% moderately stressed, and 2% severely stressed.⁸ Social support is defined as the presence and accessibility of people on whom one can depend on and from whom one can experience care, warmth, value, and affection. As discussed by Ye et al.⁹ whom suggested that an individual's level of satisfaction includes respect, understanding, and support that they received in their upbringing is considered as perceived social support. Study by Steese et al. undertaken in 2006¹⁰ mentioned that social support has shown to promote mental health as a buffer against stressful life events. This is supported by Lee et al.¹¹ claiming that perceived social support from their closed ones are instrumental in the association between stress and mental well-being.

Sociodemographic can be simply defined as the characteristics of the population. This includes age, gender, race, education level, household income and others. An article by Prezza et al¹² concluded that not only the number of close friends reduce with increasing age, males teenagers tend to receive lesser support from their closed ones as compared to females of the same age. In the same article, it was also found that married couples prone to have higher family support as compared to those who are no longer married.¹²

In order to preserve the students' physical

and psychological well-being, a proper social support is required for them to have a strong coping strategy. This is portrayed by several studies done among breast cancer patients which revealed that factors such as age, education level, social support and psychological distress affect coping strategies¹³. Another study done showed that social support was one of the factors that reduced emotional disorders during isolation for COVID-19 positive patients¹⁴

Therefore, this study aims to assess the level of perceived social support by the students from their closed ones be it friends, family or significant others during this pandemic and analyse it in relation to the sociodemographic. The sociodemographic characteristics being studied include gender, age race, nationality, year of study, university, faculty, marital status, household income, and accommodation during study.

Materials and methods

A cross-sectional study was conducted among undergraduate students from International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP) and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Prior conducting this study, ethical approval was obtained from IIUM Research Ethical Committee. Informed consent was obtained from the participants after the nature of the study was fully explained. The participation was entirely on voluntary basis. All participants were ensured of the confidentiality and the gathered information will only be used for research purposed.

The inclusion criteria for the subjects were those students who consented to participate in the study and the students should be registered as undergraduate students of IIUM, UMP or UiTM. This study was conducted online by distribution of questionnaire via emails and WhatsApp messenger. After data analysis using IBM SPSS26 on the answered revised 8-item Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), the participants were grouped into three groups of having low, moderate, and high social support.

The MSPSS is a brief research tool designed to measure perceptions of support from three sources: family, friends and significant other. The scale is comprised of a total of 12 items, with 4 items for each subscale.¹⁵

The original MSPSS is free to use. Across many studies, the MSPSS has been shown to have good internal and test-retest reliability, good validity, and a fairly stable factorial structure. The Malay version of the MSPSS demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89), parallel form reliability (0.94) and test-retest reliability (0.77) (Spearman's rho, $p < 0.01$).¹⁶

The revised 8-item MSPSS-M displayed good internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.91, 0.93 and 0.92 for total scale, family, and friends factors respectively. In this study, revised 8-item MSPSS-M was used to assess the social support among the participants.¹⁶

Results

A total of 630 students received the questionnaires, six respondents did not complete or did not give consent, making the final number of respondents of 624. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the population. Majority of respondents were female (73.2%), less than 21 years old (54.0%), Malay (54.6%), Year 1 of their study (34.3%), IIUM students (62.5%), Dentistry students (46.8%), unmarried (99.2%), having household income of less than RM5000 (38.8%) and staying at home with parents during the study (51.0%).

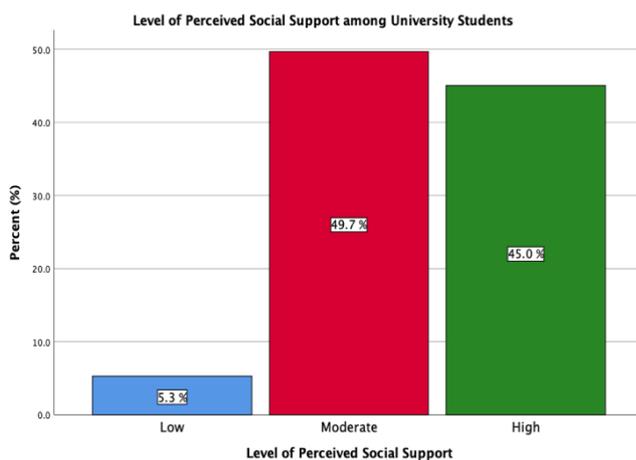


Figure 1. Prevalence of level of perceived social support among university students.

Figure 1 showed the prevalence of level of perceived social support. Based on screening tool using the revised 8-item Multidimensional Scale of Social Support (MSPSS), out of 624 respondents, 5.3% (n=33) were having low social

support while majority of 49.7% (n=310) of respondents have moderate social support.

Sociodemographic characteristic	n (%)
Gender	
• Male	167 (26.8)
• Female	457 (73.2)
Age	
• ≤ 21 years old	341 (54.0)
• > 21 years old	283 (44.8)
Race	
• Malay	586 (54.6)
• Non-Malay	38 (45.4)
Nationality	
• Malaysian	621 (99.5)
• Non-Malaysian	3 (0.5)
Year of Study	
• Year 1	214 (34.3)
• Year 2	153 (24.5)
• Year 3	92 (14.7)
• Year 4	77 (12.3)
• Year 5	88 (14.1)
University	
• IIUM	390 (62.5)
• UMP	45 (7.2)
• UiTM	189 (30.3)
Kulliyah/Faculty	
• Medicine	287 (46.0)
• Dentistry	292 (46.8)
• Industrial Science and Technology	45 (7.2)
Marital Status	
• Married	5 (0.8)
• Unmarried	619 (99.2)
Household Income	
• ≤ RM5000	242 (38.8)
• RM5001 – RM9999	177 (28.4)
• ≥ RM10000	205 (32.9)
Accommodation during Study	
• Home with parents	318 (51.0)
• Hostel	303 (48.6)
• In a rented house	3 (0.5)

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents.

Our study found that the only significant factor that contributes to one's perceived social support is household income (p-value=0.006) which is less than 0.05. Other factors such as gender, age, race, nationality, year of study, university, faculty, marital status, and accommodation during study were not significantly associated as shown in Table 2.

Sociodemographic characteristic	Perceived Social Support, n (%)			p-value*
	Low	Moderate	High	
Gender				
• Male	10 (6.0)	86 (51.5)	71 (42.5)	0.711
• Female	23 (5.0)	224 (49.0)	210 (46.0)	
Age				
• ≤ 21 years old	16 (4.7)	172 (50.4)	153 (44.9)	0.742
• > 21 years old	17 (6.0)	138 (48.8)	128 (45.2)	
Race				
• Malay	31 (5.3)	290 (49.5)	265 (45.2)	0.929
• Non-Malay	2 (5.3)	20 (52.6)	16 (42.1)	
Nationality				
• Malaysian	33 (5.3)	308 (49.6)	280 (45.1)	1.000*
• Non-Malaysian	0 (0.0)	2 (66.7)	1 (33.3)	
Year of Study				
• Year 1	13 (6.1)	102 (47.7)	99 (46.3)	0.166
• Year 2	4 (2.6)	90 (58.8)	59 (38.6)	
• Year 3	7 (7.6)	38 (41.3)	47 (51.1)	
• Year 4	5 (6.5)	41 (53.2)	31 (40.3)	
• Year 5	4 (4.5)	39 (44.3)	45 (51.1)	
University				
• IIUM	21 (5.4)	194 (49.7)	175 (44.9)	0.802
• UMP	4 (8.9)	22 (48.9)	19 (42.2)	
• UiTM	8 (4.2)	94 (49.7)	87 (46.0)	
Kulliyah/Faculty				
• Medicine	12 (4.2)	143 (49.8)	132 (46.0)	0.720
• Dentistry	17 (5.8)	145 (49.7)	130 (44.5)	
• Industrial Science and Technology	4 (8.9)	22 (48.9)	19 (42.2)	
Marital Status				
• Married	0 (0.0)	3 (60.0)	2 (40.0)	1.000*
• Unmarried	33 (5.3)	307 (49.6)	279 (45.1)	
Household Income				
• ≤ RM5000	11 (4.5)	117 (48.3)	114 (47.1)	0.006
• RM5001 – RM9999	17 (9.6)	95 (53.7)	65 (36.7)	
• ≥ RM10000	5 (2.4)	98 (47.8)	102 (49.8)	
Accommodation during Study				
• Home with parents	14 (4.4)	163 (51.3)	141 (44.3)	0.667
• Hostel	19 (6.3)	146 (48.2)	138 (45.5)	
• In a rented house	0 (0.0)	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	

* Pearson Chi-square Test **Fisher's Exact Test

Table 2. Relationship between level of perceived social support and sociodemographic characteristics.

Discussion

This cross-sectional study was conducted in order to assess the level of perceived social support by the students and analyse it in relation to the sociodemographic characteristics. It was found that 49.7% of the students have moderate social support and 5.3% having low social support. Also, the result shows that race, nationality, year of study, faculty and marital status were not significantly associated with level of perceived social support among university students.

In addition to that, it was found that there was higher perceived social support in female than male students, be it from their families or friends although there was no significant association. This is however in contrast with Matud et al.¹⁷ proposing that gender has a significant role on social support. A more recent study by Zamani et al.¹⁸ claimed that males had higher perceived social support and was

supported by the work of Reza et al.¹⁹

Stereotypically, females are known for expressiveness meanwhile males for their instrumentality.¹⁷ As the decade goes by, the gender role may have developed to another perspective as compared to how it was previously, thus the reason why it has no significant association to the perception of social support. Nevertheless, further study is required to clarify on this issue.

On another note, several studies done by Shahahmadi²⁰ and Mansorian²¹ revealed there was significantly lower social support among the younger students. Conversely, our study found there is no significant different between the age groups in relation to the level of perceived social support. This is in line to a study done by Zamani et al.¹⁸ which as well found that there is no significant relationship between age and social support. Therefore, it was postulated that this is due to the narrow age gap among the respondents. In order to strengthen the variables studied, a wider age group should be included to further assess the relation.

In several previous studies, marital status appears as a significant factor in the association with perceived social support.^{22,23} Even so, this study shows there was no significant difference between being married or unmarried. Being married is hypothesised as the students have their significant others to rely on to despite the challenges they were facing during this pandemic. It may also be another cause of stress as the students have to provide living for their partners and sometimes, children. However, the results of this study could barely prove any of this as it may be due to the uneven distribution of the respondents as there were very minimal students who were married.

Good relationship with housemates is important as they allow students to establish an assuring home during this vulnerable period.⁴ Housemate here refers to those who lives together in the same household. This includes own family members or peers in hostel or rented house. This was as well concluded by Lee et al.²⁴ saying that it has been demonstrated that the significant predictor of successful adjustment to university life is when students are able to establish their own social support. Our study revealed there is no significant difference to relate on the accommodation during study and level of perceived social support. When

compared between staying home with parents and staying at hostels, most number of students have moderate social support for both of these accommodation.

Although the students living in hostel may exposed to possible stress and exposure to new culture, it was reported that they have higher perceived social support as they mingle among the similar age groups and cultivate their interpersonal skills between their peers^{25,26} Bankston et al.²⁷ and Zamani et al.²⁸ also expressed that the students tend to accept advice, opinions, and attitudes more from their friends.

As for household income, it is noted there was significant association with level of perceived social support. this is in line with a study by Lai et al.²⁸ reveals that this distancing policies has caused physical and psychological distress as the students experience financial difficulties along with them having concerns regarding their physical health as the exposure to COVID-19 is highly inevitable. From the same study, it was found that those participants were most likely from the lower income household as they require higher monthly internet expenses, extra costs for electronic devices for online learning as well as those living in an overcrowded household as it affects their concentration during online learning²⁸ This was supported by Irawan et al.²⁹ and Rohman et al.³⁰, claiming that students from low-income households had to increase their Internet bandwidth in order to participate in online learning, hence needing to increase their expenditure. This pandemic lockdown as well has caused some parents to lose or restrained from their usual job. Thus further causes financial burden to the household.

Conclusion

The findings from this study contribute to current literatures and fill the gap in exploring the relationship of sociodemographic and level of perceived social support among university student. Results have shown that majority of students have moderate level of perceived social support and only minimal have low social support. It can also be concluded that there is association between sociodemographic and perceived social support, particularly household income. This may be due to the increasing burden required for their online learning as well as their family's financial

source were being reprimanded during this COVID-19 pandemic.

This study has a number of limitations. Firstly, a cross-sectional study itself which gave limited information. It is suggested to perform a proper follow up with these students throughout a longer period during the pandemic. Next, sampling bias may have occur as the study does not represent a heterogenous nature of university students in Malaysia. Future studies on these variables would help to open the nation's eyes on how this pandemic has costs us a fortune and how important it is to have each other's back through this tough times.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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