



Stress Amongst Private University Students in Malaysia: Do Personality Differences Matter?

Seong-Yuen Toh, Sunway University, Malaysia

Shehnaz Tehseen, Sunway University, Malaysia

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4039-0256>

Ali B. Mahmoud, St. John's. University, USA & Brunel University London, UK & University of Wales Trinity Saint David, UK*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3790-1107>

Jason B. Cheok, Sunway University, Malaysia

Ranita Kaur, Sunway University, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The authors examine the predictive power of individual differences based on the five-factor model (FFM) for stress among undergraduate students in private universities in Malaysia. One hundred thirty-one undergraduate students from three private universities were surveyed. A partial least square structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was utilised to analyse the data. The findings indicate that neuroticism and agreeableness positively predict student stress whereas openness to experience, conscientiousness, and extraversion do not exhibit significant or sufficiently sizable predictions of student stress. Notably, female students are found to report higher levels of stress than males. Emotionally unstable students tend to be more vulnerable to forms of stress. Agreeableness signifies the predisposition to be kind and supportive instead of suspicious or adverse towards people. Thus, highly agreeable students may expose themselves to discretionary stress to meet their classmate and tutor expectations. The results are discussed. Further, practical and research implications are provided.

KEYWORDS

Five-Factor Model, Personality, Student Stress

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of stress among university students in Malaysia is a serious concern (Nordin, Talib, Yaacob, & Sabran, 2010). For example, Nordin et al. (2010) found that 34.4% of undergraduate students out of 1,467 respondents said they have signs of potential mental health problems. In another study (Islam, Low, Tong, Yuen, & Abdullah, 2018), as high as 30% of 1,023 students said they experienced

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*Corresponding Author

stress, 4.4% suffered from severe depression. There is mounting concern by the Malaysian government about the mental health of undergraduate students in Malaysia (Othman, Kelvin, Othman, & Yasin, 2013). Survey has shown that 9.7 per cent of university students in Malaysia surveyed had severe depression, 29 per cent had extreme severe anxiety, and 5.1 per cent had too severe stress (Sani, 2018). In addition, the student suicide rate has been a serious issue among Malaysian private education institutions (The NST, 2019b). Furthermore, the deputy prime minister of Malaysia (The NST, 2019a) and director-general of the national health of Malaysia (Cheah, 2019) has acknowledged the need to identify suicide tendencies amongst teen school students in Malaysia as well.

For private universities, most stress coping mechanisms utilised to mitigate the issue focus predominantly on external stressors like understanding the demands of an academic programme, counselling related to family and personal problems, and self-caring (Sani, 2018). Factors contributing to stress include financial burden, family problems, peer pressure, and academic load (Othman et al., 2013; Ramachandiran & Dhanapal, 2018). However, internal stressors, like differences in student's personality traits, are seldom considered when private universities consider strategies to cope with student stress. Taking into account personality differences can offer better accuracy in identifying or detecting candidates to receive early intervention. Most studies in Malaysia have focused on depression amongst medical students (Bunevicius, Katkute, & Bunevicius, 2008; Gan & Yuen Ling, 2019; Othman et al., 2013; Salam, Yousuf, Bakar, & Haque, 2013; Saravanan & Wilks, 2014). Besides, very little is known concerning whether personality differences play a role in student stress besides external stressors in private universities in Malaysia. As such, there is very little empirical research to guide the private university in this regard. This study addresses this pressing concern.

Our choice of studying private universities in Malaysia was triggered the growing monstrosity of for-profit higher education institutes worldwide (Mahmoud, Hack-Polay, Fuxman, Massetti, & Al Samarh, 2020b), including Malaysia (Ghasemy, Hussin, Megat Daud, Md Nor, Ghavifekr, & Kenayathulla, 2018), which has led to a new generation of students, known as consumerist students (Havergal, 2016). These colleges provide post-secondary education with little or no student engagement. Thus, they are not only assisting in the transition of education's idea from attainment to commodity, but they are also moving student expectations from educational outcomes to cost (Bartlett & Smallwood, 2004; Mahmoud et al., 2020b). Consequently, students are increasingly viewing themselves as clients, with a sense of degree entitlement (Kelso, 2017). In general, the more skewed a student's perception of the demands of university study, the more likely they are to exhibit unhealthy attitudinal and behavioural patterns when those perceptions collide with reality (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019; Mahmoud et al., 2020b). Moreover, a "student-consumer" perspective may discourage creativity, foster passive and instrumental attitudes toward learning, jeopardise academic standards, and further entrench academic privilege inside the higher education system (Mahmoud et al., 2020b; Naidoo, Shankar, & Veer, 2011).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study's theoretical framework is based on the five-factor model (FFM), as shown in Figure 1. The use of the Five-Factor Model is validated in extant research (Costa & McCrae, 1991, 1992; McCrae & John, 1992). According to McCrae and Costa (McCrae & Costa, 2003), personality plays a vital role in how individuals experience life. For example, positive emotions are usually associated with positive traits such as cheerfulness (Hankin, 2010). Thus, personality traits tend to be relatively immutable and have a substantial impact on the experience of daily events individuals encounter. Therefore, it is not surprising that past studies have shown that personality traits determine how much individual experiences stress (Vollrath, 2001). The FFM differentiates personality by efficiently analysing the different aspects of personality using five dimensions (McCrae & Costa, 2003). The relationship between each dimension and student stress is discussed in the subsequent sections.

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