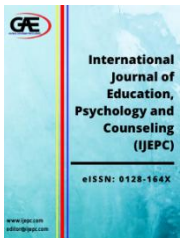
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DETERMINANTS OF FINANCIAL STRESS AMONG MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: THE ROLES OF SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS, FINANCIAL BEHAVIOUR AND FINANCIAL LITERACY

Noorliana Safian[1], Shawal Sahid Hamid@Hussain[2]*, Khairiyah Md Shahid[3], Nor Syamaliah Ngah[4], Siti Melinda Haris[5], Norazlin Abd Aziz[6], Mohd Idham Mohd Yusof[7]

[1]Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
noorliana_safian@uitm.edu.my https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0402-8430
[2]Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
shawalhussain@uitm.edu.my https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7490-2214
[3]Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
khairiyah870@uitm.edu.my https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7747-3388
[4]Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
syamaliah@uitm.edu.my https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8268-4941
[5]Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
melinda596@uitm.edu.my https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0483-9933
[6]Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
norazlin525@uitm.edu.my https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0661-3102
[7]Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
idham708@uitm.edu.my https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5376-6163

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

Financial stress constitutes a substantial threat to university students' psychological well-being and academic achievement, particularly in the context of escalating living expenses and constrained financial resources. This research investigates the associations among socioeconomic factors, financial behaviour, financial literacy, and financial stress in undergraduate students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was conducted, collecting primary data from 201 students across three UiTM campuses (Seremban 3, Shah Alam, and Raub) through a structured questionnaire.

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Data analysis involved descriptive statistics and Spearman's rank-order correlation. The results indicated a high overall level of financial stress among respondents (Mean = 4.07, SD = 0.89). Additionally, non-parametric correlation analysis identified statistically significant, moderate positive relationships between financial stress and socioeconomic factors ($r_s = 0.493$, $p < 0.001$), financial behaviour ($r_s = 0.470$, $p < 0.001$), and financial literacy ($r_s = 0.448$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that socioeconomic constraints directly increase stress, while higher financial literacy may heighten awareness of economic vulnerabilities, thereby intensifying perceived stress. The study offers empirical evidence to inform university administrators and policymakers in developing targeted financial support initiatives and comprehensive financial management programs.

Keyword:

Financial Behaviour, Financial Literacy, Financial Stress, Higher Education, Socioeconomic Status, UiTM Students

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Introduction

The higher education sector in Malaysia has expanded rapidly over the past two decades, and the country now stands as a regional educational hub with more than 1.24 million tertiary students enrolled across public and private institutions (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2025). Structural improvements have widened access to tertiary education, yet financial distress remains a stubborn challenge for undergraduates (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2024). University students generally rely on several sources of financing — family allowances, public student loans such as the Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional (PTPTN), scholarships, and part-time work — to meet academic and living expenses (Hosen et. al, 2025). Still, monthly subsistence costs, averaging RM501 to RM1,000, often outstrip available funding, which pushes many students toward loans even for basic necessities (AKPK, 2024; Chan et al., 2023).

Financial stress reaches beyond material shortage. It has serious effects on students' mental health, sleep quality, and academic trajectory (Sharma et.al., 2026). Empirical evidence shows that a major proportion of tertiary students experience severe financial anxiety, and those from bottom 40% (B40) income households face a heavier burden because of inflationary pressures and limited support cushions (Harun et al., 2025; Jamri & Ishak, 2023). At the same time, Malaysia's national financial literacy index remains modest at 59.1, which points to broad

deficits in budgeting, debt management, and contingency saving skills (BNM, 2025; Hamzah et.al., 2024). Poor financial practices, including impulsive spending and weak budgeting, intensify these vulnerabilities and leave students exposed to chronic economic anxiety (Abdulhameed & Khalid. 2021).

Although prior scholarship has examined student financial dynamics in Malaysia, most studies still treat socioeconomic status, financial behaviour, or financial literacy as separate concerns (Shim et al., 2010; Xiao et al., 2014). A small number of recent studies have tried to bring these constructs together, but the issue is that major empirical and contextual constraints remain.

First, existing integrated investigations in Malaysian higher education (e.g., Khalid & Othman, 2025; Wan Nawang et al., 2025) have primarily focused on localized, single-campus samples or relied strictly on direct linear assumptions. In doing so, they treat financial literacy and self-regulatory budgeting as universal mitigation tools that automatically reduce stress. These studies fail to account for how these constructs interact under conditions of severe structural scarcity, thereby overlooking potential non-linearities and behavioral paradoxes. Second, while studies in Western contexts have acknowledged complex relationships between financial knowledge and strain (e.g., Archuleta et al., 2013; Northern et al., 2010), their findings cannot be generalized to public university systems in emerging Southeast Asian economies, where students face distinct structural pressures—such as reliance on fixed public loans (PTPTN) amidst surging post-pandemic living costs.

To date, no empirical study has comprehensively examined the simultaneous, non-linear interrelationships of socioeconomic background, financial management behaviours, and conceptual literacy within Malaysia's largest public university network, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM).

The present study addresses this gap and establishes its novelty in two distinct ways:

- **Contextual & Empirical Scope:** It evaluates a multi-campus sample across different regional environments (UiTM Seremban 3, Shah Alam, and Raub) to capture broad institutional dynamics rather than localized anomalies.
- **Conceptual Innovation**: Moving beyond conventional linear frameworks that assume financial knowledge inherently shields students from strain, this study critically tests the "management friction" and "cognition-anxiety" mechanisms. In doing so, it uncovers how active budgeting and high financial awareness can paradoxically heighten psychological stress when operating within structural cash-flow deficits.

1. To bridge these empirical gaps, this study addresses two core research objectives:
2. To measure the prevailing level of financial stress among UiTM undergraduate students.
3. To examine the relationships between socioeconomic factors, financial behaviour, financial literacy, and financial stress among these students.

The findings aim to inform institutional policy, enabling higher education leaders to formulate impactful financial literacy interventions, holistic counseling support, and equitable assistance schemes.

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
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Literature Review & Hypotheses Development

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates two foundational frameworks to model student financial stress which are Stress Process Theory (Pearlin et al., 1981) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991).

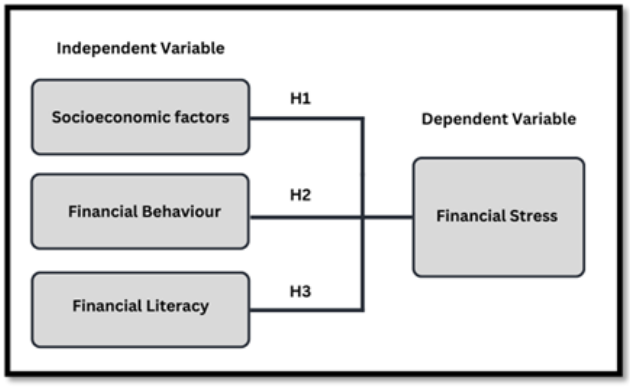


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Stress Process Theory postulates that social and economic statuses dictate an individual's exposure to primary stressors (e.g., low household income, inadequate allowance) and secondary stressors (e.g., inability to buy course materials), which directly manifest as psychological distress (Pearlin et al., 1981). Socioeconomic constraints function as structural stressors directly elevating financial anxiety.

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) in contrasts, posits that individual behavior is dictated by behavioral intentions, which are shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). In personal finance, perceived control and knowledge (literacy) govern financial habits (budgeting, saving). Maladaptive financial behaviors and heightened cognitive awareness of economic liabilities can influence psychological stress outcomes (Montalto et al., 2019; Xiao & Porto, 2017).

Socioeconomic Factors and Financial Stress

Socioeconomic indicators including family income, parental education, living arrangements, and financial aid have directly shaped a student's resource environment (Sirin, 2005). Undergraduates from lower-income backgrounds face constant resource scarcity, forcing them to balance academic obligations with immediate survival needs (Jeyakumaran & Hussain, 2025; Moore et al., 2021). Empirical findings across Malaysian higher education confirm that household income is a primary determinant of perceived financial stress (Aziz et al., 2025; Khalid & Othman, 2025). Thus, it is hypothesized:

H_1: There is a significant relationship between socioeconomic factors and financial stress among university students.

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
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Volume 11 Issue 64 (September 2026) PP. 1892-1907

Financial Behaviour and Financial Stress

Financial behaviour encompasses the execution of money management tasks, including cash flow budgeting, saving, and discretionary spending (Xiao & Porto, 2017). Poor financial habits, such as impulse buying, lack of expense tracking, and inadequate cash planning, increase the risk of liquidity shortfalls and intensify psychological strain (Norlaili Harun et al., 2025; Potter et al., 2020). In contrast, disciplined financial behaviors promote financial stability and enhance overall well-being (Foo et al., 2024; Wan Nawang et al., 2025). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_2: There is a significant relationship between financial behaviour and financial stress among university students.

Financial Literacy and Financial Stress

Financial literacy encompasses the cognitive abilities and knowledge rnecessary to make informed financial decisions related to saving, borrowing, and budgeting (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014; Remund, 2010). Although, higher financial literacy generally typically facilitates effective debt management and long-term planning (Amagir et al., 2018; Prempeh et al., 2024), it may also increase individual's awareness of current debt burdens and future economic uncertainties, thereby affecting their perception of financial stress (Xu & Rashid, 2023). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_3: There is a significant relationship between financial literacy and financial stress among university students.

Methodology

Research Design and Sampling Procedure

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was utilized in this study. The target population consisted of undergraduate students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Data collection followed a two-stage sampling procedure. Initially, cluster sampling identified three distinct campuses within the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) system: UiTM Seremban, UiTM Shah Alam, and UiTM Raub. This approach ensured representation of both main and branch campuses with varying geographical and environmental contexts. Subsequently, convenience sampling was applied to recruit active undergraduate students at each selected campus.

Although convenience sampling provides practical benefits such as accessibility, cost-efficiency, and expedited data collection among student populations, its methodological limitations are recognized As a non-probability sampling method, convenience sampling may introduce selection bias since self-selected participants could differ systematically from the broader student body, for example in their interest in personal finance or availability. Additionally, because non-probability sampling does not afford every population member an equal or known chance of selection, the generalizability of the findings to the entire Malaysian university population is limited. To address these limitations, respondents were recruited from

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 64 (September 2026) PP. 1892-1907

diverse academic programs, study levels, and campus environments, resulting in a heterogeneous sample (N=201) appropriate for non-parametric bivariate correlation analysis (Etikan et al., 2016; Roscoe, 1975).

Classic probability sample size formulas such as those Krejcie & Morgan (1970) recommend a sample size of N=384 for infinite populations under simple random sampling. However, is social science research utlizing non-probability convenience sampling effective sample sizes typically range from N=30 to 500 ranges (Etikan et al., 2016; Roscoe, 1975). The final sample of N=201 was sufficient to achieveadequate statistical power (α= 0.05, β> 0.80) for robust non-parametric bivariate correlation analyses.

Survey Instrumentation

The survey instrument was constructed by adapting validated scales from established literature to allign with the Malaysian higher education context. The dependent variable, Financial Stress, consisted of seven items adapted from the Financial Stress Scale for Undergraduates (Northern et al., 2010). The independent variables comprised Socioeconomic Factors (five items adapted from Sirin, 2005; Jamri & Ishak, 2023), Financial Behaviour (6 items adapted from Xiao & Porto, 2017), and Financial Literacy (six items adapted from Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014; Remund, 2010). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

A structured three-stage adaptation processwas implemented prior to full survey administration to ensureacademic rigor.

1. Contextual Adaptation and Translation: The original scale items were adapted to reflect the financial circumstances of Malaysian public university students including local expenditure categories, rental living arrangements, and PTPTN loan considerations. Bilingual researchers employed a back-translation technique to ensure semantic equivalence between the English and Bahasa Melayu versions.
2. Expert Content Validation: Content validity was verified through review by a panel of three academic experts specializing in consumer economics, public policy, and student affairs. The panel assessed item clarity, contextual relevance, domain coverage, and construct appropriateness. Minor wording adjustments were made based on expert feedback to eliminate ambiguity in terminology.
3. Pilot Testing: After expert validation, a pilot study was conducted with 30 undergraduate students at UiTM Seremban, who were subsequently excluded from the main sample. The pilot test assessed instrument readability, measure completion time (average 10–12 minutes), and establish preliminary scale reliability.

All variables were measured using established scales adapted from prior literature. The dependent variable, Financial Stress, was measured using 7 items adapted from Northern et al. (2010). The independent variables included Socioeconomic Factors (assessed through demographic indicators, income tiers, allowance levels, and living arrangements), Financial Behaviour (evaluated using budgeting, saving, and spending), and Financial Literacy (measured by understanding of financial concepts and decision-making abilities). Each construct was measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 64 (September 2026) PP. 1892-1907

Internal consistency and reliability were evaluated by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all multi-item constructs. As presented in Table 1, all constructs exhibited good to excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha (α) values ranging from 0.784 to 0.892, exceeding the recommended statistical threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 1: Construct Measurement, Item Counts, and Reliability Analysis

Construct Variable	Source/Adaptation	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Internal Consistency Level
Financial Stress (DV)	Northern et al. (2010)	7	0.892	Excellent (α> 0.80)
Socioeconomic Factors (IV1)	Sirin (2005); Jamri & Ishak (2023)	5	0.784	Acceptable / Good (α> 0.70)
Financial Behaviour (IV2)	Xiao & Porto (2017)	6	0.815	Good (α> 0.80)
Financial Literacy (IV3)	Lusardi & Mitchell (2014); Remund (2010)	6	0.831	Good (α> 0.80)

Note: N = 201. All constructs exceeded the standard threshold of α = 0.70$.

Statistical Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, were calculated to assess demographic distributions and financial stress levels. Financial stress mean scores were classified into three categories: Low (1.00–2.50), Moderate (2.51–3.50), and High (3.51–5.00). Diagnostic testing indicated a violation of the bivariate linearity assumption, making the parametric Pearson correlation inappropriate. Therefore, Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation (r_s) was employed to test hypotheses H_1-H_3.

Ethics Consideration and Informed Consent

The study adhered to the ethical principles for human research established in the Declaration of Helsinki and institutional guidelines of the Research Ethics Committee (REC) or Ethics Research Committee (ERC) of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Before data collection commenced, ethics exemption or approval was obtained under minimal risk protocols for non-invasive questionnaire-based research.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. A standardized Informed Consent Form was embedded on the opening page of the online/printed survey. Before gaining access to the questionnaire, respondents were provided with detailed information regarding the study's objectives, voluntary nature of participation, absence of monetary compensation, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. To ensure participant privacy and data protection, all survey responses were collected anonymously, without recording personal identifiers (such as student identification numbers or names). All collected data were stored securely on password-protected institutional cloud storage, accessible strictly to the research team, and used solely for aggregate academic research purposes.

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 64 (September 2026) PP. 1892-1907

Findings

Respondent Profile

The final dataset comprised 201 valid responses. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample. The majority of respondents were female (63.7%, n=128), aged between 21–23 years (61.2%, n=123), and enrolled in Bachelor's degree programs (64.68%, n=130). Geographically, 51.0% (n=102) were based at UiTM Seremban 3, 34.5% (n=69) at UiTM Shah Alam, and 14.5% (n=29) at UiTM Raub. Primary financial sources included parents/family (32.34%) and scholarships/loans (30.35%). The predominant monthly allowance ranged between RM1,001–RM1,500 (43.28%), and most students resided in rented accommodation (43.28%) or university hostels (39.30%).

Table 2: Demographic Profiles of the Respondents

Profile Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	73	36.30
	Female	128	63.70
Age	18–20 years old	52	25.90
	21–23 years old	123	61.20
	>24 years old	26	12.90
Campus	UiTM Seremban 3	102	51.00
	UiTM Shah Alam	69	34.50
	UiTM Raub	29	14.50
Level of Study	Foundation	3	1.49
	Diploma	60	29.85
	Bachelor's Degree	130	64.68
	Master's Degree	5	2.49
	PhD	3	1.49
Financial Source	Parents / Family	65	32.34
	Scholarship / Loan	61	30.35
	Part-time Job	52	25.87
	Combination	23	11.44
Monthly Allowance	<500	19	9.45
	RM500-RM1000	79	39.30
	RM1,001-RM1,500	87	43.28
	>RM1,500	16	7.96
Living Arrangement	Rented House	87	43.28
	Hostel / College	79	39.30
	With Family	19	9.45
	Others	16	7.96

Research Objective 1: Level of Financial Stress

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 64 (September 2026) PP. 1892-1907

Table 2 indicated that the overall mean score for financial stress was 4.07 (σ= 0.89), which is categorized as High stress (3.51–5.00). The most significant stressors were general financial anxiety (μ = 4.19, σ = 1.04$), anxiety regarding current financial status (μ = 4.16, σ = 0.88), and concerns regarding future financial stability (μ = 4.11, σ = 0.97). This financial pressure result in both psychological and somatic symptomsSleep disturbances related to financial worries were also prominent (μ = 3.90, σ= 1.01).

The findings indicate a persistent pattern of anxiety affecting multiple aspects of the students' daily lives, suggesting that financial strain is a sustained burden rather than an intermittent issue. The primary contributors to this psychological distress stem are general personal financial conditions (μ = 4.19) and uncertainty about future financial stability (μ = 4.11). This financial pressure results in both psychological and somatic symptoms. is not merely abstract or theoretical; it manifests in tangible psychological and somatic distress. Students frequently report experiencing tension when paying for basic necessities (μ = 4.08) and sleep deprivation due to ongoing concerns about debt and financial obligations (μ = 3.90).

These descriptive results are consistent with recent empirical studies on Malaysian higher education, which highlight those macro-economic pressures, such as post-pandemic inflation, rising food prices, and increasing off-campus accommodation costs, have imposed significant psychological strain on university undergraduates (Aziz et al., 2025; Harun et al., 2025).

Table 3: Level of Financial Stress

Specific Stressor Area	Item Mean Score
Stressed by Personal Financial Condition (FS3)	4.19 (High)
Anxious About Current Financial Situation (FS1)	4.16 (High
Uncertain About Future Financial Stability (FS7)	4.11 (High)
Tense When Paying for Basic Needs (FS6)	4.08 (High)
Sleep Disturbance Due to Financial Worries (FS2)	3.90 (High)

Research Objective 2

Examination of the Relationship Between Socioeconomic Factors and Financial Stress

To address Research Objective 2, a Spearman rank-order correlation analysis identified a statistically significant, moderate positive relationship between socioeconomic factors and financial stress (r_s= 0.493, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting Hypothesis 1 (H1). Socioeconomic status demonstrated the strongest bivariate association with financial stress among the three independent variables examined. This result is consistent with Pearlin et al.'s (1981) Stress Process Theory, which posits that lower socioeconomic standing and limited structural resources are strongly associated with psychological strain. These disadvantages are evident in the students' living conditions: over 48% of respondents reported a monthly allowance below RM1,000, and 43.28% resided in private rented accommodation. Additionally, this finding corroborates previous empirical studies by Jamri and Ishak (2023) and Khalid and Othman (2025), who found that household income tier, particularly Bottom 40% (B40) status, is

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 64 (September 2026) PP. 1892-1907

strongly associated with subjective stress among Malaysian public university students. Given that full-time undergraduates experience significant time constraints due to academic workloads, which limit opportunities for supplementary employment, socioeconomic constraints remain closely linked to perceived financial stress.

Table 4: Correlation Analysis

Construct		Financial Stress
Socioeconomic Factors	Spearman Correlation	0.493**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	201
Financial Behaviour	Spearman Correlation	0.470**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	201
Financial Literacy	Spearman Correlation	0.448**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	201

Examination of the Relationship Between Financial Behaviour and Financial Stress

Regarding Research Objective 3, statistical testing revealed a statistically significant, moderate positive relationship between financial behaviour and financial stress (r_s= 0.470, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 2 (H2). While conventional applications of Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) suggest that responsible financial practices—such as budgeting, saving, and expense tracking—are associated with lower stress, this empirical finding reveals a "management friction" co-occurrence under conditions of severe resource scarcity. When students navigate tight budgets, engaging in money management may co-exist with psychological fatigue rather than empowerment. Under acute resource scarcity, students who report tracking their expenses may experience constant, daily confrontation with budget deficits. This association reinforces observations by Che Din and Abd Rashid (2023) and Norlaili Harun et al. (2025), who noted that practicing strict financial self-regulation within an expensive university environment is associated with psychological friction and elevated stress scores (σ= 4.02 for Item FS5). From a theoretical standpoint, this suggests that exercising high perceived behavioral control over a deficit cash flow co-occurs with heightened mental strain in low-allowance student populations.

Examination of the Relationship Between Financial Literacy and Financial Stress

With regard to Research Objective 4, statistical analysis showed a statistically significant, moderate positive relationship between financial literacy and financial stress (r_s = 0.448, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting Hypothesis 3 (H3). This positive association shows that among undergraduates who are working within budget limits, greater financial knowledge goes hand in hand with higher levels of financial stress. To make sense of this correlation, a preliminary, non-causal hypothesis known as the "cognition-anxiety mechanism". According to this conceptual model, financial literacy offers a conceptual understanding of issues such as inflation, the accumulation of interest, and debt obligations (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014; Remund, 2010), even though it does not directly provide financial capital. As a result, when

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
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Volume 11 Issue 64 (September 2026) PP. 1892-1907

financially literate undergraduates assess their student loan obligations (for example, their PTPTN loans) in the light of a competitive labour market after graduation, their increased cognitive awareness is accompanied by anticipatory financial anxiety. This finding is in line with those of Xu and Abd Rashid (2023), who found a positive correlation between financial literacy and psychological anxiety among Malaysian tertiary students who have no structural economic safeguards. The same phenomenon is also seen in Item FS7, since a high level of concern about future stability (Mean = 4.11) is positively related to literacy levels. Nevertheless, since this study uses a cross-sectional correlational design, it is not possible to determine any causal direction. The observed association might be due to hyper-awareness, reverse causality (in which students who are stressed seek out financial information), or there could be unmeasured confounding variables.

Synthesis of the Objectives

Synthesizing the empirical findings across Research Objectives 1 through 4 demonstrates that student financial stress shares complex, multi-dimensional associations with structural, behavioral, and cognitive factors. Research Objective 1 established that financial stress is high among UiTM undergraduates. Research Objective 2 confirmed that lower socioeconomic background exhibits the strongest positive link with financial strain. Research Objectives 3 and 4 illustrated that active financial management behaviours and higher financial literacy are positively associated with perceived stress under cash-flow constraints. Taken together, these correlational findings indicate that financial stress among university students is strongly intertwined with structural resource shortages, daily budgeting friction, and heightened economic awareness.

Conclusion

This empirical study examined the determinants of financial stress among Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) undergraduate students by analyzing the complex interrelationships among socioeconomic status, financial behaviour, financial literacy, and psychological strain. The findings indicate that financial stress is a significant and widespread issue among undergraduates, as reflected by a high overall composite mean (μ= 4.07, σ = 0.89).

By integrating Stress Process Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, this study provides a nuanced, multi-dimensional understanding of financial strain in higher education. Socioeconomic factors emerge as the primary source of strain (r_s= 0.493, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that structural resource deficits directly contribute to acute psychological anxiety. Additionally, financial behaviour (r_s = 0.470, $p < 0.001$) and financial literacy (r_s= 0.448, $p < 0.001$) exhibit statistically significant positive associations with financial stress. Disciplined budgeting, when practiced under severe cash-flow constraints, generates management friction, while increased financial literacy heightens awareness of immediate cash shortfalls and future debt obligations, such as PTPTN loan repayments, thereby creating a cognition-anxiety mechanism. Therefore, student financial stress arises from a complex interplay of structural resource scarcity, self-regulatory fatigue, and heightened economic realism, rather than solely from inadequate money management or financial ignorance.

Addressing these challenges necessitates a multi-level strategy encompassing both macro-level policy interventions and institutional administrative measures. At the macro-policy level,

government funding agencies, particularly the Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional (PTPTN) and public scholarship providers, should recalibrate baseline allowance structures. Current loan disbursements often reflect outdated living costs; thus, financial aid calculations ought to be dynamically indexed to inflation and adjusted according to campus geographic locations and prevailing consumer price indices. Furthermore, given that low household income is the primary driver of stress, policymakers are encouraged to expand non-repayable living subsidies and targeted food voucher schemes for students in the Bottom 40% (B40) income bracket. Such measures would reduce reliance on student loans for basic needs and help mitigate long-term debt burdens.tutional level, university management—such as the UiTM Student Affairs Division—should transition away from basic, knowledge-only financial literacy workshops. Financial education must be paired with psychological coping strategies to help students navigate financial anxiety and reduce the cognitive burden of deficit budgeting. Furthermore, institutions ought to establish decentralized, low-barrier campus safety nets, such as food bank networks and emergency micro-grant funds, to protect students from sudden, unexpected costs like medical emergencies or rental deposits. Given that off-campus private renting contributes significantly to financial strain—affecting 43.28% of respondents—university administrations should also expand subsidized housing options or negotiate regulated, affordable transportation and housing tariffs with local municipal authorities.

Finally, while this study provides valuable empirical insights, several methodological and conceptual limitations highlight opportunities for future research. The sample was geographically limited to three campuses within the UiTM system (Seremban 3, Shah Alam, and Raub). Future studies should employ stratified random sampling across a broader range of public and private universities in East Malaysia, the Northern region, and the East Coast to enhance national generalizability. Methodologically, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to determine causal relationships; therefore, longitudinal studies tracking undergraduates from enrollment through graduation would more effectively capture the evolution of financial stress in relation to academic workload and debt accumulation. Additionally, future research with larger probability samples should utilize Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) or Multiple Linear Regression to examine complex structural pathways, including potential mediating variables such as financial self-efficacy, parental financial socialization, and perceived social support, as well as moderating variables like psychological coping mechanisms and employment status.

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