

The Relationship between Social Support and Demographic Characteristics among Malaysian University Students during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the fastest and most widespread epidemics affecting the world today, and its impacts are also experienced in Malaysia. The pandemic has a huge impact on the social, economic, and educational livelihood of the community. Furthermore, the government's implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) has resulted in most sectors not operating at full capacity, including higher education institutions. This situation has largely affected the field of education. Thus, this study was conducted to explore the relationship between social support and demographic characteristics among the Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study adopted the quantitative survey research design and involved 468 randomly sampled participants. Data were collected using a digital questionnaire developed using Google Form and distributed through social media applications. The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software was used to analyze the data obtained. The study's findings showed that there was no significant difference between social support and sociodemographic backgrounds. Apart from that, the study also found a significant correlation between the three elements of social support (family, peer, and other close individual). Therefore, continuous social support must be fully utilized in order to avoid the emergence of any issues that can have a negative impact on students, thereby affecting their academic achievement and progress.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, university students, social support, demographic characteristics, Malaysia

1. Introduction

At the end of 2019, the world was shocked by the discovery of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), later known as COVID-19, which causes the severe acute respiratory syndrome. Soon after, the virus has declared a pandemic due to its spread worldwide (Harapan et al., 2020). To date, scientists worldwide are still working to find vaccines and treatments that are truly effective in fighting the virus. Although vaccines have been administered as a preventive measure to control the pandemic, social distancing and isolation are still practiced everywhere as infection rates are still high. Malaysia is also affected by the

spread of this disease. This situation has had a huge impact on the life of society, not only on the social and economic aspects but also the educational aspect. According to the OECD (2020), the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is heterogeneous as it affects people's aspects such as health, economic, social, and fiscal.

The government's implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) has forced almost all sectors and activities, including higher education institutions, to operate at half or fraction of their full capacity. Furthermore, due to the prolonged pandemic situation and burdensome measures such as movement control and lockdowns, the COVID-19 pandemic also has a negative impact on higher education (Son et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on students' psychology and social support (El-Zoghby et al., 2020). According to previous studies, people who are exposed to the persistent risk and uncertainty of infectious diseases have a higher rate of psychological or mental health issues (T.B. Liu, X.Y. Chen, G.D. Miao, et al., 2003). Social support is defined as the support and contribution given or potentially by individuals, groups, communities, and systems related to the individual concerned (Şahin et al., 2019). According to Alia Ashrani et al. (2016), social support is an experience related to love, attention, and appreciation gained from family members, friends, neighbours, or other people who can contribute to positive individual development. Therefore, the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) to control the COVID-19 pandemic has indirectly limited interactions between students, their family, and friends. Being away from their family, students in university residential colleges often get moral and emotional support from friends, fellows, and even lecturers. However, during this pandemic, their interaction with others has become limited. As a result, students face constraints to do social activities such as meeting friends, going out for leisure or being involved in co-curricular activities as before. This situation has severely affected students' emotions and mental health. According to Sundarasan et al. (2020), students living alone experience the highest anxiety level compared to those living with family and friends. As a result of their loneliness, they are at risk of harming their health and safety. The lack of social support determines mental health problems (Alsubaie, Stain, Webster, & Wadman, 2019). It has been associated with various indicators of psychological stress such as depression and loneliness (Eskin, 2003). The limited physical and functional activity as well as family support could also have a negative impact on students' psychological well-being (Li et al., 2021). Thus, social support is an important factor influencing students' mental health as they experience unforeseen emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic (Guo et al., 2021).

Therefore, this study has been conducted to explore the relationship between social support and demographic characteristics among Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design, Population and Data Collection

This study has adopted a quantitative design. Simple random sampling was conducted to select 468 UPM students who are residents of ten residential colleges located in UPM Serdang and Bintulu Campuses. These students came from various backgrounds and were

still studying when this survey was conducted in early August 2021. The questionnaire was developed using Google Form and was distributed through the WhatsApp social media application. According to Dewaele (2018), using online/digital questionnaires is more cost-efficient than conventional methods. Moreover, it allows researchers to collect data from respondents from a wider background in less time. This has indirectly strengthened the validity of the data.

2.2 Research Instrument

Respondents' Demographic Background

Respondents' background information includes their age, gender, race, level of education, year of study, residential college, estimated monthly family income, and location where they attend online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Social Support

Sources of social support were measured using the Malay version of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) instrument, which was translated by Ng et al. (2010) from the original instrument developed by Zimet et al. (1988). The instrument contains 12 questions, and it is divided into three parts which represent different forms of support, namely family support (questions 3,4,8,11), peer support (questions 6,7,9,12), and support from other individuals (questions 1,2,5,10). Among the questions used in this instrument are 'I have a special friend to share love and grief with', 'I get the necessary emotional help and support from my family', and 'I can talk about my problems with friends. This instrument uses a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The overall score range is between 12–84, where a score of 12–48 indicates low social support, 49–68 moderate social support, and 69–84 high social support.

Furthermore, the score range for each form of support is 4-28. The results of previous studies showed that MSPSS has been psychometrically proven in various samples and have strong Cronbach's Alpha reliability values and validity (Guan et al., 2013). The Cronbach's Alpha reliability value for the pilot test conducted on 55 students is 0.933. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability value for each form of social support is 0.957 for other people, 0.929 (family), and 0.927 (friend).

3.1 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22. The statistical analysis comprises instrument reliability (Cronbach's Alpha), descriptive statistics, T-test, One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), and Pearson Correlation analysis.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

There are no ethical issues in this study. This study did not involve physical contact with the respondents, except through the online survey questionnaire form. In addition, there are no tests involving clinical aspects and the use of drugs because this study is more of a social science nature. The respondents' involvement is also voluntary. The questionnaire has stated

that the respondents' responses indicate their consent to become the study's respondents. Respondents' data such as full name, matrix number, and telephone number were not shared and mentioned in the study findings in adherence to the Personal Data Protection Act 2010.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Respondents' Demographic Background

The results in Table 1 show that the majority of respondents are female (77.1%), Malay (70.1%), studying for their Bachelor's degree (92.9%), residents of Kolej Tun Dr. Ismail, UPM (40.2%), and studying in their first year (44.7%). Meanwhile, the respondents' mean age is 21.24 years (standard deviation = 1.359), and their mean estimated family monthly income is RM4,145.59 (standard deviation = 4061.947).

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis of Respondents' Backgrounds

Item	n	%	Mean	Standard Deviation
<i>Age</i>	468	100	21.24	1.359
<i>Sex</i>				
Male	107	22.9		
Female	361	77.1		
<i>Race</i>				
Malay	328	70.1		
Chinese	74	15.8		
Indian	24	5.1		
Bumiputera Sabah/Sarawak	37	7.9		
Others	5	1.1		
<i>Residential College</i>				
Kolej Tun Dr. Ismail	188	40.2		
Kolej Canselor	3	0.6		
Kolej Sultan Alaeddin Suleiman Shah	8	1.7		
Kolej Pendeta Za'ba	88	18.8		
Kolej Sepuluh	55	11.8		
Kolej Dua Belas	24	5.1		
Kolej Empat Belas	37	7.9		
Kolej Tujuh Belas	1	0.2		
Kolej Sri Rajang	64	13.7		
<i>Level of study</i>				
Diploma	31	6.6		
Bachelor	435	92.9		
Master	1	0.2		
PhD	1	0.2		

<i>Year of Study</i>				
Year 1	209	44.7		
Year 2	184	39.3		
Year 3	64	13.7		
Year 4	8	1.7		
Year 5	2	0.4		
Year 5 and more	1	0.2		
Estimated family household monthly income (Per month) (RM)	460	98.3	RM4,145.5	4061.947
			9	
<i>Location when attending online T&L</i>				
Home	323	69.0		
Residential College	101	21.6		
Residential College and Faculty/Institute	43	9.2		
External Organization/Agency	1	2.0		

3.2 The Relationship between Respondents' Sociodemographic Background and Social Support

The analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between the demographic background of the respondents with the level of social support from family, friends, and other people) the respondents received during the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO). The results of the T-test and ANOVA analysis shown in Tables 2, 3 and 4 below indicate no significant differences between social support received from family, friends and other people close to them across students with different ages, gender, race, level of study, year of study, estimated family monthly income and location where they attend T&L online . Previous studies have reported varied findings (Gray et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2021; Paykani et al., 2020). The mean scores are relatively high for all three sources of support, with family support (20.03–21.34), peer support (20.06–21.84), and other people (17.00–20.30). Thus, it is possible that during the COVID-19 pandemic situation and the implementation of the MCO, the respondents received more social support from various parties as they want to ensure that the students can emotionally cope with the challenging situation.

Table 2. The Relationship Between Respondents' Background and Family Support

Item		n	%	Mean	Standard Deviation	t/F	P value
Age	20 and below	121	25.9	20.97	5.679	1.250	0.287
	21-22	292	62.3	21.74	5.496		
	23 and above	55	11.8	22.22	5.050		
Sex	Male	107	22.9	21.50	5.438	0.220	0.826
	Female	361	77.1	21.63	5.522		
Race	Malay	328	70.1	21.23	5.650	1.973	0.117
	Chinese	74	15.8	22.31	4.388		
	Indian and others	29	6.2	23.34	5.143		
	Bumiputera	37	7.9	22.05	6.123		
	Sabah/ Sarawak						
Level of Study	Diploma and others	33	7.1	20.03	6.706	1.703	0.089
	Bachelor	435	92.9	21.72	5.385		
Year of Study	Year 1	209	44.7	21.72	5.338	0.097	0.908
	Year 2	184	39.3	21.49	5.398		
	Year 3 and above	75	16.0	21.52	6.202		
Estimated Family household income (per month) (RM)	RM4,359 and below	316	68.7	21.36	5.516	1.385	0.251
	RM4,360 –	96	20.9	22.42	5.471		
	RM9,619	48	10.4	21.44	5.454		
	RM9,620 and above						
Location when attending online T&L	Residential College and Others	145	31.0	21.50	5.512	0.250	0.803
	Home	323	69.0	21.64	5.499		

*P<0.05

**P<0.01

Table 3. The Relationship Between Respondents' Background and Friends' Support

Item		n	%	Mean	Standard Deviation	t/F	P Value
Age	20 and below	121	25.9	20.30	5.154	1.829	0.162
	21-22	292	62.3	21.25	5.097		
	23 and above	55	11.8	21.62	5.526		

Sex	Male		107	22.9	20.64	5.107	0.932	0.352
	Female		361	77.1	21.17	5.192		
Race	Malay		328	70.1	20.83	5.342	0.850	0.467
	Chinese		74	15.8	21.84	4.092		
	Indian and others		29	6.2	21.52	5.717		
	Bumiputera		37	7.9	21.00	5.159		
	Sabah/ Sarawak							
Level of Study	Diploma and others		33	7.1	20.06	6.062	1.134	0.257
	Bachelor		435	92.9	21.12	5.099		
Year of Study	Year 1		209	44.7	21.17	4.904	0.726	0.485
	Year 2		184	39.3	20.72	5.197		
	Year 3 and above		75	16.0	21.51	5.823		
Estimated Family household income (per month) (RM)	RM4,359 and below		316	68.7	20.89	5.334	0.651	0.522
	RM4,360 – RM9,619		96	20.9	21.56	5.107		
	RM9,620 and above		48	10.4	21.23	4.401		
Location when attending online T&L	Residential College or Others		145	31.0	20.86	5.377	0.512	0.466
	Home		323	69.0	21.13	5.084		

*P<0.05

**P<0.01

Table 4. The Relationship Between Respondents' Background and Support from Other People Close to them

Item		n	%	Min	Standard Deviation	t/F	P Value
Age	20 and below	121	25.9	18.54	6.707	0.555	0.575
	21-22	292	62.3	18.73	6.853		
	23 and above	55	11.8	19.67	6.918		
Sex	Male	107	22.9	18.02	6.791	1.335	0.183
	Female	361	77.1	19.02	6.817		
Race	Malay	328	70.1	18.39	6.931	1.729	0.160
	Chinese	74	15.8	20.14	5.491		
	Indian and others	29	6.2	18.41	7.730		
	Bumiputera	37	7.9	19.95	7.226		
	Sabah/ Sarawak						
Level of Study	Diploma and others	33	7.1	17.00	8.400	1.568	0.118
	Bachelor	435	92.9	18.93	8.674		
Year of Study	Year 1	209	44.7	19.36	6.233	1.373	0.254
	Year 2	184	39.3	18.26	6.946		
	Year 3 and above	75	16.0	18.51	7.940		
Estimated Family household income (per month) (RM)	RM4,359 and below	316	68.7	18.38	6.886	2.969	0.052
	RM4,360 –	96	20.9	20.30	6.483		
	RM9,619	48	10.4	18.67	6.783		
	RM9,620 and above						
Location when attending online T&L	Residential College or Others	145	31.0	19.02	6.644	0.489	0.625
	Home	323	69.0	18.69	6.901		

*P<0.05

**P<0.01

3.2.1 The Relationship between Supports Provided by Family, Friends and Other People Close to Them

Figure 5 below shows the relationships between the three sources of social support. The results of the correlation analysis found that there was a significant association between family support with peer support ($r = 0.647$, $p < 0.01$), which supports the findings of previous

researchers (Çevik & Yildiz, 2017; Yang et al., 2021). This finding suggests that these two sources of support have a strong relationship with each other. This finding indicates that in this COVID-19 pandemic, students get more support from family and friends, specifically material, mental and emotional support. Family support can reduce feelings of loneliness and have an exclusive role in reducing depressive symptoms (Mariani et al., 2020). In addition, support from family and friends also helps overcome anxiety (Bourion-Bédès et al., 2021) and improve quality of life (Alsubaie et al., 2019).

Subsequent findings have also shown a significant relationship between family support and the support from other people close to them ($r = 0.411$, $p < 0.01$). Hence, similar to family support, support from other people close to them has a positive effect on students. In this case, students receive support from close friends or university staff like lecturers, principals, fellows, and residential college staff while living on campus. These findings support a previous study by Permatasari et al. (2021), which stated that family and other close parties positively contribute to students' well-being during online learning and help build academic resilience during online learning. Furthermore, the analysis also showed that there is a significant relationship between peer support and the support of other close individuals ($r = 0.565$, $p < 0.01$), in line with the findings by Khatiwada et al. (2021). This finding further indicates a strong relationship between these two sources of social support. According to Salimi and Bozorgpour (2012), support from others also has a role in reducing loneliness experienced by students, similar to support from family and friends.

Table 5. Relationship between supports provided by family, friends, and other people close to them

Item	Mean	Standard deviation		1	2	3
1 Family Support	21.60	5.497	<i>Pearson Correlation</i> <i>Sig (2-tailed)</i> N	1		
2 Friends' Support	21.04	5.172	<i>Pearson Correlation</i> <i>Sig (2-tailed)</i> N	0.647** 0.000 468	1	
3 Support from other people	18.79	6.817	<i>Pearson Correlation</i> <i>Sig (2-tailed)</i> N	0.411** 0.000 468	0.565** 0.000 468	1

* $P < 0.05$

** $P < 0.01$

4. Conclusion

Social support plays an important role in students' mental and emotional stability, especially

during the challenging COVID-19 pandemic. Although the survey findings show that the students receive adequate social support throughout the pandemic, social support should always be examined from time to time. Furthermore, on-going social support must be fully utilized to avoid any issues that could negatively impact students and their academic performance.

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Appendix

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Sex	Male	107	22.9	21.50	5.438	0.220	0.826
	Female	361	77.1	21.63	5.522		
Race	Malay	328	70.1	21.23	5.650	1.973	0.117
	Chinese	74	15.8	22.31	4.388		
	Indian and others	29	6.2	23.34	5.143		
	Bumiputera Sabah/ Sarawak	37	7.9	22.05	6.123		
Level of Study	Diploma and others	33	7.1	20.03	6.706	1.703	0.089
	Bachelor	435	92.9	21.72	5.385		
Year of Study	Year 1	209	44.7	21.72	5.338	0.097	0.908
	Year 2	184	39.3	21.49	5.398		
	Year 3 and above	75	16.0	21.52	6.202		
Estimated Family household income (per month) (RM)	RM4,359 and below	316	68.7	21.36	5.516	1.385	0.251
	RM4,360 –	96	20.9	22.42	5.471		
	RM9,619	48	10.4	21.44	5.454		
	RM9,620 and above						
Location when attending online T&L	Residential College and Others	145	31.0	21.50	5.512	0.250	0.803
	Home	323	69.0	21.64	5.499		

*P<0.05

**P<0.01

Table 3. The Relationship Between Respondents' Background and Friends' Support

Item		n	%	Mean	Standard Deviation	t/F	P Value
Age	20 and below	121	25.9	20.30	5.154	1.829	0.162
	21-22	292	62.3	21.25	5.097		
	23 and above	55	11.8	21.62	5.526		
Sex	Male	107	22.9	20.64	5.107	0.932	0.352
	Female	361	77.1	21.17	5.192		
Race	Malay	328	70.1	20.83	5.342	0.850	0.467
	Chinese	74	15.8	21.84	4.092		
	Indian and others	29	6.2	21.52	5.717		
	Bumiputera	37	7.9	21.00	5.159		
	Sabah/ Sarawak						
Level of Study	Diploma and others	33	7.1	20.06	6.062	1.134	0.257
	Bachelor	435	92.9	21.12	5.099		
Year of Study	Year 1	209	44.7	21.17	4.904	0.726	0.485
	Year 2	184	39.3	20.72	5.197		
	Year 3 and above	75	16.0	21.51	5.823		
Estimated Family household income (per month) (RM)	RM4,359 and below	316	68.7	20.89	5.334	0.651	0.522
	RM4,360 – RM9,619	96	20.9	21.56	5.107		
	RM9,620 and above	48	10.4	21.23	4.401		
Location when attending online T&L	Residential College or Others	145	31.0	20.86	5.377	0.512	0.466
	Home	323	69.0	21.13	5.084		

*P<0.05

**P<0.01

Table 4. The Relationship Between Respondents' Background and Support from Other People Close to them

Item		n	%	Min	Standard Deviation	t/F	P Value
Age	20 and below	121	25.9	18.54	6.707	0.555	0.575
	21-22	292	62.3	18.73	6.853		
	23 and above	55	11.8	19.67	6.918		
Sex	Male	107	22.9	18.02	6.791	1.335	0.183
	Female	361	77.1	19.02	6.817		
Race	Malay	328	70.1	18.39	6.931	1.729	0.160
	Chinese	74	15.8	20.14	5.491		
	Indian and others	29	6.2	18.41	7.730		
	Bumiputera Sabah/ Sarawak	37	7.9	19.95	7.226		
Level of Study	Diploma and others	33	7.1	17.00	8.400	1.568	0.118
	Bachelor	435	92.9	18.93	8.674		
Year of Study	Year 1	209	44.7	19.36	6.233	1.373	0.254
	Year 2	184	39.3	18.26	6.946		
	Year 3 and above	75	16.0	18.51	7.940		
Estimated Family household income (per month) (RM)	RM4,359 and below	316	68.7	18.38	6.886	2.969	0.052
	RM4,360 –	96	20.9	20.30	6.483		
	RM9,619	48	10.4	18.67	6.783		
	RM9,620 and above						
Location when attending online T&L	Residential College or Others	145	31.0	19.02	6.644	0.489	0.625
	Home	323	69.0	18.69	6.901		

*P<0.05

**P<0.01

Table 5. Relationship between supports provided by family, friends, and other people close to them.

Item	Mean	Standard deviation		1	2	3
1 Family Support	21.60	5.497	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	1		
			<i>Sig (2-tailed)</i>			
			N			
2 Friends' Support	21.04	5.172	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	0.647**	1	
			<i>Sig (2-tailed)</i>	0.000		
			N	468		
3 Support from other people	18.79	6.817	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	0.411**	0.565**	1
			<i>Sig (2-tailed)</i>	0.000	0.000	
			N	468	468	

*P<0.05

**P<0.01

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