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PERCEIVED ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG STUDENTS DURING PANDEMIC IN A MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

In light of the recent uptick in reported cases, the problem of the Covid-19 pandemic has once again become a topic of discussion. After the spread of the Covid-19 virus, traditional classrooms gave way to virtual ones. As a result, students have had a more difficult time adjusting to the new system of education. Emotional distress associated with the fear of disappointment due to academic performance or the realisation of the possibility of any loss is what call “academic expectation stress.” Students may also feel academic pressure from their own high expectations and those of their parents and teachers. Students also may have a greater tendency to fall short of realising their full potential if they have a poor self-perception or have a negative attitude about themselves. Hence, while online education was widely used despite the Covid-19 pandemic, this study aimed to determine what factors contributed to students' academic stress and examine their relationship with one another. Furthermore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the significance level each Perceived Academic Stress variables of different gender. This study resulted that man show high mean in all variables. Furthermore, all the factors accounted for 55.22 percent of the variance in responses related to students’ experiences of academic related stresses. From the results also show factor on “Academic Self Perception” contributed high percentage to students’ academic stress.

Keywords: Pandemic, stress, academic, perception, student

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1. Introduction

According to Johnston and Cassidy (2020), in comparison to academic stress, academic expectations have received far less attention from researchers. A disproportionate number of students in Malaysia experience symptoms of stress. One of the causes for this is the societal expectation placed on young people to graduate with high grades. One incentive in particular is that if they graduate high school with good grades, they will have a higher chance of finding a better job in the future (Hj Ramli et al., 2018). Academic expectation stress is a form of mental distress which caused by the apprehension of unhappiness related to academic failure or even awareness of possibility of any potential loss (Ismail et al., 2022). Students must perform lots of academic commitment, such as school examination, answering questions in class, catching up what teacher is teaching and competing with their peer or classmates. These expectations may rise above their limit (Ismail et al., 2022). There is a risk that the weight of these expectations will be too much for the students to bear, putting them at risk for academic expectation stress (Johnston & Cassidy, 2020). According to Poots and Cassidy (2020), academic expectations can be self-imposed by the students themselves. Furthermore, students' own expectations and expectations that coming from parent as well as teachers may also contribute to the academic stress among the students (Sultana et al., 2018). The situation on academic fear pass through students' life, ruining parts of their everyday routine and students are under pressure to perform, to fit in, to commit, and to live up to others' expectations and this even establish high objectives for themselves which are usually unattainable (Nandagaon & Raddi, 2020).

There has been a lot of talk among students at institutions of higher learning about the stress that comes from having to deal with their studies (Ramachandiran & Dhanapal, 2018). Stress cannot be disconnected from students' academic life in university or higher learning institution. This stressful situation and condition could prevent students from successfully completing their studies if the students cannot handle it accordingly (Utami et al., 2020). One form of stress that can manifest in an academic environment, such as a school or university, is known as academic stress. Students frequently find themselves unable to cope with the pressures of school because they are confronted with a variety of stresses, such as the expectation that they would do well in their studies and the expectations of their peers (Tus, 2020). Academic stress is the most familiar emotion state of mind that students experience during their studies (Hj Ramli et al., 2018). In addition, academic stress is a situation that develops as a result of the pressures that students feel when they are confronted with academically challenging situations. These situations cause students to have an objective viewpoint toward their inability to approach the needs and resources that they actually possess (Aina & Wijayati, 2019). The many demands placed on students in terms of their academic lives, their examinations, their ability to compete with their peers, and their ability to satisfy their own academic goals can lead to unpleasant situations (Aihie & Ohanaka, 2019). In addition, students are up against time restrictions to finish their assignments, academic workload, and instructor non-academic labour, such as joining organisations and societies as well as participating in programmes that take place off campus. Students who are striving for academic achievement in an increasingly competitive academic environment are typically subjected to the consequences of stress. In addition, it is well acknowledged that the main cause of stress for students is the assessment of their performance on exams, and this stress has been shown to have an effect on the academic performance of students (Dudani et al.,

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2022). It has been shown that the most significant factor in the onset of stress in students is the burden of academic responsibilities, which includes exams (Akbar et al., 2018).

Students evaluate their own academic capabilities in relation to the challenges presented to form their academic self-perception. This evaluation takes into account both the activity at hand and the environment in which it is being performed. According to Shapka and Khan (2018), self-perception is defined as the various beliefs that students have about themselves. These beliefs exert a powerful influence on the types of activities in which students become involved, the amount of effort that students will expend on that activity, and the likelihood that will participate in the activity again in the future. According to Musa (2020), the idea of academic self-efficacy or self-perception refers to a person's trust in themselves, their ability to rely on themselves, and their confidence in themselves. In addition, self-perception can be defined as the conviction that a person possesses the capacities to organise and carry out a course of action in order to achieve a specified level of fulfilment. In order to increase their activities' efficacy, participants in the efficacy experiment are expected to manage their behaviour accordingly (Salleh et al., 2021). A person's efficacy beliefs determine what they pursue, how hard they work toward their goals, how they respond to setbacks, how adaptable they are, and how well they can handle the pressures and stresses of their endeavours (Oloo et al., 2019).

According to Kamal et al. (2020) academic self-efficacy or self-perception refers to a person’s determination that they can effectively complete a specific academic activity or completing a particular academic goal. Musa (2020) argues that students who have a positive view of themselves in the classroom are better able to balance their academic and extracurricular obligations, and are less likely to let peer pressure or other factors derail their pursuit of knowledge. Furthermore he added, Students who have a high academic self-efficacy or positive self-perception of themselves are more likely to achieve their academic goals than students who have a low academic self-efficacy or negative self-perception of themselves. Students that have a low academic self-efficacy are more likely to engage in disruptive behaviours, receive low grades, and have a higher propensity to drop out of school. Possessing a healthy sense of self-worth can provide students the motivation they need to take on leadership roles, manage their own behaviour, and succeed in school. People tend to fail to achieve their fullest potential if they are having weak or negative self-perception towards themselves (Oloo et al., 2019). Students' confidence in their own abilities has been shown to have a positive effect on their motivation to learn, their ability to handle stress, and their overall academic performance (Salleh et al., 2021).

1.1. Problem statement

Mental health issues among Malaysian people have increased from 10.7% in 1996 to 11.2% in 2006 to 29.2% in 2015, according to the results of a National Health and Morbidity Survey conducted in 2015. According to The Star, after the implementation of the mobility control order (MCO) in March 2020, the number of reported cases of mental health issues in Selangor climbed from 86 the previous year to 251. University student mental health is becoming an international concern, and Malaysia is no exception (Kotera et al., 2021). There is a growing need to improve access to timely and effective mental healthcare in Malaysia to alleviate the rising prevalence of mental health problems in the country (Raaj et al., 2021). Challenges such as living on their own for the first time, juggling schoolwork and extracurriculars, and

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thinking about their professional futures can all contribute to depression among Malaysian college students (Islam et al., 2018). As a result of the pressure to succeed academically, students' physical and mental health may be jeopardised if they do not receive help reducing their stress (Kotera et al., 2021).

1.2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this research was to examine the elements that contributed to students' mental health problems as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, when online education was in high demand. The study's secondary objective is to compare the statistical significance of the various variables measuring perceived academic stress among the sexes.

2. Research Methods

This study has implemented quantitative analysis which aim to examine variables influencing students stress at UNITEN during the pandemic. Quantitative analysis method is the process of collecting and analyzing numerical data. It can be utilized to find patterns and average, prepare the predictions, examine causal relationships, and generalize results to a wider population (Bhandari, 2020). The study of behaviour can benefit greatly from the application of quantitative analysis because it allows for the separation of invariant relations (Nevin, 1984). This study was conducted towards students in Universtiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN), Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah Campus to measure academic stress among them. There were total of 496 students from foundation level, diploma and bachelor degree program has answered the questionnaire. Respondents were obtained by purposive sampling method who taking the academic programmes in UNITEN, Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah Campus, Pahang with aimed to increase the depth understanding on the study.

The instruments of the questionnaire which consist of the Perception of Academic Stress Scale (PAS) was adopted from Bedewy and Gabriel (2015) with 18 statements. The statements were asked with five answer options from strongly disagree to strongly agree with a reliability value of 0.795 which consists of three subscales which are stress related to academic expectation, stress related to faculty work and examination and stress related to student academic self-perception. All data obtained were entered into IBM SPSS software and were analyzed.

3. Data Analysis

Microsoft Excel 2019 and IBM SPSS Statistics 25.0 were used for the statistical analysis. A combination of Microsoft Excel's editing, sorting, and coding features were used. Then, the data from the excel file was transferred into IBM SPSS. IBM SPSS was used to conduct statistical tests (frequencies, means, and percentages), as well as a one-sample T-test, a correlation analysis, and a factor loading.

3.1. Demographic variable

Table 1 below are the summary of respondents' profile for this study. From the total of 496 respondents, 144 respondents are male (29.0%) and 352 respondents are female (71.0%). Furthermore, for

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age profiling, highest number of respondents are for age range between 18-20 years with a total of 380 respondents (76.6%). In addition, in terms of nationality, it is possible to draw the conclusion that the majority of the respondents are Malaysians by referring to the table below. There were a total of 492 respondents, which is a 99.2% response rate. Next, regarding on the respondents' programme of study, it can be divided into three categories, which is foundation level, diploma level and bachelor degree, and the highest number of respondents are from diploma programme with 275 respondent (55.4%). For course of study, most of the respondents, are from accounting (294 respondents) and in year two of study (290 respondents).

Table 1. Demographic profile

	Characteristics	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Gender	Male	144	29.0
	Female	352	71.0
Age	18-20	380	76.6
	21-23	100	20.2
	24-26	15	3.0
	27-30	1	.2
Nationality	Malaysian	492	99.2
	Non-Malaysian	4	.8
Programme	Foundation	24	4.8
	Diploma	275	55.4
	Bachelor's degree	197	39.7
Course	Accountancy	294	59.3
	International Business	42	8.5
	Business Administration in Human Resource Management	38	7.7
	Business Administration in Marketing	6	1.2
	Business Studies	73	14.7
	Finance	14	2.8
	Tahfiz AL Quran	3	.6
	Business Administration	26	5.2
Year of Study	One	120	24.2
	Two	290	58.5
	Three	74	14.9
	Four	11	2.2

3.2. Normality test

The results of the Skewness and Kurtosis tests can be used to infer whether or not the sample is normally distributed. Skewness values between 4 and +4, and kurtosis values between 7 and +7, as defined by Byrne (2010), indicate that the data are normally distributed. Consequently, the sample normality is adequate. Details of the normality test findings are shown in table 2 below:

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Table 2. Normality test

	N	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Pressure to perform	496	.053	.110	.307	.219
Perception of workload	496	.215	.110	.747	.219
Academic self-perception	496	.273	.110	-.170	.219
Time strains	495	.455	.110	-.059	.219
Valid N (listwise)	495				

3.3. Reliability test

Reliability test is used to measure the consistency and precision of the respective research instrument (Sidek, 2005). Reliability values in between 0.50 and 0.90 are considered reliable by most of researchers around the world (Sidek, 2005). The instrument's reliability test results are listed in Table 3. Accordingly, the Cronbach's Alpha value indicates that the research instrument is reliable.

Table 3. Reliability test

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	N Of Items
Perception of Academic Stress	0.795	18 items

3.4. PAS

PAS three main subscales: (1) the academic expectations subscale (four items), (2) workload and examinations subscale (eight items), and (3) students' academic self-perceptions subscale (six items).

3.4.1. Independent sample T-test

A t-test based on independent samples was carried out in order to determine whether or not there was a statistically significant difference between the genders in terms of each variable that measured perceptions of academic stress. As shown in Table 4 below, the significance value for Levene's Test is $p<0.05$; as shown in Table 4 below, the result revealed that there is a significant (2-tailed) difference between male and female graduates. It can also be concluded that for all variable of Perception of Academic Stress, male has higher number in pressure to perform (mean =15.423), perception of workload (mean=12.250), academic self-perceptions (mean =11.305), and time strains (mean=13.755).

Table 4. T-test for gender

	Male		Female		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2 tailed)
Pressure to perform	15.423	3.159	15.179	3.158	.289	.591	.783	496	.434
Perception of workload	12.250	2.557	12.116	2.320	.899	.343	.564	496	.573
Academic self-perceptions	11.305	3.027	10.977	3.265	1.214	.217	1.038	496	.300
Time strains	13.755	4.224	13.454	4.238	.014	.904	.716	496	.474

Note: SD= Standard Deviation, F = F statistic (group variance/within group variance); sig. = significance value; t = t value; * $p < 0.05$

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3.4.2. Correlation analysis

Correlation could be characterized as a measurable estimation of the relationship between two variables. Correlation analysis was conducted for this study to test relationship between pressure to perform, perception of workloads, academic self-perception and time restrain. As the collected samples are normally distributed the parametric statistic technique, Pearson's correlation is employed to examine the relationship between the variable. There were significant positive correlations between factor scores and between the Pearson correlations analysis. Table 5 below are the result:

Table 5. Correlation analysis

		Pressure To Perform	**Perception Of Workload**	**Academic Self Perception**	**Time Restraint**
Pressure To Perform	Pearson Correlation	1	.468**	.379**	.294**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	496	496	496	495
Perception Of Workload	Pearson Correlation	.468**	1	.423**	.236**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	496	496	496	495
Academic Self Perception	Pearson Correlation	.379**	.423**	1	.602**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	496	496	496	495
Time Restraint	Pearson Correlation	.294**	.236**	.602**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	495	495	495	495

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

3.4.3. Factor loading analysis

The variance in responses related to students' experiences of academic-related pressures could be explained by these four factors to the extent that they accounted for 55.22 percent of the total. The factor loadings, as well as the fraction of the observed variance that is attributable to each component, are presented in Table 6.

Achievement expectations are the first aspect to consider. This fraction accounts for 34.5% of the total variance. Peer pressure, parental expectations, and teachers' negative feedback all contribute to a toxic environment for learning. Exam stress and workload expectations are a secondary consideration. There is 49.04% more variance explained by this factor. Stresses associated with a heavy workload, lengthy tasks, and anxiety over performance on tests all fall under this category. The self-perceptions constitute the third factor. This component is responsible for explaining 56.4% of the total observed variance. It is confidence in one's own academic abilities, confidence in one's ability to succeed as a student and in one's future job, and confidence in one's ability to make the appropriate academic choices. Time constraints make up the fourth factor. This component is responsible for explaining 45.7% of the total observed variance. It is a

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reference to the tensions that arise as a result of the restricted time that is allotted to classes, the inability to accomplish assignments, the difficulties in catching up if one falls behind, and the limited time to wind down or relax.

Table 6. Factor loading analysis

	Factor Loading			
	1	2	3	4
The competition with my peers for grades is quite intense.	0.615			
The unrealistic expectations of my parents stress me out.	0.581			
Examination times are very stressful to me.	0.722			
I think that my worry about examinations is weakness of character.	0.545			
My teachers are critical of my academic performance.	0.578			
I believe that the amount of work assignment is too much.		0.601		
The size of the curriculum (workload) is excessive.		0.711		
Even if I pass my exams, am worried about getting a job.		0.453		
The examination questions are usually difficult.		0.198		
Am confident that I will be successful in my future career.			0.665	
Am confident that I will be a successful student.			0.782	
I fear failing courses this year.			0.743	
I can make academic decisions easily.			0.068	
I have enough time to relax after work.				0.821
The time allocated to classes and academic work is enough.				0.837
Teachers have unrealistic expectations of me.				0.691
Examination time is short to complete the answers.				0.697
Am unable to catch up if getting behind the work.				0.655
Proportion of the observed variance for each factor (%)	34.5%	49.04%	56.4%	45.7%

4. Discussions and Conclusions

The widespread outbreak of the COVID-19 virus has had a significant impact on many people's lives, including students. As a result of the nationwide lockdown that was implemented to prevent the virus from spreading further, the traditional teaching and learning method was completely replaced by online learning. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives of students regarding the factors that contributed the most to the academic stress they experienced. The findings of this study suggested that there was no significant difference between males and females in the mean PAS score. This was determined by analysing the data from the study. This result is in line with the findings of prior research that found no significant difference between males and females on a scale measuring felt stress (Khan et al., 2013; Reddy et al., 2018).

The factor analysis also found that the 55.22 percent of variance in this scale could be attributed to just four variables. The results of this study showed that the items on the academic stress perception scale clustered into four factors: performance pressures (factor 1), workload perceptions (factor 2), academic self-concept (factor 3), and time constraints (factor 4). The academic-related stress might reduce the

students' motivation and would give impact to ones' academic performance (Mahapatra & Sharma, 2021). The majority of students (56.4%), according to the findings of this study, experience stress as a result of their perceptions of academic self-confidence, the pressure they put on themselves to succeed as students, worries about their future careers, and doubts about their ability to make the best academic decisions. Barlow and McCann (2019) demonstrated that students might have put unrealistic expectations to themselves, and this would be one of the stress factors to them. Furthermore, students need to set a realistic expectation for better academic performance and they would not put high pressure to their selves. Reviewing the results, the number of possible causes of academic stress are varies such 49.04% of students, the source of academic-stress is from their workload which their assignments, curriculum and examinations are the main factors. Consequently, students need to manage their time accordingly and not to do it on the last minute as assignments; curriculum and examinations are part of the assessments and could not be avoided (Omar et al., 2020).

Early intervention may be inclined to better stress management by students. Universities might identify students with high stress level as to develop better mental health among students. Yusof et al. (2019) suggested universities to introduce stress management courses by way of to equip students with managing their stress. Counsellor role should be widely share to students as to seek professional when students get stressed out is crucial (Fauzi et al., 2021). Therefore, for the future studies, it is recommended to make a comparison on academic stress factors of students before and after the pandemic outbreak. It is recommended that in future studies, the topic be broadened by inviting subject matter experts or teachers to take part in the research.

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