

Mental Health Awareness among University Students: A Study of Knowledge, Family Influence, Media Exposure and Government Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

Mental health is the condition of a person on how they cope or manage their emotional and psychological. However, in Malaysia, especially in the higher level of education, many students are faced with the problems of mental health due to the lack of awareness regarding this issue. The environment in the university should be fun with friends at the same time with the learning process itself. If the students are faced with the issue of mental health, then it affects their academic performance. The objectives of this study are to identify the level of mental health awareness among university students, to examine the relationship between knowledge, family influence, media exposure, and government initiatives towards mental health awareness among university students and to find out the most significant factors that contributed to mental health awareness among university students. Furthermore, the data collected through questionnaires by the university students specifically in UiTM Seremban and it has been conducted with a total of 405 respondents. This study uses a quantitative method where the data gathered through data collection. From the data gathered, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the result. The data were analysed with Descriptive Statistics, Pearson Correlation, and Multiple Regression. The findings demonstrate that all variables examined significantly influence mental health awareness among university students, with knowledge emerging as the most significant factor contributing to students' awareness of mental health issues. This study also provides recommendations to increase mental health awareness among university students with strengthening the role of government, parents, and media exposure.

Keywords: Mental Health Awareness; University Students; Family influence; Knowledge; Government initiative

INTRODUCTION

Today, mental health is a global issue which grabs the world's attention as it has affected almost 970 million people (World Health Organization, 2022). According to the World Health Organization, mental health problems can be defined as a condition when an individual is having disturbance in his ability to think, emotions and behaviour which prevent him from coping with problems in his life well, restricts him from actively participating in the learning process, adapts to numerous working environments and contributes to the society (World Health Organization, 2022). There are many types of mental illnesses. Among them are depression, schizophrenia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

The outcome from a survey conducted by National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2023 has revealed that some one million people who are over 15 years old in Malaysia are suffering from mental health, depressions. The findings across urban and rural area which observe that the number of people who having these issues increasing two times from 2019 to 2023, with half of them try to self-harm or suicide. The worst part is mental health issues are getting higher among teenagers and young generations who are between 16 to 29 years old. A total of 4.6% which equals 1,000,000 of adults were suffering with these issues (Carvalho & Rahim, 2024).

Moreover, this issue has become increasingly concerning as mental health challenges are no longer limited to adults experiencing pressures in the workplace. They have also become prevalent among students, particularly university students, who often face significant academic demands and transitional challenges. Previous studies have shown that university students are more vulnerable to mental health problems, including stress, anxiety, and depression, compared to the general population. This highlights the importance of addressing mental health awareness and support systems within higher education institutions. They are prone to mental health issues because of the burden of the studies especially when examinations are around, toxic environment, financial problems and sleep pattern are the factors that contribute to this problem (Mayer et al., 2016). It has also been reported that university students have poor mental health including higher incidences of depression, anxiety, and high stress health in many countries including UK, US and Malaysia (Wong et al., 2023).

Furthermore, a study conducted by the Department of Community Health and Psychiatry and the Department of Family Medicine, *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*, published in the Asian Journal of Psychiatry (2013), examined the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as their associated factors among university students. The findings revealed that mental health issues were present among students aged 18 to 24 years (Shamsuddin et al., 2013). Similarly, Maung et al. (2023) reported that mental health problems remain a significant concern among university students in Malaysia. Their study further indicated that these issues are associated with various factors, including individual characteristics, social influences, background factors, and parental income.

Other than that, lack of awareness on the mental health issue among students makes this issue getting uncontrolled. A study conducted by National Health and Morbidity Survey (2015) by the Institute for Public Health proved that only 5.1% of students had sufficient mental health literacy (Lee et al., 2023). It is also supported by a study conducted by University of Science Malaysia which showed a moderate level of knowledge about the symptoms of mental health issues and therapy that can be taken (Khan et al., 2010). The findings conclude that only students with a personal experience of mental health had better knowledge of the symptoms and therapy (Lee et al., 2023). This shows that the lack of awareness on mental health issues also contributed to the level of knowledge that an individual gains.

Furthermore, a study conducted in Saudi Arabia reported that 87.5% of individuals aged 18 years and above lacked adequate understanding of mental health issues (Siddique et al., 2022). This finding is particularly concerning as it highlights a significant gap in mental health awareness within the population. In addition, Shim et al. (2022) noted that approximately two-thirds of the population have experienced mental health problems, yet many did not receive appropriate treatment or support. This situation underscores the urgent need to improve mental health literacy and access to mental health services at the societal level.

Attitudes towards mental health remain one of the key barriers to improving mental health literacy among individuals. Negative or unaccepting attitudes often lead to limited understanding of mental health issues, which may discourage individuals experiencing psychological distress from seeking help or continuing treatment. Although both government and private sectors have expanded mental health services, including counselling and psychological support, utilisation of these services remains relatively low. This is largely due to persistent stigma surrounding mental health, which continues to hinder open discussion and acceptance within society. In many Asian countries, including Malaysia, mental health stigma remains prevalent and contributes to low levels of openness and awareness regarding psychological well-being. As a result, individuals with mental health challenges may be reluctant to seek professional assistance despite the availability of support services.

Therefore, this study aims to determine the level of mental health awareness among university students in higher education institutions, to examine the relationship between knowledge, family influence, media exposure, and government initiatives with mental health awareness, and to identify the most significant factors influencing mental health awareness among university students. This study is expected to provide several contributions. First, it will help identify the current level of mental health awareness among university students. Second, it will assist higher education institutions in understanding students' awareness and perceptions of mental health issues. Finally, the findings may support the development of more effective mental health awareness initiatives and intervention programmes within educational settings.

Each level of education has its approach in promoting mental health awareness. In primary level the counselling unit stresses more on learning development for the pupils such as conducting early screening like psychometric tests. Every primary school under the Ministry of Education has its own counselling unit which holds the role in providing consultation services for the pupils. While for secondary level, the counselling unit focuses more on which fields are suitable for them to pursue the study and the consultation on issues regarding studies, family matters and peer matters. If the symptoms are getting serious then the case still needs to be brought further to MOH.

In higher education institutions, counselling units are commonly established to support students' personal, academic, and career development. These units typically provide a range of services, including counselling support, career development guidance, and other student support programmes aimed at enhancing overall student well-being. For example, at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Seremban, Malaysia, such services are provided through the Counselling Unit under the Student Affairs Division, which plays an important role in supporting students' psychological and developmental needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Mental Health

In Malaysia, the issue of mental health received attention from the public after the COVID-19 had spread globally. The Malaysian government had implemented quarantine regulations known as Movement Control Order (MCO) on 18th March 2020 to prevent the spreading of the virus. During this period, the society is requested to stay at home, keeping physical distance and commute within 10 km of their living area. Only several services, such as food, energy, communication, and healthcare, can operate while others are prohibited. As society is forced to stay at home and avoid any social interaction or gathering, the restrictions become a challenge to those who usually love to do outdoor activities. These restrictions affect their mental health and many of them suffer from anxiety, stress and confusion (Anukshi Gunawardana et al., 2024).

In the United Kingdom, a study found that the incidence of mental health problems was 8.4% higher after the implementation of the lockdown, with a higher incidence of psychological problems observed among adolescents, women, and those living with young children during the pandemic (Anukshi Gunawardana et al., 2024). Another survey conducted in India reported that more than 80% of the participants felt the need for professional help from mental health experts to deal with emotional issues and other psychological issues during the pandemic (Roya et al., 2020).

Malaysia also does not leave behind as university students are facing mental health issues due to high anxiety and depression. The driven factor of the condition happened because of the drastic change in the education system especially in teaching delivery (Kumaran et al., 2022). Another study that was conducted in Malaysia also revealed that mental health issues persisted when COVID-19 lockdown restrictions were lifted, as evidenced by the 37.6% prevalence of psychological distress reported by (Siew Koon et al., 2023). As depression and anxiety have become more prevalent amongst college students over the last decades, it has become a priority for the authorities to respond to the growing mental health crisis. The Covid-19 exacerbated pre-existing health challenges that students face which make an urgent need for psychological health education to act (Arroyo et al., 2026).

After the Pandemic of Covid-19, Malaysia had improved mental health treatment from time to time. The society has awareness about mental health needs to be treated as physical health. Certainly, physical ill also needs to be described yet mental health is always attributed with religion. It took years to spread the awareness, but with all the efforts done by the government, non-government organizations (NGOs), mass media, institutions, family or even among society brought positive impact. Nonetheless, day by day people start to be open-minded to discuss and aware if there are mental health fighters among them or even support them to seek help from professionals such as counsellors or psychiatrists.

From the global perspective, developed countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada spend a higher proportion of their healthcare budget on mental health services. It also drafted stronger policy and well-implemented as well as protecting the individuals with mental health conditions. Nevertheless, compared with other developing countries, it performs better in terms of awareness and policy implementation. Neighbour countries such as Indonesia, Philippines synonymously face stigma-related challenges. They also have fewer, limited nationwide campaigns and weaker mental health infrastructure. Malaysia progressed well compared to other developing countries, particularly in recent years. Undoubtedly, it still lags here and there but Malaysia shows strong policy engagement. Hence, all efforts need to persuade more until people that face the mental health problem have no barrier to seeking help and are not worried about all the stigmas towards mental health. Also, Malaysia can build a healthy nation mentally and physically (Liang et al., 2026).

However, there is still need for improvement in terms on how the government can manage the issue as mental health is still in the community. This statement supported by findings from the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) conducted by the Ministry of Health (MOH) in 2015. Their discovery revealed that the prevalence of mental health problems among those 16 years and above is 29.2%, with one in three Malaysians have mental health issues, with highest prevalence among those aged 16-19 years as well as those from low-income families (Riffin et al., 2025). Therefore, it is vital to investigate the awareness level of mental health issues among students which is within the affected age group and what are the factors that contributed to it.

Knowledge

Knowledge on the mental health issue is a very crucial part as it leads to the awareness of mental health issues. Knowledge is a familiarity, awareness, or understanding of someone or something, such as facts, information, descriptions, or skills, which is acquired through experience or education by perceiving, discovering, or learning (Gilanie, 2022). Mental health literacy consists of multiple elements, including the capacity to identify various disorders and types of psychological discomfort, understanding and beliefs regarding risk factors and causes, awareness and beliefs about self-help strategies, comprehension and beliefs about available professional assistance, attitudes that encourage recognition and proactive help-seeking, and the knowledge of how to find information related to mental health (Yan Ma et al., 2022).

From a public health perspective, interventions that prevent mental disorders and promote well-being are an important strategy to reduce the health, social, economic burden of mental health issues. The educational sector believes it can provide a good opportunity for mental health education as children with a lack of knowledge of mental health disorders and mental health stigma can develop early with children often associating mental disorders with unpredictability (Lovett et al., 2011). Moreover, low perceived need and attitudinal barriers were found to be the main barriers to mental health treatment. Therefore, by improving mental health literacy and reducing stigma, it can help to overcome the barriers (Yan Ma et al., 2022).

Awareness on the mental health issue can be increased when the student has a good understanding and full information on the mental health issue. The result of the studies revealed that there is a significant difference in belief and awareness about mental health which leads to decreasing a negative stigma on people who suffer mental issues after the student completed the Abnormal Psychology Course (Shim et al., 2022). Other than that, researchers also stated that lack of knowledge and awareness on the mental health resources that had been provided give a barrier for students to seek mental health treatment when they need it (Shim et al., 2022). This statement also has been proven in other studies revealing that knowledge provides a basic information of mental health, tackling the perception and discrimination activities. The result from the survey collected shows that the

programs and workshops that had been joined give a significant impact on the students' attitudes and understanding on the mental health issue (Ahorsu et al., 2021).

According to Raaj et al. (2020) a lack of education and understanding of mental illness is one of the factors that lead to avoiding medical treatment which only rely on the traditional treatment such as religious practitioners or shamans. If a patient suffers from a mental problem did not receive a correct on-going treatment, it can make the problem become more worsen from the first place it happened. A better understanding regarding mental illness can improve the awareness of it and seek for a right treatment. Meanwhile, another study disclosed that adequate mental health knowledge and skills can provide more psychological resources to help them cope with challenges and maintain a good level of mental health. Therefore, mental health knowledge not only helps to create awareness but also can help the students to avoid mental health problems (Zhang et al., 2023).

A study conducted by Shim et al. (2022) finds that mental health education and knowledge is an important tool to raise awareness and understanding regarding mental health. By providing students with mental health knowledge and training enables students to learn and understand mental health illnesses well. According to the theory of knowledge-attitude-practice, the change of human behaviour is influenced by three successive stages which is knowledge acquisition, belief generation and behaviour formation. Humans first generate belief from knowledge, and the belief guides human behaviour. Therefore, to know the effectiveness of mental health education is based on mental health knowledge (Guo et al., 2020). Knowledge and education can help to spread awareness of mental health among students.

Family Influence

Family is one of the important roles that shape the mental health awareness among the students. Families shape the student's awareness through their parenting style, perception, family expectation, cultural, and religious beliefs that start from the household, especially in Malaysia where many religions and different cultures are being practiced (Ching et al., 2024). Moreover, a family environment is the first place where an individual learns various kinds of knowledge. Parents especially play an important role in the family as they significantly influence the physical and mental development where a negative parental attitude can hinder a positive family communication which their act was transmitted through the observation and imitation which can affect their well-being (Wang et al., 2025). Deng et al. (2022) also stated that a positive parent-child relationship depends on the parent's attitude, perspectives, and understanding. When there is a positive relationship in the family, it encourages open communication of mental health between the parent-child where students feel more supported mentally (Dimbulana et al., 2023).

Family background influences effective communication regarding mental health within the families as argued by Dimbulana et al. (2023). The less strict parenting style is used, the better the communication and openness between parents and students about mental health. Additionally, the view and attitude of the family members regarding mental health, whether a negative or positive view, highly influence the students' awareness and perception directly. A recent study conducted by Sharma et al., (2025) indicated that family communication patterns that consist of emotional intelligence, resilience, and understanding the necessity of open communication within the family structure has enhanced emotional intelligence of college students.

Other than that, the way mental health issues are being understood and addressed within each household can be the barrier that prevents awareness toward mental health. Some families may view mental health issues negatively due to their religion, cultural beliefs, and educational background (Rajagopal et al., 2023; Dimbulana et al., 2023). The older generation has an out-dated and ideology regarding mental health which influences the new generation views (Dimbulana et al., 2023). A study conducted by Sadiq et al., (2026) among university students in Baghdad specified that most students believed "anyone can suffer" from mental illness. The findings highlight the critical role of family-based social support as a protective factor, with higher levels of perceived support significantly associated with lower levels of suicide risk, depression, anxiety, and psychological distress.

Perception of stigma in the family is one of the barriers that prevent awareness of mental health. Prejudice, discrimination, negative stereotypes, discrediting are the types of the negative attitude or perception known as stigma which is often circulating through the interactions and beliefs of the family (Subu et al., 2021; Ching et al., 2024; Ahad et al., 2023). Ching et al., (2024) stated that stigma is categorized as one of the factors that contribute to mental health awareness which can be divided into self-stigma and public stigma. Moreover, stigma leads to the discouraging of acknowledging the mental health which affects the person's mental health as it will cause late medical treatment to be received (Ching et al., 2024; Subu et al., 2021). Rajagopal et al., (2023) and Dimbulana et al., (2023) further stated that stigma was highly influenced by the religion, cultural beliefs, lack of knowledge, and education regarding mental health. Asian families for example have a higher stigma regarding mental health which often resulted being judged and excluded by the families (Dimbulana et al., 2023).

Family support in emotional situations is an important act in enhancing and influencing a positive mental health awareness among the students. Families that provide a positive environment regarding mental health issues by providing open discussion has created a safe space for the students to openly express their feelings and concerns. This can foster students that are aware about their own mental health. Moreover, recent research by An et al., (2024) found that family support can increase the psychological well-being and improve emotional regulation. This shows that a supportive environment within the family can provide a sense of security and acceptance by the students, empowering them to embrace the mental health issues without fear of judgement (An et al., 2024). Additionally, a study conducted by Zhang et al., (2024) found that a good communication among family members can enhance mental health awareness as it strengthens the family support and understand the mental health issues among the family members.

Family support is generally acknowledged as a protective factor; however, its impact is intricate. Supportive family environments promote open communication and early help-seeking, while highly traditional or authoritarian family structures may reinforce stigma and discourage the disclosure of psychological distress. Consequently, family influence may function as both a protective and inhibiting factor, contingent upon cultural beliefs, parenting styles, and communication patterns.

Media Exposure

One of the methods to raise awareness on mental health issues is through media exposure. There are two types of media which are traditional such as newspaper and digital media such as websites or social media. The media is one of the sources that can spread the information and help those who are seeking to get the treatment (Tam et al., 2024). As technology advancement is growing rapidly, social media has become one of the most popular online interaction platforms, especially among youth worldwide (Mohamad & Abd Mubin, 2023). According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, there were 26.8 million users of social media. In Malaysia, most Gen Z and Millennials are approximately 99.8% of those aged 18 and above who actively use social media. The most active users are aged 25-34 which represent 31.5% of the population, or around 8.4 million users. These statistics proved that social media platforms are a channel to reach and engage with the society in Malaysia, including spreading mental health awareness (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023).

Studies show that students used social media to find additional information for studies purposes. Moreover, the platform also helps in gaining the students opportunities to learn how to improve their wellbeing. Consequently, public health practices have increasingly used social media to promote health information and encourage health protective behaviours which respond to the specific health concerns. These platforms are also effective in raising mental health awareness in online communities which helps to challenge sociocultural norms that promote unrealistic perspectives towards mental health issues. Moreover, the platform also can help them to communicate and seek help between others which can provide support and build their emotional connections. Through communication and connections, it significantly will prevent them from keeping their emotions alone that will lead to mental health issues (Ramsden & V. Talbot, 2024).

Social media can be a vulnerable tool to support and promote mental health. It can be seen as an opportunity to promote mental health care because of the large amount of time users spend on their gadget, surfing the internet.

Moreover, through social media, mental health awareness can be spread more easily and understandable as the information presented becomes more attractive, brief and in a precise way which can be assessed everywhere and anywhere. The potential positive effect of social media on mental health care includes the source of information, providing access to resources, advice and specialized information. It gives the society an opportunity in sharing their experience with people who are facing the same issues while exchanging opinions. Furthermore, some of the applications and platforms are developing digital intervention programs, offering online therapy, self-management tools and emotional support programs. As a result, awareness on mental health issues can be delivered effectively and it also helps in reducing the negative stigma on people who are experiencing the issues (Herrera-Peco et al., 2023).

Plackett et al. (2025) demonstrated that social media campaigns can serve as effective public health communication tools by enhancing public awareness, increasing mental health literacy, and encouraging greater engagement with mental health issues. People will have the access to get to learn and be aware more on mental health also could reduce the stigmas and negative perception towards mental health. This is because most people have social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, where they can build social networking with all the people (Latha et al., 2020). Social media has become an important platform for disseminating information and raising public awareness about mental health. Its widespread accessibility enables mental health information to reach diverse population groups, including individuals living in rural areas, provided they have internet access. Moreover, social media facilitates the rapid dissemination of information, as users can access these platforms at any time and from virtually any location (Latha et al., 2020). Consequently, social media serves as an effective medium for increasing public understanding of mental health issues by providing timely, accessible, and educational content. Previous studies have also suggested that exposure to mental health information through social media enhances individuals' knowledge and awareness, particularly regarding topics with which they are less familiar.

Government Initiatives

In the effort towards enhancing the knowledge of mental health awareness as well as cutting the stigmas that have become barriers, the government, specifically the Ministry of Health (MOH) Malaysia has executed several campaigns and programs to ensure the mental health literacy among people is increasing. The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) introduced a National Strategic Plan for Mental Health in Higher Education Institutions (2020-2025) instructing all public and private universities to establish University Counselling Centres, provide psychological first aid training and conduct mental health literacy campaigns.

The integration of mental health in campus policies provides a systematic, long-term response to rising incidences of depression, suicide ideation, and academic stress (MoHE, 2021). For instance, the campaigns initiated by the Ministry of Health (MOH) is “*Let’s Talk Minda Sihat*”. These initiatives aim to reduce the stigma associated with mental health, which often discourages individuals from seeking information and accessing appropriate support. They involve collaborative efforts between government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to promote mental health awareness through various platforms and community-based programmes. Such initiatives are intended to improve public understanding of mental health issues, encourage help-seeking behaviour, and reduce negative perceptions and misconceptions surrounding mental illness (Normazhazlin, 2025).

Studies by Tengku Mohd et al., (2023) have shown that there is a positive correlation between the programs and supports and their desire to seek assistance. Initiatives such as Mental Health Week, Stress Management Workshops, and cooperation with NGOs such as Malaysia Mental Health Association (MMHA) and Befrienders Malaysia have all been successful in promoting student engagement. The National Strategic Plan for Mental Health (NSPMH) 2020-2025 serves as a comprehensive framework. Pillar 1 (“Promotion & Prevention”) requires mental health literacy programs in all post-secondary institutions, whereas Pillar 5 prioritises human resource development to provide qualified campus counsellors (MOH, 2020). The Twelfth Malaysia Plan (12th MP) incorporates mental-health indicators into its “Social Re-engineering” thrust (Strategy 3 Inclusive (Strategy 3, Inclusive Society). Furthermore, the integration of mental health guidance into the school

curriculum is essential to promote students' psychological well-being, enhance mental health literacy, and facilitate early identification and intervention for mental health concerns (Zain et al., 2025).

The Peer Support Programme was evaluated in many public universities, and peer-led groups were found to help minimise isolation and enable students to talk openly about their feelings. Students who participated in peer support expressed better attitudes about mental health and were more likely to refer friends to professional care. However, the study emphasised that without constant training and supervision, peer help may not be effective in replacing professional services. Previous studies have consistently reported knowledge, family support, media exposure and government initiatives as factors contributing to mental health awareness.

However, there are several critical gaps in the current literature. First, most research explore these determinants individually rather than in combination in a single explanatory model. Thus, the relative impact of each element is not evident, especially among university students in developing nations. Second, most of the existing information is based on Western contexts where mental health stigma, family relationships, and institutional assistance are very different from Asian countries. As a result, the findings may not be directly generalisable to Malaysia where cultural norms, religious beliefs and family expectations greatly influence attitudes about mental health. Third, although numerous studies have examined mental health literacy, comparatively fewer have focused specifically on mental health awareness by integrating knowledge, family influence, media exposure, and government initiatives simultaneously.

This study attempts to fill these gaps by exploring these four determinants under a single conceptual framework in the Malaysian higher education system. Furthermore, the past findings on media exposure are still inconsistent. While some research suggests social media promotes mental health literacy and encourages help-seeking behaviour, others suggest the potential for misinformation, sensationalised content and self-diagnosis to reinforce myths and stigma. These mixed findings imply that media exposure alone may not necessarily increase awareness unless the shared information is reliable, evidence-based, and supported by credible health authority. The presence of such contradictions provides support for future empirical research.

Based on the above discussion, the study proposes the following hypothesis and further conceptualised using the conceptual framework as shown in Figure 1.

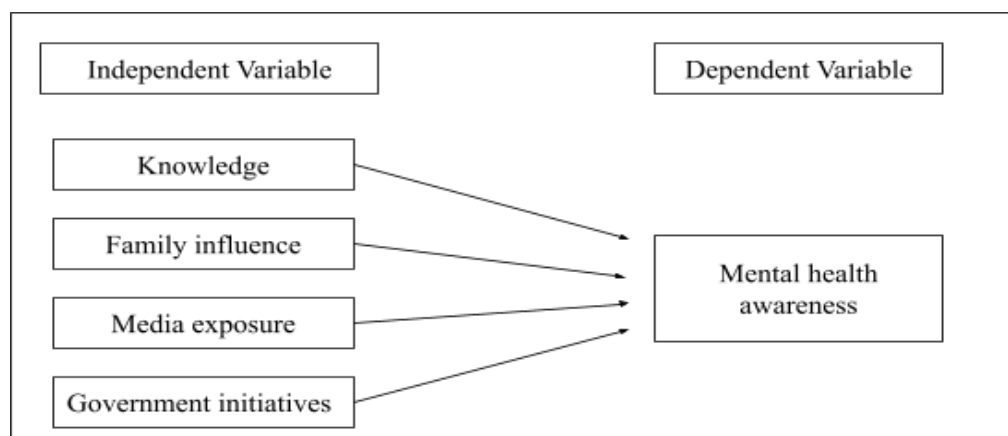
H1: There is a significant relationship between knowledge and mental health awareness

H2: There is a significant relationship between family influence and mental health awareness

H3: There is a significant relationship between media exposure and mental health awareness

H4: There is a significant relationship between government initiatives and mental health awareness

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework on Mental Health Awareness



Adapted from (Lee et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2020)

METHODOLOGY

The research method of this study is a quantitative method, and the research design is cross sectional research design because it involved one off data collection. The respondents for this study were selected using stratified random sampling techniques based on the calculation as shown in Table 1. The study was conducted in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Seremban, Negeri Sembilan, one the public universities in Malaysia. The population of this study is gathered students from three different faculties in UiTM Seremban which consist of Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, College of Computing, Informatics and Mathematics, and Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation.

According to the data retrieved from the Academic Affairs Department of the UiTM Seremban, the population of the students is 4,572 as of May 2025. The sample size was determined using the table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), which stated that for the population under 5000, the sample size needed was 357 respondents. The respondents were then selected by using Stratified Sampling technique, where the researchers approach students from each faculty to answer the questionnaires (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). In addition, to increase precision, this study had obtained an extra 48 respondents which makes the total of respondents is 405.

The questionnaire consisted of six sections, with Part A examining the demographic profile of the respondents and Part B measuring the dependent variable which is mental health awareness. Parts C to F addressed the independent variables, which included knowledge, family influence, media exposure, and government initiatives. The collected data were analysed using Descriptive Analysis, Reliability Testing, Frequency Analysis, Pearson Correlation, And Multiple Regression Analysis to examine the relationships between the variables and determine the most influencing factors of students' mental health awareness.

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire items were adapted from instruments that had been previously validated and reported in the mental health awareness literature (Lee et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2020). In terms of construct validity, the questionnaire was developed in accordance with the proposed conceptual framework. Measurement items were grouped according to their respective theoretical constructs (knowledge, family influence, media exposure, government initiatives, and mental health awareness). Subsequently, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were employed to verify internal consistency reliability. Each coefficient exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, suggesting that the measurement items displayed satisfactory consistency. Future research is encouraged to conduct Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to substantiate the construct validity evidence.

Table 1: Sample size of the study

Faculty	Population	Percentage of sampling	Number of samplings	Number of samples obtained
Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies	2 962	$(2\ 962 / 4\ 572) \times 357$	231	240
College of Computing, Informatics and Mathematics	1 330	$(1\ 330 / 4\ 572) \times 357$	104	123
Faculty of Sports and Recreation	280	$(280 / 4\ 572) \times 357$	22	42
Total	4,572		357	(N:405)

Reliability Test

The Normality and Reliability Tests were conducted for all variables to ensure that this study is reliable. The reliability for Cronbach's Alpha should be 0.7 or higher (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016) while the normality test should be -3 to +3 for skewness and -10 to +10 for kurtosis (Kline, 2005). Table 2 below shows the results of the Reliability Test which had been conducted involving 30 sample sizes to fulfil the assumptions of the normality and reliability test. The results show that all variables are reliable.

The highest Cronbach's Alpha was for the independent variable of media exposure ($\alpha = 0.890$), while the lowest was for government initiatives ($\alpha = 0.772$). All values are above the minimum level of 0.70 suggested by (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). For the Normality Test, the skewness and kurtosis values of all variables were within the acceptable ranges suggested by (Kline, 2005). The highest skewness (-1.438) and kurtosis (2.758) were found for media exposure. This shows that the data are approximately normally distributed. In conclusion, the results in Table 2 show that the study meets the assumptions for both reliability and normality. The data were further analysed using the Pearson Correlation and Multiple Regression Analysis.

Table 2: Measurement of variables, normality test, and reliability test results

Variables	Items	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's Alpha
Mental health awareness	B1. I understand what mental health is. B2. I am aware of the difference between regular stress and a serious mental health issue. B3. I am aware that anyone regardless of their background can experience mental health issues B4. I am aware of early signs of mental health problems experienced by individuals. B5. I am aware that mental health issues can occur among university students. B6. I am aware that mental health problems should be taken seriously and not ignored. B7. I am aware that early intervention can help prevent mental health problems from becoming more serious B8. I am aware that mental health problems can affect academic performance and daily life as a student. B9. I am aware of the mental health support services provided by the university. B10. I am aware that mental health awareness is important for all university student	-.836	.994	0.841
Knowledge	C1. Mental health is as important as physical health. C2. Knowledge on mental health is important among students. C3. I know that mental illnesses can be treated effectively with the right support C4. I know where to seek support and help for mental health problems. C5. People around me know about mental health issues. C6. I know that early detection of mental health problems can help in recovery.	-.069	-.673	0.773
Family influence	D1. Family plays an important role in shaping awareness of mental health D2. Discussing mental health issues with family members can increase the awareness of mental health. D3. Family members need to take mental health issues seriously. D4. Emotional support provided by family members can positively affect awareness of mental health.	-.627	-.257	0.798

	D5. Positive family member's attitudes towards mental health can have a positive impact on mental health awareness. D6. Family members need to be aware of the importance of mental health.			
Media exposure	E1. Media exposure is an effective tool to spread mental health awareness among university students. E2. I often see or hear information about mental health in mass media (newspaper, radio, television and internet) E3. Media coverage has improved my understanding of mental health. E4. Media always describes mental issues accurately. E5. Media exposure on the mental health issue was adequate and effective to make me understand mental health and its importance. E6. I have shared or reposted mental health related content online (social media).	-1.438	2.758	0.890
Government initiatives	F1. Government initiatives have encouraged students to seek professional help when facing mental health issues. F2. Program and campaign that had been organized by the Malaysian government to enhance knowledge of mental health awareness. F3. The Malaysian government is actively working to promote mental health awareness. F4. The government provides sufficient access to mental health services for university students. F5. Government funding and support for campus mental health programs is sufficient. F6. I know that the government is working to address youth mental health issues.	-.822	.186	0.772

FINDINGS

Demographic Profiles

Table 3 shows the analysed data of the respondents' demographics. Based on the table 3 below, out of the 405 respondents, the majority were female (305, 75.3%), while the remaining were male (100, 24.7%). This gender distribution reflects female students dominated at UiTM Seremban. Besides, for the age group, most respondents are between 21 and 23 years old (222, 54.8%), followed by those aged 18 to 20 years (161, 39.8%), and 24 years old and above (22, 5.4%). Many respondents are classified as youth, which aligns with the typical age range of students who continue to study at a higher education level. In terms of educational level, most respondents were pursuing a Bachelor's Degree (256, 63.2%), while the remaining were enrolled in Diploma programs (149, 36.8%). This is consistent with the course offerings at UiTM Seremban, where many programs are offered at Degree level. Finally, most of the respondents are from the Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies (240, 59.3%), followed by the College of Computing, Informatics and Mathematics (123, 30.4%), and the Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation (42, 10.4%). The higher representation from the Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies reflects that many programs are offered by the faculty as it is the main faculty in UiTM Seremban.

Table 3: Demographic profiles

Profile		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	100	24.7
	Female	305	75.3
Age Group	18-20 years old	161	39.8
	21-23 years old	222	54.8
	24 years old and above	22	5.4
Education Level	Bachelor's Degree	256	63.2
	Diploma	149	36.8
Faculty	Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies	240	59.3
	College of Computing, Informatics and Mathematics	123	30.4
	Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation	42	10.4

(N=405)

Awareness of Mental Health

According to (Abdul Gafoor, 2012), awareness can be defined as knowledge that is gained without direct teaching. Awareness also refers to public or common knowledge or understanding about social, scientific or political issues. In the mental health context, it is an understanding of the mental health issue, its symptoms, early signs and knowing available treatment options to manage the issue effectively.

In this study, levels of mental health awareness are interpreted by indicating three levels which are low (1.00 - 2.33), moderate (2.34 - 3.57) and high (3.58 - 5.00) based on the study done by (Landell, 1997). The awareness level of mental health among students in UiTM Seremban is high. This has been proven in Table 4 that shows all the mean value for mental health awareness is high. The highest mean score is (4.59) where the students are aware that mental health awareness is important for all the university students. The second highest mean value is (4.57) which indicates that the students are aware that mental health issues should be taken seriously and not to be ignored as it will affect daily activity. Furthermore, with a mean score of (4.53). This shows that the students are aware they are also exposed to the mental health issue if they do not handle it well.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Mental Health Awareness

Items	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Level
B1. I understand what mental health is.	4.38	0.644	1	5	High
B2. I am aware of the difference between regular stress and a serious mental health issue.	4.36	0.669	1	5	High
B3. I am aware that anyone regardless of their background can experience mental health issues.	4.43	0.673	1	5	High
B4. I am aware of early signs of mental health problems experienced by individuals.	4.20	0.808	1	5	High
B5. I am aware that mental health issues can occur among university students.	4.53	0.607	1	5	High
B6. I am aware that mental health problems should be taken seriously and not ignored.	4.57	0.608	1	5	High
B7. I am aware that early intervention can help prevent mental health problems from becoming more serious.	4.51	0.616	1	5	High

B8. I am aware that mental health problems can affect academic performance and daily life as a student.	4.52	0.631	1	5	High
B9. I am aware of the mental health support services provided by the university.	4.29	0.756	1	5	High
B10. I am aware that mental health awareness is important for all university students.	4.59	0.594	1	5	High
Overall Mental Health Awareness	4.4373	0.49694	1	5	High

Relationship Between Knowledge, Family Influence, Media Exposure, And Government Initiatives Towards Mental Health Awareness Among University Students

Pearson Correlation Analysis indicates the direction, strength, and significance between bivariate relationships among all variables that were measured at an interval or ratio level. The correlation is derived by assessing the variations in one variable as another variable also varies (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). In this study, Pearson Correlation Analysis was used to see the relationship between each of the variables involved in this study. The result in Table 5 indicates that all independent variables have a strong relationship with the dependent variable (mental health awareness). Knowledge found to has strong relationship with mental health awareness ($r=0.693$, $p < .001$). According to (Pallant & Cohen, 2004), this study indicates that there is a strong and significant relationship between knowledge and mental health awareness.

The result is followed by family influence which is ($r=0.647$, $p < .001$). This shows that family influence has a strong and significant relationship with mental health awareness among students at UiTM Seremban. Moreover, Correlation Analysis between media exposure and mental health is ($r=0.578$, $p < .001$). This finding shows that there is a strong and significant relationship between media exposure and mental health awareness among students at UiTM Seremban. Finally, government initiatives and mental health awareness have a moderate relationship as it ($r=0.493$, $p < .001$). To conclude, all the findings indicate that knowledge, family influence, media exposure, and government initiatives have a significant relationship between the mental health awareness among students in UiTM Seremban, Malaysia.

Table 5: Pearson Correlation Analysis

		Mental health Awareness
Knowledge	Pearson Correlation	0.693**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	405
Family Influence	Pearson Correlation	0.647**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	405
Media Exposure	Pearson Correlation	0.578**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	405
Government Initiatives	Pearson Correlation	0.493**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	405

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

Table 6: Correlation Coefficient Interpretation Table (Pallant & Cohen, 2004)

Correlation coefficient (r)	Strength of relationship
0.10 - 0.29	Weak
0.30 - 0.49	Moderate
0.50 - 1.00	Strong

The Most Significant Factors Influencing Mental Health Awareness

Based on the Table 7, the results of the Multiple Regression Analysis indicate that knowledge, family influence, media exposure, and government initiatives collectively explain 52.0% of the variance in mental health awareness ($R^2 = 0.520$). This finding suggests that more than half of the variation in mental health awareness among students at UiTM Seremban can be explained by the independent variables included in the research model, while the remaining 48.0% is attributable to other factors which are not examined in this study. The standardized beta (β) coefficients were used to assess the relative contribution of each independent variable while controlling for the effects of the others. Among the four predictors, knowledge emerged as the most significant determinant of mental health awareness ($\beta = 0.440$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that increase in students' knowledge significantly enhances their level of mental health awareness. This was followed by independent variables of family influence, which also showed a significant and positive effect on mental health awareness ($\beta = 0.273$, $p < 0.001$). This shows that family also plays an important role in influencing the mental health awareness among the students. However, media exposure ($\beta = 0.053$, $p = 0.386$) and government initiatives ($\beta = 0.016$, $p = 0.763$) did not demonstrate a statistically significant influence on mental health awareness.

These findings show that, at the university, knowledge ($\beta = 0.440$, $p < 0.001$) and family influence ($\beta = 0.273$, $p < 0.001$) factors play a more critical role in shaping mental health awareness than media exposure and government initiatives. As the results indicate that knowledge is the most influential factor affecting mental health awareness among students in UiTM Seremban. Besides, this shows student's understanding on the mental health issue including the awareness on the importance of early intervention, symptoms and correct treatment playing an essential role in shaping their awareness. They are also aware that this issue requires serious attention. Thus, this study highlights the importance of knowledge on the issue which can improve the mental health awareness among university students.

Table 7: Multiple Regression Analysis

	Beta (β)	Sig. (p)	Tolerance	VIF
Knowledge	0.440	0.000	0.343	2.917
Family Influence	0.273	0.000	0.396	2.527
Media Exposure	0.053	0.386	0.325	3.079
Government Initiatives	0.016	0.763	0.451	2.219
R^2	0.520			
Adjusted R^2	0.515			
F Change	108.119			
Sig.	0.000			

a. Dependent Variable: DV_Awareness

b. Predictors: (Constant), Iv_Govinitiatives, Iv_Familyinf, Iv_Knowledge, Iv_Media

DISCUSSION

Mental health can be defined as the situation where a person has difficulty in terms of managing their stresses (World Health Organization, 2025). Nowadays, mental health is considered as a serious issue among university students. This is because there is evidence that shows 70% - 75% of adults have faced mental health issues (Siddique et al., 2022). This happened because the person did not have the knowledge and awareness regarding the issue of mental health. Malaysia is known for its diversified races, culture and religion. Each main race, which are Malays, Chinese and Indian, has its own stigma towards mental health. Based on the study in 2018, a survey was conducted and one of the surveys was about stigma, one of the respondents often defined mental health issues as religious issues and referred to religious practitioners rather than medical professionals. Malays habitually associate people with mental health problems as people that lack connection to God.

Besides, the prime minister of Malaysia which is Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim also emphasised on the mental health issue where during the World Mental Health Day 2023, he stated that anyone can experience mental health issues. Therefore, he wears a green ribbon as a symbol of creating awareness regarding mental health issues to the society (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2023). This is because the issue of mental health in Malaysia has been increasing rapidly. According to the National Health & Morbidity Survey (NHMS), the number of adults in Malaysia which is 29% had experienced the issue of mental health (New Straits Times, 2023). Not only that, in Malaysia four of the youth had to face mental health issues. This shows that this matter is important and needs further solutions by the authorities such as the government, Ministry of Health, and other relevant stakeholders.

The findings disclosed that knowledge, family influence, media exposure, and government initiatives significantly influenced mental health awareness. The result of Multiple Regression Analysis indicated that knowledge is the most significant factor that contributes to the awareness of mental health among students in UiTM Seremban. It shows that students who are more concerned towards mental health knowledge are significantly aware of mental health issues. Mental health awareness is important in reducing the negative perspective and promoting understanding and help-seeking behaviour among youth. As revealed in the study among Malaysian university students, findings disclosed that those with a well-insight in mental health awareness present more positive attitudes and better awareness of mental health concerns (Ibrahim et al., 2019).

The Ministry of Health Malaysia also underlines that increasing mental health knowledge is essential for early identification and intervention of mental health problems in young populations (MOH, 2020). The finding that knowledge emerged as the strongest predictor suggests that awareness is primarily driven by mental health literacy rather than exposure to external campaigns alone. Students who understand symptoms, available treatments, and appropriate help-seeking pathways are more likely to recognise mental health problems and respond appropriately. This finding supports that youth with knowledge in mental health influence their behavioural intention. It also indicates that universities should prioritise educational interventions that improve mental health literacy rather than relying solely on awareness campaigns.

Moreover, the high level of family influence indicates the continued relevance of family relationships in collectivistic societies such as Malaysia. While independence is stressed in early adulthood in many Western contexts, Malaysian university students often depend on their families for emotional and financial assistance (Mohamad et al., 2023). Parental attitudes and family communication can thus encourage or restrict help-seeking behaviour (Ibrahim et al., 2020). These findings suggest that mental health promotion should be directed not only at students, but also at educational efforts for families. Nevertheless, traditional stigma within Malaysian families where the emotional struggles may be seen as personal weaknesses that would be a barrier to open discussions.

Interestingly, although media exposure was positively correlated with awareness, it was not a significant predictor in the regression model after controlling for knowledge and family influence. This finding suggests that media may function primarily as an information dissemination channel rather than an independent determinant of awareness. Campaigns on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok have helped normalised conversations about mental health and share information on symptoms, treatment, and support. The effectiveness of media campaigns may therefore depend on the credibility, quality, and consistency of the information delivered (Khadeeja et al., 2022).

This study also found that government initiatives indicate a positive but weaker correlation with mental health awareness compared to other variables. Malaysia's National Strategic Plan for mental health 2020-2025 precisely includes raising awareness as a key objective, particularly among youth and community settings (MOH, 2020). The average correlation recommends that while national policies and programmes help raise awareness among students, their consequences may not be as strong unless universities actively promote and integrate these initiatives into student life. Therefore, it demonstrated that students may not be fully aware of government mental health services unless these are communicated through more direct channels like campus programmes or media. Similarly, the non-significant contribution of government initiatives may indicate that

national policies alone are insufficient to influence students unless they are translated into visible and accessible university-based programmes. This finding underscores the importance of implementation rather than policy formulation alone.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, the findings revealed that all the factors examined significantly influenced mental health awareness, with knowledge emerging as the strongest predictor. These findings are consistent with international evidence demonstrating that mental health literacy is a fundamental determinant of mental health awareness, early recognition of mental health problems, and timely help-seeking behaviour among young adults. They also reinforce the growing global emphasis on strengthening mental health literacy as a key strategy for improving mental health outcomes within higher education settings.

This study contributes to the international body of literature by providing empirical evidence from a Malaysian university context, where research on the determinants of mental health awareness remains relatively limited. Although the study was conducted in Malaysia, the identified factors (knowledge, family influence, media exposure, and government initiatives) reflect broader social and ecological determinants of mental health awareness that have also been reported across diverse cultural and educational contexts. As universities worldwide continue to face increasing mental health challenges among students, the findings underscore the importance of adopting comprehensive and collaborative approaches that integrate educational institutions, families, media organisations, healthcare professionals, and policymakers.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, the Ministry of Education (MOE), together with higher education institutions, should strengthen mental health literacy by integrating mental health education into university curricula through compulsory courses, seminars, or co-curricular activities. Such initiatives are aligned with international recommendations that advocate embedding mental health promotion within educational systems to improve awareness and reduce stigma. Second, government agencies should expand community and family-based mental health education programmes to improve parents' understanding of mental health and enhance their capacity to support young adults experiencing psychological distress. Third, both traditional and digital media should continue to disseminate accurate, evidence-based mental health information to increase public awareness, challenge misconceptions, and encourage early help-seeking behaviour. Given the extensive use of digital media among university students globally, strategic use of social media platforms can substantially enhance the reach and effectiveness of mental health promotion initiatives.

Despite the contributions of this study, interpretation of the data should be made with some restrictions in view. First, the study was conducted at a single public university, limiting the generalisability of the findings to students at other higher education institutions with diverse demographic and institutional characteristics. Second, the study used a cross-sectional design which captures the respondents' perceptions at one point in time, therefore limiting the capacity to demonstrate causal links among the variables. Third, all factors were measured by self-reported questionnaires and hence the findings are prone to typical method bias, social desirability bias and respondents' subjective perceptions. Thus, the actual level of mental health awareness may differ from what is reflected in the responses. The interpretation of the results should consider these limitations.

Future research should replicate this study among respondents from a variety of public and private universities across different areas in Malaysia to increase the representativeness and external validity of the findings. Cross-cultural comparisons with universities in other countries might also be helpful to gain insights into characteristics associated with mental health awareness. We also advocate longitudinal research designs to assess changes in mental health awareness over time and to give greater evidence for causal links between knowledge, family influence, media exposure, government activities, and mental health awareness. Future research may also use qualitative methodologies or mixed-method designs to yield further insights into students' living experiences, perceptions, and help-seeking behaviours.

In addition, this research has provided a valuable insight to the understanding of mental health awareness among university students which can contribute to the further research related to mental health. Moreover, the findings contributed as a reference for the future research, education institutional, and policymakers in better understanding how the independent variables in this study contribute to mental health awareness and influence the changes that can be taken to further increase the mental health awareness among university students.

Ethics Statements

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, UiTM, Malaysia. Approval Number: 600-FSPPP(PT.5/1/1).

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Conflict of interest

The authors agree that this research was conducted without any self-benefits or commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article because no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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