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(IJEPC)**www.ijepec.com**THE INTERPLAY OF SOCIAL SUPPORT, ACADEMIC STRESS,
AND MENTAL HEALTH HELP-SEEKING AMONG
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DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.1060021**Abstract:**

University students worldwide face increasing mental health challenges, yet disparities in help-seeking behaviour persist across cultural and social contexts. This study explores how different levels of perceived social support interact with academic stress and mental health help-seeking intentions among a diverse group of university students, with a focus on differences by nationality and gender. A cross-sectional survey of 259 students (55.2% female; 62.9% Malaysian, 37.1% non-Malaysian) assessed perceived social support (using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, MSPSS), academic stress, and mental health help-seeking behaviour. Results showed a significant relationship where students with moderate social support had lower help-seeking intentions compared to those with low (mean difference = 0.56, $p = .002$) or high support (mean difference = -0.44, $p = .005$). Malaysian students reported higher academic stress (mean difference = -0.13, $p = .034$) but lower help-seeking behaviour (mean difference = 0.34, $p = .007$) than their non-Malaysian peers, suggesting that cultural stigma may influence these effects. Gender differences were not significant. These findings challenge the belief that moderate social support is enough to promote mental health engagement and highlight the need for culturally tailored interventions in academic settings.

**Keywords:**

Psychological Distress, Malaysia, Burnout, Stigma, Higher Education

Introduction

University students face increasing academic pressure, social transitions, and life challenges, often leading to heightened stress and psychological distress. In Malaysia, as in many parts of the world, university students report higher levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout compared to the general population (Hossain et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023). Despite the rising prevalence of mental health issues, help-seeking behaviour among students remains limited and inconsistent (Chang et al., 2020).

While academic stress is gaining recognition as a critical issue in higher education, there is a significant gap in understanding how students' access to and perception of social support influence their help-seeking decisions. This issue is worsened by the stigma surrounding mental health, which continues to act as a barrier—particularly in Asian contexts where cultural norms may discourage open discussions of psychological distress (Ahad et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2020). Additionally, limited campus mental health resources and a lack of awareness or trust in these services make the situation worse (Bourdon et al., 2020; Harris et al., 2022). Although many studies have looked at stress or support individually, few have examined how they interact with help-seeking behaviour within a Malaysian university setting (Ariffin & Nor, 2022; Rathakrishnan et al., 2022).

This study aims to fill these gaps by exploring the relationships between social support, academic stress, and help-seeking intentions among Malaysian and non-Malaysian university students. Specifically, we test three hypotheses: (1) Academic stress will be positively related to help-seeking intentions but negatively related to perceived social support; (2) Moderate social support will predict lower help-seeking compared to low or high support; and (3) Malaysian students will report higher academic stress but lower help-seeking than non-Malaysians.

Methods***Participants and Procedure***

A total of 259 university students were recruited through convenience sampling at a private higher education institution. To facilitate data collection, the researcher distributed an online questionnaire via Google Forms, disseminated through instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp, and across various social media platforms, including Instagram, among Malaysian university students. Ethical clearance approval was obtained from the institution (Ethical Clearance Code: IEC-2023-FAS_0012).

Instruments

Perceived Social Support was assessed using the 12-item Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet et al., 1988), which demonstrated excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$). Participants were categorized into low (<3), moderate (3–5), or high (>5) support groups based on mean scores (Zimet et al., 1988).

Academic stress was measured using the Academic Expectations of Stress Inventory (AESI) developed by Ang and Huan (2006) consisted of 13 items and two components of expectations of self and expectations of others (parents/teachers).

Mental Health Help-Seeking Behaviour was evaluated via a 9-item scale based on Fischer and Farina's (1995) Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help scale ($\alpha = .83$). Items assessed willingness to seek counselling, psychiatric care, or other formal support services.

Statistical Analysis

The collected data were analysed using SPSS software. Categorical variables were summarized using frequencies and percentages, while continuous variables were presented as means and standard deviations. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between the independent variables (social support and academic stress) and the dependent variable (mental health-seeking behaviour). A one-way ANOVA was used to compare mental health-seeking behaviour across different levels of social support. Additionally, an independent samples t-test was performed to compare academic stress and mental health-seeking behaviour based on nationality.

Results

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 116 males and 143 females. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 25 years, with a mean age of 20.7 years ($SD = 1.4$). The sample consisted of 62.9% Malaysian and 37.1% non-Malaysian participants. Regarding social support, 18.5% of participants who scored below 3 were categorized as having low social support, while 30.5% who scored above 5 were classified as having high social support.

Table 1

Demographic and Reliability of Measures (n = 259)

Variables	Sub-groups	Frequency (%)	Cronbach Alpha
Gender	Male	116 (44.8)	-
	Female	143 (55.2)	
Nationality	Non-Malaysian	96 (37.1)	-
	Malaysian	163 (62.9)	
Social Support level	Low	48 (18.5)	.962
	Moderate	132 (51.0)	
	High	79 (30.5)	
Academic Stress	-	-	.810
Mental Health Seeking	-	-	.830

According to Table 2, academic stress is correlated significantly with mental health seeking behaviour ($r = .173, p = .005$), moderate social support ($r = -.136, p = .029$), and Malaysian nationality ($r = .129, p = .038$). Besides, mental health seeking behaviour is correlated significantly with low social support ($r = .155, p = .012$).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1: Academic Stress	3.817	.497	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
2: Mental Health Seeking	4.715	.999	.173**	1	-	-	-	-	-
3: Low Social Support	.185	.389	.095	.155*	1	-	-	-	-
4: Moderate Social Support	.510	.501	-.136*	-.001	-.486*	1	-	-	-
5: High Social Support	.282	.451	.046	.037	-.299*	-.639*	1	-	-

Note. ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table 3 shows that there was a significant difference within social support level on university students' mental health seeking ($F = 8.328$, $p < .000$). Levene's test of equality of variance showed that equal variances are assumed in running the T-test of university students' nationality (Non-Malaysian and Malaysian) on academic stress and mental health seeking.

Table 3

Between-Group Comparison

Variables	Groups	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Academic Stress	Social Support	2.552	.080
	Nationality (Levene's Test)	.519	.472
Mental Health Seeking	Social Support	8.328	< .001
	Nationality (Levene's Test)	.295	.588

Table 4 shows that there was a significant difference between Malaysians and non-Malaysians on academic stress and mental health seeking, for example, Malaysians had higher academic stress than non-Malaysians ($MD = -.132$, $p = .034$), while having lower mental health seeking behaviour than their counterparts ($MD = .343$, $p = .007$). In comparing the social support level, university students who had moderate social support had lower mental health seeking behaviour than those who had low social support ($MD = .563$, $p = .002$), while also having lower mental health seeking behaviour compared with those who had high social support ($MD = -.439$, $p = .005$).

Table 4

Mean Difference and Group Comparison

Variables	Group Comparison	Mean Difference	Std. Error	p-value	Lower Limit	Upper Limit
Academic Stress	LSS vs MSS	.165	.083	.120	-.0317	.3611
	MSS vs HSS	-.117	.070	.221	-.2827	.0488
	LSS vs HSS	.048	.090	.858	-.3611	.0317
	NM vs M	-.132*	.062	.034	-.254	-.010
Mental Health Seeking	LSS vs MSS	.563**	.164	.002	.177	.949
	MSS vs HSS	-.439**	.138	.005	-.765	-.113
	LSS vs HSS	.124	.178	.766	-.296	.543
	NM vs M	.343**	.126	.007	.094	.592

Note. LSS: low social support; MSS: moderate social support; HSS: high social support; NM: non-Malaysian; M: Malaysian; vs: versus; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Discussion

According to the study's findings, there was a substantial curvilinear association between students' intentions to seek aid and their level of social support. The association between academic stress and burnout was partially mediated by psychological capital and social support, according to a study by Gebregergis and Csukonyi (2024) that involved 448 college students. It was clear that the biggest risk factor for burnout was academic stress. Perceived social support and psychological capital were crucial to promoting students' mental health.

According to this study, compared to their non-Malaysian classmates, Malaysian students reported lower levels of help-seeking (mean difference = 0.34, $p = .007$) but higher levels of academic stress (mean difference = -0.13, $p = .034$), indicating that cultural stigma may mitigate these effects. The mean loss of face among Malaysian undergraduate students was high (mean = 113.75), which significantly predicted help-seeking behaviour in a negative direction ($p < 0.001$) (Loong et al., 2024). Besides that, undergraduate students (first semester) from a government university in Malaysia had poor self-regulation when they were under a lot of academic stress. Compared to college students and public adults, they exhibited a lower degree of mindfulness, or awareness and attention to the present moment (Ahmadi et al., 2014). It was suggested that mindfulness training be included in the curriculum to promote effective learning, lessen students' stress and anxiety as their grades improve, and lessen burnout, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students (Wu & Zhao, 2023).

Social support, mental health seeking, and academic stress were all non-significantly connected with gender differences. One of the related cross-sectional studies, which had 389 students (29% of men; 70.2% of women) aged 18 to 60 years old, refuted these findings by showing that men experienced lower levels of academic stress ($p < 0.001$) and technostress ($p < 0.004$) than women. This could be because social support strongly mediated the beneficial association between men's self-perceived health and academic stress (Asensio-Martínez et al., 2023).

“There is no health without mental health” (Prince et al., 2007). This study was carried out at the right moment to draw the interest of academics, educators, and mental health professionals

in collaborating using a multidisciplinary approach to assist college or university students. In addition to peer monitoring, which may be beneficial for university students, particularly in their first year of study (Gehreke et al., 2024), the curriculum ought to include the development of a growth mindset, resilience, and social and emotional skills (Green et al., 2021). However, the use of convenience sampling for data collection was one of the study's drawbacks. Future studies were advised to use random sampling to lessen selection bias. The study's conclusions were restricted to a university setting. Therefore, the generalisability to various educational levels was diminished. Besides that, the participants were able to respond in ways that supported societal norms because the data were gathered via self-reported questionnaires. In addition to the quantitative results, this might be improved by adding an interview or focus group discussion to obtain more meaningful data.

Conclusion

Differences by gender were non-statistically significant in this study. On the other hand, these results highlight the need for culturally appropriate treatments in academic contexts and cast doubt on the notion that modest social support is enough to promote mental health participation.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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