

The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic Crisis on Mental and Emotional Health among Unisza Students

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic became a disease outbreak in Malaysia and the world. In Malaysia, the COVID-19 outbreak has had a significant impact on the mental health aspects. However, it has the potential to change the patterns and norms of human life, which could affect the mental and emotional health of individuals involved, whether they are living alone or with family during the MCO, due to psychological pressures including fear, panic, stress, anxiety, and depression. Therefore, the objective of this study is to focus on the implications of the COVID-19 outbreak and the MCO on the mental and emotional health of UniSZA students. The research method used in this study is quantitative, utilizing a descriptive and inferential analysis design. The sample size of this study is 500 UniSZA students, involving 4 UniSZA campuses. The findings of the study indicate that the mental and emotional health of UniSZA students is at a moderate level. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the MCO have a negative impact on the mental and emotional health of UniSZA students and humans in general.

Keywords: COVID-19 Outbreak, UniSZA Students, Mental and Emotional Health.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic that hit Malaysia has had a very significant impact on the country's political, economic, social, health, and public services systems. Its impact has also extended to the education sector. According to a report from the World Health Organization (WHO) as of November 30, 2020, the total number of COVID-19 cases reached 62 million, with more than 1.4 million deaths worldwide. In Malaysia, the number of positive cases reached 65,697, with 360 deaths (Ministry of Health Malaysia Statistical Report, 2020). Consequently, the pandemic that affected Malaysia has had a significant impact on the political, economic, social, health, and education systems. The WHO report also estimated an increase in mental health cases among the global population due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a result of this outbreak, the Malaysian government announced the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) starting on March 18, 2020, with the aim of breaking the chain of the outbreak by controlling the spread of the virus. Among the measures of the MCO was the closure of all educational institutions, including daycare centers, schools, tahfiz centers, and colleges. In addition, higher education institutions, including both public and private universities, as well as vocational training institutes across the country, were also closed. The global crisis caused by the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak not only delayed conventional teaching and learning but also made students' tasks even more challenging as they had to adapt to new norms and a new way of life, which required teaching and learning (PdP) to be conducted online.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the level of mental and emotional health among students at UniSZA as a result of changes in the teaching and learning (PdP) process during the COVID-19 outbreak and the MCO in Terengganu. The objective of this study also focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on mental and emotional health. The main findings and discussions are centered on the implications of the COVID-19 outbreak on mental and emotional health among students in UniSZA.

The COVID-19 pandemic can lead to symptoms of anxiety, which include cognitive, emotional, somatic, autonomic, and behavioral aspects, with varying degrees depending on the characteristics of the at-risk population. Among the cognitive symptoms are poor concentration, memory problems, and feelings of helplessness, while the emotional symptoms include feelings of fear, dread, distress, irritability, and sensitivity. Somatic symptoms include insomnia, body aches, loss of appetite, and a decrease in sexual desire. Autonomic symptoms include a fast heartbeat, palpitations, frequent urges to urinate, and stomach pain. Behavioral symptoms of anxiety can be observed through aggressive behavior, cruelty, and avoidance of crowds, places, or situations (Chhabra, 2020).

A study by Sundarasan et al. (2020) involving 983 respondents among students found that 20.4%, 6.6%, and 2.8% of students experienced anxiety at minimal to moderate, moderate severe, and very severe levels during the COVID-19 pandemic. All factors, including age, gender, field of study or course, and financial status, showed significant relationships with the level of anxiety. The main stressors were financial constraints, online learning, uncertainty about academic performance, graduation, and future job prospects. These findings were also supported by a study from Firdaus Abdul Gani (2020), which found that the majority of students exhibited symptoms of anxiety during the MCO, with 62.64% expressing concerns about food sources and finances, while 54% of students avoided social contact and large gatherings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2019, nearly half of million citizens in the adult category (2.3 percent) were found to experience symptoms of stress or depression. Among this group, the majority of affected individuals were from the B40 group (2.7 percent), followed by the M40 group (1.7 percent) and the T20 group (0.5 percent). At the same time, the NHMS 2019 also found that 424,000 (7.9 percent) children experienced mental health issues. Half of these mental health problems began as early as the age of 14, and three-quarters of them occurred in the mid-20s (Berita Harian, 2020).

In the education sector, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, all schools, including public and private higher education institutions across the country, were forced to close simultaneously due to the spread of the virus, which was seen as potentially impacting the operations of organizations as well as teaching and learning in the involved institutions. The situation during the COVID-19 pandemic required swift action from the relevant authorities, such as the government, the Ministry of Higher Education, and the involved institutions, to make the best decisions to prevent the spread of infection through the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO). Therefore, on May 16, 2020, the National Security Council approved the proposal submitted by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) to manage all campus activities involving all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) nationwide (Ministry of Higher Education, 2020).

Furthermore, according to Tam and El Azhar (2020), as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is estimated that more than 421 million students were affected in their learning process for the current academic session when educational institutions had to close immediately to ensure the safety of the staff and students, who are considered to be at risk of infection. According to a study conducted by Mohd Arif Johari & Sa'odah Ahmad (2019), there were several challenges faced by students in undergoing online learning, including the ability to adapt to technological changes, as it involved digital learning, as well as the change in attitude required to accept the practice of online learning that was being implemented.

METHODOLOGY

The design of this study is quantitative, using a survey research approach with a questionnaire instrument. This study was conducted during the post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery phase in the 2021/2022 period. The sampling method employed in this study was systematic random sampling involving three (3) UniSZA

campuses. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, a total of 500 respondents were selected from a population of 20,000 male and female students at UniSZA.

The questionnaire in this study consists of two (2) main sections:

Section A: Respondent Demographics

This section relates to the background of the respondents, such as gender, district location, and facilities for online teaching and learning.

Section B: Enforcement of MCO (Movement Control Order) during the Covid-19 Pandemic

This section aims to examine the respondents' attitudes towards the enforcement of the MCO due to the Covid-19 pandemic, containing five items.

Section C: Depression Anxiety Stress Scale 21-item (DASS-21) Instrument in Malay Version

In this study, the researcher will use a modified instrument from the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale 21 (DASS-21) to assess the mental health status of students, focusing on depression, anxiety, and stress. The choice of DASS-21 is due to its design not only to conventionally measure emotional levels but also to facilitate a more detailed process for understanding and measuring emotional status, which is often described as stress. DASS can be effectively used by groups or individuals for research purposes (Ramli Musa & Ruhaila Maskat, 2020).

Table 3.1 DASS-21 Item

Scale	Item Numbers
Depression	3, 5, 10, 13, 16, 17, 21
Anxiety	2, 4, 7, 9, 15, 19, 20
Stress	1, 6, 8, 11, 12, 14, 18

Table 3.2 Scale for Level of Depression, Anxiety and Stress

Scale	Normal	Mild	Moderate	Severe	Extremely Severe
Depression	0–9	10–13	14–20	21–27	28+
Anxiety	0–7	8–9	10–14	15–19	20+
Stress	0–14	15–18	19–25	26–33	34+

Validity And Reliability Of The Dass-21 Instrument

Based on several previous studies, the validity and reliability of the DASS-21 instrument have shown high values based on Cronbach's Alpha assessments. For example, in a study conducted by Ramli Musa and Ruhaila Maskat (2020), the Cronbach's Alpha values were 0.95 for depression, 0.85 for anxiety, and 0.87 for stress, with an overall Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.95. Similarly, Edimansyah (2008) reported Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.91 for depression, 0.88 for anxiety, and 0.89 for stress.

FINDINGS

This section will explain the data analysis descriptively as the research results, organized according to the sequence of the research questions. Descriptive analysis is used to explain the findings of this study, which are the interpretation of the mean percentage scores. To explain the analysis of the percentage mean scores of mental and emotional health, the readings in Table 4.0 are used to interpret the meaning of the obtained scores. Therefore, the interpretation of the scores in percentage is shown as displayed in Table 4.0.

For percentage scores ranging from 75% to 100%, it indicates that the scores for the variable being studied are at a high level. Percentage scores ranging from 50% to 74% indicate that the scores for the variable being studied are at a moderate level, and percentage scores ranging from 0% to 49% indicate that the scores for the variable being studied are at a low level.

Table 4.0 Interpretation of Mean Percentage Scores

Mean Percentage Score	Interpretation of Mean Score
75%–100%	High
50%–74%	Moderate
0%–49%	Low

Source : Tuckman (1999), Gay & Airasian (2003).

Level Of Mental And Emotional Health Among Unisza Students

This section will present the overall results regarding the level of mental and emotional health among UniSZA students in Terengganu, referring to research question 1: What is the level of mental and emotional health among UniSZA students?

To answer research question 1, descriptive statistical analysis was used to clarify the interpretation of the percentage scores obtained for the level of mental and emotional health among UniSZA students. The overall result for the level of mental and emotional health among 500 respondents shows that the mean percentage score is (65.7%), which indicates a moderate level.

Table 4.1 Mean Percentage Score for Mental and Emotional Health

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mental And Emotional Health	500	48.00	95.00	65.6620	18.61453
Valid N (listwise)	500				

DISCUSSION

The respondents involved in this study were a total of 500 UniSZA students from the Gong Badak Campus, Besut Campus, and Kota Campus. All respondents are students currently studying at UniSZA in Terengganu. The distribution of respondents by gender is as follows: 284 males (57%) and 216 females (43%). The distribution of respondents by campus location at UniSZA is as follows: 167 students (34%) from the Gong Badak campus, 167 students (34%) from the Besut campus, and 166 students (32%) from the Kota campus. The number of respondents is not evenly distributed across the districts as it depends on the number of students at each UniSZA campus.

Based on the data analysis involving 500 respondents, the findings related to mental and emotional health indicate that the level of mental and emotional health among UniSZA students is at a moderate level, with a mean score of 66%. The findings show that the mental and emotional health of the majority of UniSZA students falls within the moderate category. Referring to Beck's Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT) (2011), this condition suggests that some students experience symptoms of anxiety, distress, and fear as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. These findings are consistent with a study by Sidik (2020), which reported that a large proportion of the study sample experienced mental health problems, emotional distress, stress, anxiety, and psychological tension. The findings are also in line with those reported by Irawan et al. (2020), who identified online learning workload as a contributing factor to student stress, as students were required to quickly master the use of online media despite having only recently been exposed to it. Furthermore, conditions that forced students to remain confined at home, engage in limited physical activity, and experience reduced peer interaction further exacerbated their situation. These circumstances may also have psychological effects on students' mental and emotional health in the form of fear and anxiety.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

Overall, there is indeed an influence of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on the mental and emotional health of students at UniSZA. The mental and emotional health of students across all three campuses is at a moderate level, indicating that all students across the three campuses are experiencing a decline in mental and emotional health

due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the MCO (Movement Control Order). The study also indicates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Movement Control Order on the mental and emotional health of students. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide significant benefits to the management and administration of UniSZA, UniSZA lecturers, UniSZA students, and scholars in the field of counseling in Malaysia.

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