

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
MODERN EDUCATION
(IJMOE)**www.gaexcellence.com/ijmoe**EXPLORING THE ROLES OF GENDER AND ACADEMIC
PERFORMANCE ON STUDENTS' CAREER PREFERENCES**

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Article Info:**Article history:**

Received date: 09.02.2026

Revised date: 05.03.2026

Accepted date: 21.04.2026

Published date: 09.06.2026

To cite this document:

Hassim, N. H., Yusri, M. Y., Shafee, C. M. N. M., & Norahim, N. B. (2026). Exploring The Roles of Gender And Academic Performance On Students' Career Preferences. *International Journal of Modern Education*, 8(30), 164-180.

Abstract:

An individual's preferences for a career can vary greatly, and this is especially noticeable among undergraduate students. In Malaysia, these preferences usually correspond with opportunities in either the public or private sector. Accordingly, this study investigates how career preferences are associated with gender and academic performance among undergraduate students in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Seremban. Respondents for this study were selected through convenience sampling, with an online survey as the primary data collection method. The data were then analysed using cross-tabulation and chi-square tests to examine relationships among the main variables. The findings revealed a tendency for female students to pursue careers in the public sector, whereas male students leaned toward the private sector. Nevertheless, no significant association was established between gender and career preferences among the students. Furthermore, the findings suggested that students who perform better academically are more likely to pursue careers in the public sector. Additionally, there was a significant association between career preference and academic performance. Regardless of the sector, choosing a career that aligns with

a student's interests, strengths, and values leads to greater job satisfaction and personal fulfilment.

DOI: 10.35631/IJMOE.830012 **Keyword:**

Academic Performance, Career Preference, Chi-Square-Test, Gender



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Introduction

One of the processes involved in deciding on a career is the possibility of pursuing a particular career path (Hadiyati & Astuti, 2023). University students, especially those in their final years, should begin focusing on their intended career paths and work towards achieving them. This is despite the fact that selecting a subject, a set of courses of study, and a career path is often challenging, particularly for undergraduate students (Siva Gurunathan & Lokesh, 2021). This may also be attributed to the fact that career preference is an essential aspect of life that requires significant consideration (Vondracek et al., 2019). Notably, a career is a long-term process that provides an individual with consistent income and satisfaction (De Vos et al., 2020; Davidescu et al., 2020). In that regard, Jackson and Bridgstock (2018) suggested that educators must understand how to support students' career development during university since universities are increasingly being held responsible for students' graduate outcomes. Correspondingly, understanding students' career preferences at university can help bridge the gap between academic learning and practical applications. Moreover, according to a recent study by Quinlan and Corbin (2023), more than 60% of students reported that their career choice had changed between their first and final year in the United Kingdom. Essentially, students are easily influenced by a variety of circumstances, such as the changes in curriculum, placements, work experiences and co-curricular activities.

In universities, stakeholders, such as faculty members and policymakers, rely heavily on reliable and valid data (Lavidas et al., 2022). According to Porter (2011), self-report surveys of university students are the most popular primary data source to assess how relevant and applicable university programs are to market needs. Thus, it is crucial to understand university students' perceptions and career aspirations, as this knowledge can help future career sectors offer relevant opportunities that align with students' interests, talents, and motivations. In that

sense, this valuable insight benefits both students and the workforce, providing a more prepared, engaged, and future-ready generation.

In this study, career preferences are categorised into two primary sectors: public and private. According to Hata et al. (2026), students in Malaysia frequently believe that different sectors provide conflicting advantages. The public sector traditionally offers potential for career advancement, promising benefits, and perceived job security, subject to eligibility, and provides pension benefits upon retirement (Heong & Tuan, 2019). In contrast, employees who work in the private sector are often offered significant annual wages and bonuses (Ahmad et al., 2022). Using this binary classification enables the study to examine how factors such as job security versus financial incentives influence students' career choices. Thus, this division provides a necessary framework for understanding how Malaysian students navigate the unique demands and opportunities of the local labour market.

To make better, more informed decisions for their future, students must be guided and supported (Zulfqar et al, 2022). For example, it is essential for universities, their lecturers, counsellors, and parents to be involved in guiding and supporting students to help them make a more informed decision at this stage (Pitan & Atiku, 2017). By understanding students' career preferences, counsellors and lecturers can provide appropriate support in matching students' aspirations. This is due to students' preferences reflecting their interests, values, skills, and views of various career paths. Accordingly, this study was conducted to explore the career preferences with a particular focus on gender differences and students' academic performance.

Literature Review

This study aims to provide an overview of career preferences by gender and by academic performance.

Career Preferences Based on Gender

A significant characteristic that persists across labour markets worldwide is the tendency for men and women to pursue different careers (Cortes & Pan, 2018). As a result, there is a distinct gender gap in the economic sector and engagement, especially in Malaysia (Morhan, 2024). Previous research has indicated that the main reason for the gender wage gap is that men and women tend to work in different sectors of the labour market (Sato et al., 2019), suggesting that students' career preferences are strongly influenced by their gender. In addition, male students were more interested in engineering and technology, while female students were more interested in the arts and management (Angwaomaodoko, 2023). Further research by Dinhof and Willems (2024) highlighted that several public sectors are heavily gender-dominated. For example, police, firefighters, and politicians are perceived as male-dominated occupations. On the other hand, nurses, teachers, salespeople, and social entrepreneurs are viewed as women dominated. This gender dominance may be influenced by Public Service Motivation (PSM). According to Andersen et al (2021), PSM is the desire of individuals to provide services to others to improve society and help others. This is supported by a study by Benditt (2015) in the United States, which underscored that women prioritise helping others and contributing to society, indicating stronger PSM-related values. In contrast to women, the study also demonstrates that PSM is a more reliable determinant of men's career choice.

Careers are often segregated by gender. Previous research refers to occupational gender segregation as the unequal distribution of men and women across jobs, occupations, and workplaces (Blackburn et al., 2002). For instance, young girls whose fathers work in male-dominated areas tend to have traditional gender attitudes, increasing the probability of their preference for female-dominated occupations (Chesters, 2022). This outcome could be the result of a decision made at a younger age during university. According to Gao et al. (2025), choosing a major is an important step in preparing for a future university career. Thus, when one gender registers more often than the other in a given major, this can lead to gender inequality in many jobs. In that sense, Parker et al. (2020) revealed a lack of women in major social science fields such as economics, while men face a similar challenge in healthcare, indicating the existence of gender segregation in some Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields of education. Furthermore, empirical data from Western countries indicates that men are more competitive and willing to take risks than women. In comparison, women are more agreeable, conscientious, and have a higher level of neuroticism than men (Stern & Madison, 2022). Comparable findings were observed in earlier research by Charles (2017), which asserted that in Western nations, professional choices are viewed as expressions of identity rather than merely economic necessities. In general, this implies that men and women choose paths that allow them to express themselves, thereby reinforcing gender segregation in the market labour force.

Having a strong academic background is crucial for career success. Rather than having technical knowledge, a strong academic background shapes an individual's critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In Germany, Wicht et al. (2024) reported that most individuals in the vocational education and training system who terminate their training and later change careers are better aligned with their goals. This illustrates that people with strong passions are more likely to achieve their goals. According to a recent study by DeVries et al. (2026), men outnumber women in most university majors, leading to disparities in future career fields. This finding is supported by Stern and Madison's (2022) research, asserting that men value power more than female leaders do and that power valuation is positively associated with management potential. Apart from that, according to DeVries and Lauermann (2025), gender segregation in career goals is also frequent in high school. For example, both genders were unlikely to change their job goals from male-dominated to female-dominated, or vice versa. This suggests that, throughout the transition from adolescence to early adulthood in university, career changes are common and may be influenced by their surroundings, such as parents, teachers, family, and friends.

A study by Suhi et al. (2021) exploring career preferences among students in Bangladesh highlighted that students' career preferences depend on their gender, religion, and academic path. Similarly, evidence from students at a Turkish high school suggests that gender, school type, parents' educational level, and family income significantly affect students' career choices (Korkmaz, 2015). In line with this, Kazi and Akhlaq (2017) agreed that students' professional choices are heavily influenced by their parents, peers, gender, socioeconomic circumstances, and personal interests. Conversely, Siddiky and Akter (2021) discovered that neither gender nor socioeconomic class had a major impact on students' future career decisions. Likewise, Osi (2018) contended that students' career choices are significantly influenced by their socioeconomic status rather than by gender or school type.

A study by Holum et al. (2024) investigated the preferences of business students in Norway and Poland regarding the public versus the private sector. It revealed that 94% of the students preferred the private sector, suggesting that the majority of students are more likely to work in the private sector regardless of their gender. Regarding gender, a study by Gomes and Kuehn (2019) established that women comprise the majority of public sector employees worldwide. Their employment share is higher despite variations in the size of the public sector. Following this, some past studies have presented that women are more likely than men to be interested in jobs in the public sector (Hull & Nelson, 2000; Lewis & Frank, 2002). These findings suggested that female students have a greater preference for public-sector employment. This is supported by recent research by Caponi and Nobili (2024), underscoring that almost every country has a larger proportion of women in the public sector than in the private sector. However, women who begin their careers in the public sector are less likely to leave the workforce later in their careers to focus more on their children (Pertold-Gebicka, 2016). Gender should therefore be considered a significant variable relevant to career preferences.

Career Preferences Based on Academic Performance

Based on Hoti and Zenuni (2024), academic performance refers to the level of success students achieve in mastering the knowledge and curriculum provided by higher education. Generally, students' academic performance is evaluated by their Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA), an important factor, as it is one of the most reliable measures of students' academic potential and success (Hasan et al., 2017). Correspondingly, students who achieved a CGPA of 3 or above are considered to have demonstrated good academic performance (Hailu et al., 2024).

A study by Tentama and Abdillah (2019) asserted that students who have achieved academic success tend to have greater career advancement opportunities, higher employment benefits, and higher income. On a similar note, this study aligns with Mehra et al. (2023), which indicated that students with higher CGPAs are more likely to be offered better job placement packages, particularly in terms of compensation and job quality. In this context, public sector policies usually seek to provide or facilitate these opportunities. A past study by Blank (1985) established that public-sector employees are highly educated and have extensive experience. This finding aligns with Vandenabeele (2008), who noted that students who score higher on the PSM scale tend to thrive in the public sector.

On the other hand, a study by Burgmeijer (2010) demonstrated no association between intelligence level and career choice between the public and private sectors. This can be related to the fact that, even if a student has a high Intelligence Quotient (IQ), as evidenced by academic performance, it is unrelated to the career preference the student will pursue later. Additionally, a study by Rami et al. (2021) stated that academic performance does not directly affect career decision-making. Nevertheless, Woo (2011) reported no association between graduates' academic performance and a career in the public sector. In addition, Norhayati et al. (2020) claimed that a high CGPA does not ensure career performance, although maintaining a satisfactory CGPA remains important. This is particularly relevant for students intending to work in the public sector, where a minimum CGPA of 3.0 is often required. Although the literature does not directly compare preferences between the public and private sectors, it remains relevant, as academic performance can influence industry choice, especially in competitive environments. In other words, academic performance affects students' confidence, employability, and eligibility for roles. To better understand how academic performance

influences students' career preferences, it is worthwhile to examine how it interacts with preferences for public or private sector positions.

Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional design and a convenience sample of 356 students from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Seremban. The advantages of convenience sampling are that it is a less expensive, straightforward method that requires minimal effort to implement and does not require a sampling frame (Stratton, 2021). Nonetheless, this sampling technique has the limitation that it does not allow researchers to generalise the results to a larger population. Rather, the findings may apply only to the research participants (Acharya et al., 2013). As a result, the findings of this study apply only to students at UiTM Seremban.

The data were gathered through an online survey, specifically a Google Form. According to Saleh and Bista (2017), one of the most common methods of data collection among academic communities is web-based surveys. In another study by Lavidas et al. (2022), web surveys are surveys conducted online, allowing invited individuals to complete a questionnaire. The benefits of using online surveys include ease of access, protection of respondent privacy, prompt responses, time and cost savings, and faster data storage, due to their ability to collect data from large numbers of respondents (Park et al., 2019). Prior to proceeding with the data collection, this study was first reviewed and approved by the Ethics Review Committee (ERC) at UiTM. This, in turn, ensures that all research activities involving human respondents comply with the required ethical and legal standards. Following this approval, the questionnaires were then distributed to the selected respondents. Concurrently, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

The three sections, namely A, B, and C, comprised the questionnaire. Section A contained the respondents' demographic data. Meanwhile, Section B comprised the dependent variable, career choice, and Section C comprised factors influencing career choice that have been adopted from numerous sources (Assenga, 2019; Vaghela and Matimbwa, 2019; Lupas Jr and Farin, 2021; Siddiky and Akter, 2021; Soomro et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023). Accordingly, only three variables will be the focus of this study: students' gender, preferred career type, and academic performance, measured by CGPA.

In this study, descriptive statistics and the chi-square test are employed. Before proceeding with data analysis, data cleaning and screening were performed to examine for missing values, errors, and inconsistencies. At the same time, descriptive statistics are utilised to analyse the basic characteristics of students. According to Kaur et al. (2018), they constitute an essential initial stage in research and should always be calculated prior to conducting inferential statistics. On the other hand, the chi-square test is a nonparametric test used to evaluate the null hypothesis of no association between two or more groups, populations, or criteria (Schober & Vetter, 2019). It assesses the association between career preferences and students' academic performance by gender. While all assumptions for the chi-square test are met, further analysis is conducted to understand the data better. The formula for calculating the chi-square test is as follows:

$$\chi^2 = \sum_{i=1}^n \frac{(O_i - E_i)^2}{E_i}$$

where,

O = observed frequency.

E = expected frequency.

Based on the chi-square test, two research hypotheses have been identified in this study:

Alternative hypothesis 1: There is an association between preference for the type of career choice and the gender of students.

Alternative hypothesis 2: There is an association between preference for the type of career choice and the academic performance of students.

Results

Table 1 presents a cross-tabulation of career type preference and student gender to understand these variables better.

Table 1: Cross-Tabulation Table Between Preference on Type of Career Choice and Gender of Students

Gender		Preference for the type of career choice		Total
		Public sector	Private sector	
Male	Count	45	50	95
	Expected count	52	43	95
	% within gender	47.4%	52.6%	100.0%
Female	Count	150	111	261
	Expected count	143	118	261
	% of total	57.5%	42.5%	100.0%
Total		195	161	356

Based on Table 1, across genders, approximately 47.4% of male students prefer the public sector, and 52.6% prefer the private sector. Meanwhile, 57.5% of female students prefer the public sector, and 42.5% prefer the private sector. These results suggest that male students are more likely to choose the private sector, while female students are more likely to choose the public sector.

Table 2: Chi-Square Test

Pearson chi-square	Value	df	P-value
		2.870	1
Cramer's V	0.090		

Based on Table 2, there is no association between gender and preference for the type of career choice, $\chi^2(1, N = 356) = 2.870$, $p = 0.090$, $V = 0.090$, as its p-value of 0.090 exceeds the significance level.

Table 3 presents a cross-tabulation of students' career preferences and academic performance to understand these two variables better.

Table 3: Cross-Tabulation Table Between Preference on Type of Career Choice and Academic Performance of Students

Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA)		Preference for the type of career choice		Total
		Public sector	Private sector	
2.50-2.99	Count	20	10	30
	Expected count	16.4	13.6	30
	% within CGPA	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
3.00-3.49	Count	119	121	240
	Expected count	131.5	108.5	240
	% within CGPA	49.6%	50.4%	100.0%
3.50-4.00	Count	56	30	86
	Expected count	47.1	38.9	86.0
	% within CGPA	65.1%	34.9%	100.0%
Total		195	161	356

Table 3 indicates that, across academic performance, among students with a CGPA between 2.50 and 2.99, 66.7% express a preference for employment in the public sector, while 33.3% favour the private sector. In contrast, approximately 49.6% of students with a CGPA of 3.00-3.49 prefer a career in the public sector, while 50.4% prefer the private sector. Lastly, 65.1% of students with a CGPA between 3.50 and 4.00 prefer working in the public sector, while 34.9% prefer the private sector. This result demonstrates that students with high academic performance are more likely to pursue careers in the public sector. While most students in this study have a CGPA between 3.00 and 3.49, this clustering of CGPAs does not indicate that their career preferences are the same. Hoti and Zenuni (2024) argued that grades are important, though a student's personal interests and life goals usually exert a stronger impact on their future. In other words, career preferences are increasingly influenced by students' preferences and expectations rather than by small differences in their CGPA. Despite this, students may still exhibit a broad and diverse range of career interests, even within a narrow range of academic performance.

Table 4: Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	P-value
Pearson chi-square	8.037	2	0.018
Cramer's V	0.150		

Based on Table 4, there is an association between preference for the type of career choice and the academic performance of the student, $\chi^2(2, N = 356) = 8.037, p = 0.018, V = 0.150$, since its p-value of 0.018 is less than the significance level. The effect size, Cramer's V, indicates a weak yet noticeable relationship.

Discussion

The study revealed that the majority of female students prefer the public sector compared to male students. This finding is consistent with those of previous studies (Hull & Nelson, 2000; Lewis & Frank, 2002; Caponi & Nobili, 2024), highlighting a stronger preference for working in the public sector among female students. This is attributable to the fact that women's choice to work in the public sector, including government at all levels, is correlated with job characteristics (Konrad et al., 2000; Tolbert & Moen, 1998). This is supported by a study in Malaysia by Musa et al. (2018), demonstrating that women's decision to work in the public sector may also be influenced by factors such as the level of gender equality and government policy on women's employment. Furthermore, past studies indicate that the public sector positively affects career prospects and intrinsic benefits, such as flexible work hours to accommodate family responsibilities (Matin, 2018). Interestingly, this finding aligns with a previous study by Azmi et al. (2012), which identified that Muslim women public employees in Indonesia have many benefits. This includes childcare, job sharing, flexible hours, longer maternity leave, and working from home. Given that the majority of the Malaysian population is Muslim, these benefits are likely to be relevant and applicable within the Malaysian context as well. As Bumiputera undergraduates, UiTM students often come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds that place significance on long-term household stability. Therefore, female students' preference for the public sector can be viewed as a rational career choice, influenced by the various benefits offered by the public sector that help them achieve a better work-life balance. This, in turn, allows them to manage their career responsibilities alongside their future roles as wives and mothers.

On the other hand, the results established that male students are more inclined to pursue careers in the private sector. As the primary breadwinners for their families, men are expected to earn substantial income to provide economic stability, covering necessities such as food, shelter, and more. According to Rattsø and Stokke (2020), the private sector offers better financial compensation, both monthly and hourly, although employees experience lower job satisfaction and are required to work longer hours (Danzer, 2019). This suggests that male students may feel strong pressure to fulfil the traditional role as the main provider in the family, leading them to prioritise careers that offer better income opportunities. Ultimately, this implies they are willing to sacrifice job security to pursue higher financial returns and greater rewards.

This study also reported no association between gender and career preference. While this result also confirmed studies by Siddiky and Akter (2021) and Osi (2018), it contradicts previous research findings (Suhi et al., 2021; Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017; Korkmaz, 2015). For these students, career preferences are no longer strongly influenced by gender and the gender bias in certain careers may be less significant. Rather, their choices may be driven more by non-gender factors, such as family influence, as Norahim et al. (2025) highlighted. As these students belong to Generation Z, they are likely to share similar educational backgrounds, career goals, and career opportunities. This suggests that gender-based differences in career preferences are becoming less pronounced. Moreover, the limited distribution of minority students among male students may obscure an association that might exist in a more balanced population.

The second purpose of this study was to examine the association between preference for the type of career choice and the academic performance of students. The result did indicate an association between these two variables, though it contrasts with previous studies (Burgmeijer, 2010; Woo, 2011; Rami et al., 2021). Hence, a closer examination of the cross-tabulation output

is essential here, as it provides insight into how academic performance relates to students' career preferences. It can be observed that moderately performing students prefer the private sector, while higher-performing students prefer the public sector, implying that excellent students are drawn to more structured and predictable career paths. This can be attributed to the public sector having a clear advancement path, such as the Malaysian Administrative and Diplomatic Officers (PTD) programme. According to Yusof and Masrek (2016), PTDs have been recognised as top knowledge workers, and top-priority offers are given to high-performing students, such as First Class Honours graduates. Excellent students are therefore attracted to this benefit, as it provides well-defined career pathways based on length of service, examinations, and training. In the public sector, many top students are awarded government scholarships with binding service obligations, such as Public Services Department (JPA) and Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA) scholarships. For instance, under JPA's new academic merit-based sponsorship scheme, top-performing students benefit from significantly reduced loan repayment rates based on their CGPA, with those achieving between 3.75 and 4.00 required to repay only 5% of their loans. Additionally, students who obtain employment in the public sector that is consistent with their qualifications will be entirely exempt from repaying the remaining loan balance (Yusof, 2025). Based on these advantages, excellent students may be more likely to pursue careers in the public sector. Conversely, moderately performing students exhibit a favourable attitude towards the private sector, reflecting more pragmatic approaches to achieving their goals in career planning. According to Ghani (2020), private-sector employers frequently seek graduates who exhibit soft skills, such as strong communication, effective teamwork, and adaptability to workplace demands. In that regard, moderately performing students may prefer the private sector, which prioritises competence over credentials. This environment allows agile, fast-learning potential employees to thrive based on current performance and output, rather than being limited by their university grades.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Selecting a career path aligned with a student's interests, strengths, and values leads to greater job satisfaction and personal fulfilment across sectors. This research has achieved its two objectives by examining whether there is a significant association between students' career preferences, gender, and academic performance. Notably, the first finding indicates that students' gender is not related to their career preferences, suggesting that gender may not be the main factor in influencing students' career choices. Since the students in this study belong to the same university and are exposed to a similar environment, such as a shared curriculum, it tends to shape and align their career preferences, regardless of gender. Furthermore, traditional societal expectations that men should pursue more challenging careers, while women should prioritise job security, may no longer be relevant to Generation Z. Instead, they tend to base their employment decisions on other, more significant considerations rather than gender-based stereotypes. In line with this, they may pursue careers in fields where they excel academically, supporting the association between career preference and academic performance.

In response, future studies should have a proportionate distribution of genders and include a broader range of respondents from varied higher education institutions, rather than focusing on a single university. This would allow for a more thorough and relevant assessment of students' career interests across various educational settings. Concurrently, it is also recommended to include relevant variables, such as job security and salary expectations. As demonstrated by Santinha et al. (2021) and Ko and Jun (2015), job security is commonly perceived as the most important factor influencing students, particularly those enrolled in undergraduate

programmes. Since it can provide financial stability, a better quality of life, and a balance between work and personal life, job security is a crucial factor in determining career choices. As a result, it would be interesting to observe how this variable influences student in various career paths. Gu and Zhu (2023) and Nguyen et al. (2023) also suggested that students' career decisions can be influenced by their salary expectations. Correspondingly, higher salaries can lead to greater job satisfaction, increased dedication, and enhanced production. While well-paying careers frequently provide better prospects for growth, benefits, and development, each sector offers unique advantages that can appeal to different individuals. Hence, comprehensive guidance and support are necessary for students to navigate the potential challenges of their future careers successfully. This underscores the significance of career counsellors and parents in advising students and helping them choose careers. Additionally, it would be advantageous to invite industry representatives to discuss specific career disciplines, providing students with practical insights and real-world perspectives.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank all the participating students for giving invaluable responses to this study.

Funding Statement: “No Funding”

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Modern Education (IJMOE).

Ethics Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the UiTM Research Ethics Committee, approval number REC/1160/2024. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Nor Hidayah Hassim was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, analysis, and interpretation of results and overall supervision of the study. Muhammad Yassar Yusri & CT Munirah Niesha Mohd Shafee contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. Nurul Batrisyia Norahim handled data collection. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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