

## The Relationship Between Social Support and Mental Health in Secondary School

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v13-i12/19776> DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v13-i12/19776

**Published Date:** 06 December 2023

### Abstract

Mental health issues among students should be a matter of serious concern for all parties, as effective social support can assist students in preventing mental health problems. There is a scarcity of research conducted on the relationship between social support and mental health within the Malaysian society. Additionally, limited studies have focused on schoolchildren and the elderly, who are particularly in need of substantial social support. The purpose of this study was to investigate the correlation between social support and mental health among students at SMK Khir Johari, Kedah. The questionnaire for this study comprises three essential sections: Part A, which covers personal information, Part B, which addresses social support, and Part C, which focuses on mental health. This study employed two research instruments: the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behavior (ISSB), designed to assess social support among school students, and the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), used to gauge the mental health levels of the study's participants. The study included a sample of 132 participants. The study's findings indicated a lack of significant relationship between social support and mental health among students. In conclusion, it is recommended to establish crisis intervention programs to provide essential support and care for students' mental health. In future studies, it is advisable to employ a more comprehensive evaluation approach, combining qualitative methods such as observations and interviews with respondents.

**Keywords:** Social Support, Mental Health, Students, Society

### Introduction

Adolescents, especially students, are a population that is not exempt from mental health issues because they are exposed to various stress-inducing situations every day. For example, students may experience stress when they worry excessively about difficult subjects and upcoming test grades. If not managed properly, this stress can lead to mental illnesses like depression. Uncontrolled stress has been identified as a contributing factor to mental

illnesses, such as schizophrenia, as demonstrated in a study by (Ali et al., 2019). Schizophrenia is a severe mental illness in Malaysia, often caused by individuals' inability to manage stress and emotions. According to the 2016 III National Health and Morbidity Survey, 20.3 percent of children and adolescents, as well as 11.2 percent of adults, suffer from mental health disorders. This means that three million out of Malaysia's 26 million population are affected by mental health problems (Ishak, Berita Harian Online, 2016). Shockingly, the suicide rate in Malaysia is also a concerning issue, with 20 to 30 individuals per 100,000 people committing suicide each year. Moreover, there has been a significant increase of 15.6 percent, or 400,227 patients, in the number of individuals seeking treatment for mental health issues in government hospitals in 2008, compared to 346,196 patients in 2007. According to an analysis by Mohamad and Ibrahim (2018), gender is a factor that affects the level of stress, a finding consistent with Auerbach et al (2016) study, which showed that gender influences stress levels, subsequently impacting mental health.

A survey conducted in 2015 revealed that the number of Malaysians experiencing mental health issues is on the rise, affecting approximately 4.2 million Malaysians aged 16 and above, or 29.2 percent of the population. This alarming statistic underscores the fact that one in three Malaysians grapple with mental health concerns. The study also indicated that low-income individuals, especially those between the ages of 16 and 19, are more likely to experience mental health issues (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2016). In its pursuit of becoming a developed country by 2020, the government has implemented various strategies to combat mental health problems, as these issues adversely affect self-management and emotions among individuals (Ali et al., 2019). Today, mental health issues are of greater concern than ever before. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a significant number of mental illnesses go undiagnosed and untreated from a young age, with roughly half of all mental disorders manifesting by the age of 14 (Daily News, 2018). This study employs Jahoda's Mental Health Theory, first proposed in 1958, to examine the role of mental concepts, happiness, and self-actualization from a comprehensive perspective (Shuaib, 1985).

As indicated in a study by Wajar and Hamzah (2020), Positive Psychology Theory serves as a foundation for understanding the mental health of university students. This is because good mental health has a positive impact on students' academic performance. It plays a crucial role in enabling students to navigate the various challenges and pressures they encounter while adapting to changes. Wilcox and Nordstokke (2019) also endorse the idea of a positive correlation between mental health and academic achievement among students at the University of Calgary. Based on a study conducted by Farhan et al (2021) at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, which explored the relationship between social support and the mental health of students at UKM, it becomes evident that mental health is a significant concern, critical for students' successful navigation of campus life. According to Fadzil (2019), individuals who receive social support from those around them are less likely to experience high levels of stress and depression, in comparison to students who lack such support. Moreover, as noted by Hamzah (2020) and the University Student Life Happiness Model based on Mental Health Factors, support from family and close friends plays a crucial role in providing effective support when individuals face stress. This support helps them remain calmer and more comfortable, benefiting from the attention and assistance offered by those around them.

However, efforts need to be more effectively intensified, as mental health problems continue to rise, transcending race and religion. Teenagers require robust social support to effectively manage stress. Social assistance, derived from family, friends, and the community, plays a vital role in safeguarding the well-being of individuals grappling with crises in their lives. Support from these social circles, including parents, siblings, cousins, teachers, and peers, is pivotal as it inspires and helps depressed young individuals become more resilient. Social support can significantly aid teenagers in overcoming depression (Mavis & Akhir, 2020). Conversely, the absence of social support from family, friends, and the community can lead to psychological issues, such as depression. Simultaneously, psychopathological conditions can contribute to mental health problems in adolescents who lack sufficient social support (Mavis & End, 2020). Social support is crucial in facilitating a successful transition for students facing new situations, such as living away from home and interacting with strangers (Ismail & Lokman, 2020). This perspective is reinforced by the findings of Bukhari and Saba (2017), who highlighted that depression, anxiety, and stress have adverse effects on well-being and are closely linked to life satisfaction among university students. However, there is a dearth of research on social support and mental health within the context of Malaysian society, which poses challenges for new researchers seeking information and references related to these themes.

Moreover, there is a scarcity of studies addressing the needs of specific target groups for high social support, such as schoolchildren and the elderly. Some existing research, like that conducted by Aripin et al (2019), has delved into these areas. Previous research has predominantly focused on students in higher education institutions and the working class (Samsudin & Hong, 2016). This is also corroborated by the work of Farhan et al (2021), which explored the relationship between social support and mental health among university students. It's worth noting that many earlier studies relied on interview methods, for instance, the study carried out by Talib (2020) to assess community attitudes towards mental health. In this study, the researcher has chosen an innovative approach by using questionnaires, which are considered more suitable and precise for measuring each item. This is in contrast to the interview method, where researchers risk forgetting information obtained during interviews. Questionnaires provide a clear and straightforward format for respondents to answer. Additionally, the quantitative approach employed in distributing questionnaires facilitates easier interpretation of the findings. Therefore, this study adopts a quantitative method to explore the relationship between social support and mental health among students. Given the challenges identified, this study seeks to address them through effective intervention measures. By doing so, it aims to enhance mental health levels and reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes resulting from the problems individuals face. Accordingly, the following are the objectives of this article: (1) to determine the correlation between the level of social support and the mental health of students; (2) to investigate variations in the level of social support among students based on demographic factors; (3) to explore differences in the mental health levels of students based on demographic factors; (4) to establish the relationship between social support and mental health among students. The study's target population consisted of 200 students in forms 4 and 5 at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Khir Johari, Kedah. The research sample comprised 132 individuals, a sample size determined based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling criteria. The researchers employed a purposive sampling method. This technique involves the deliberate selection of subjects possessing specific characteristics that are relevant to the study. It's important to note that this sample is

not random, and the findings cannot be generalized to all school students in the district. The results exclusively pertain to the chosen subject group within the study location.

### **Method**

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### **Population and Sampling**

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### **Result**

Table 1 shows the distribution of the characteristics of the respondents. The respondents consisted of 132 students of Khir Johari National High School, Kedah. This is to analyze the distribution of respondent characteristics such as age, race, gender, place of residence and guardian.

Table 1

*Demographic information of study respondents*

Subject information	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
<b>Age</b>		
16-20 years old	130	98.5
21 years old and aboved	2	1.5
<b>Nation</b>		
Malay	70	53.0
Chines	34	25.8
Indian	13	9.8
Others	15	11.4
<b>Gender</b>		
Men	51	38.6
Female	81	61.4
<b>Residences</b>		
Rural	74	56.1
City	58	43.9
<b>Caretaker</b>		
Mother and Father	80	60.6
Mother or Father	27	20.5
Others	25	18.9

Table 2

*T-Test and ANOVA Analysis with Significance Values for Student Social Support Levels Based on Demographic Factors*

		Social support	Emotional Support	Information Support	Intrumental Support	Social Support
<b>Age</b>	<b>T</b>	2.242	2.04	1.93	1.483	1.215
	<b>Significant</b>	0.027	0.043	0.056	0.14	0.226
<b>Naton</b>	<b>F</b>	2.868	3.745	1.463	3.019	0.311
	<b>Significant</b>	0.039	0.013	0.228	0.032	0.818
<b>Gender</b>	<b>T</b>	2.544	2.074	2.263	3.322	0.056
	<b>Significant</b>	0.012	0.04	0.025	0.001	0.955
<b>Caretaker's residence</b>	<b>T</b>	1.98	-0.272	1.646	0.103	-0.721
	<b>Significant</b>	0.843	0.786	0.102	0.918	0.472
	<b>F</b>	1.065	2.515	0.216	2.136	0.107
	<b>Significant</b>	0.348	0.085	0.806	0.122	0.898

**Table 2** displays the results of the t-test and ANOVA, along with the respective p-values, indicating the differences in the level of social support among students at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Khir Johari, Kedah, based on demographic characteristics. The t-test reveals that there is a statistically significant difference in the level of social support in relation to age ( $t(130) = 2.242$ ,  $p = 0.027$ ) and emotional support ( $t(130) = 2.040$ ,  $p = 0.043$ ) since the values are less than 0.05. Conversely, the level of informational support ( $t(130) = 1.930$ ,  $p = 0.056$ ),

instrumental support ( $t(130) = 1.483, p = 0.140$ ), and social support ( $t(130) = 1.215, p = 0.226$ ) do not exhibit statistically significant differences.

The ANOVA test assessing the level of social support ( $F(3,126) = 2.868, p = 0.039$ ), emotional support ( $F(3,126) = 3.745, p = 0.013$ ), and instrumental support ( $F(3,126) = 3.019, p = 0.032$ ) based on race shows significant differences among racial groups. However, no significant differences are observed for informational support ( $F(3,126) = 1.463, p = 0.228$ ) and social support ( $F(3,126) = 0.311, p = 0.818$ ) as the p-values are greater than 0.05. Furthermore, the t-test demonstrates statistically significant differences in social support ( $t(130) = 2.544, p = 0.012$ ), emotional support ( $t(130) = 2.074, p = 0.040$ ), and informational support ( $t(130) = 2.263, p = 0.025$ ) between genders, with p-values less than 0.05. Conversely, no significant differences are observed for instrumental support ( $t(130) = 0.103, p = 0.918$ ) and social support ( $t(130) = 0.056, p = 0.955$ ) between genders. It's worth noting that both the t-test and ANOVA tests reveal no significant differences in any types of support based on residence or caregiver, as the p-values exceed 0.05.

Table 3

*t-Test and ANOVA Analyses with Significance Values for Student Mental Health Levels Based on Demographic Factors*

		Mental Health	Factor A	Factor B	Factor C	Factor D	Factor E
Age	T	-0.378	-1.074	1.31	-1.202	-0.683	0.500
	Significant	0.706	0.285	0.193	0.232	0.496	0.618
Nation	F	5.816	2.263	2.889	1.590	4.585	2.452
	Significant	0.001	0.084	0.038	0.195	0.004	0.066
Gender	T	2.454	0.031	2.678	-0.294	1.068	3.613
	Significant	0.015	0.975	0.008	0.769	0.288	0
Caretaker's residence	T	0.782	-0.157	1.034	0.242	1.621	0.006
	Significant	0.436	0.875	0.303	0.809	0.107	0.995
	F	2.253	1.272	1.675	0.670	0.639	1.033
	Significant	0.109	0.284	0.191	0.514	0.529	0.359

\*Factor A: Feelings of anxiety, worry, and tension

\*Factor B: Feelings of incompetence and low self-esteem

\*Factor C: Experiencing depression and despair

\*Factor D: Difficulty in facing illness and loss of enthusiasm

\*Factor E: Lost social functionality

Table 3 presents the results of the t-test and ANOVA analyses, along with the significance levels, demonstrating the differences in mental health levels among students at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Khir Johari, Kedah, based on demographic factors. According to the findings in Table 3, there is no statistically significant difference in mental health levels or across the various factors (Factor A, Factor B, Factor C, Factor D, and Factor E) based on age, gender, place of residence, and caregiver. This is indicated by the p-values exceeding 0.05 for all these factors. However, in the case of mental health levels ( $F(3,128) = 5.816, p = 0.001$ ), Factor B ( $F(3,128) = 2.889, p = 0.038$ ), and Factor D ( $F(3,128) = 4.585, p = 0.004$ ), the ANOVA test reveals a significant difference between different racial groups, as the p-values are less

than 0.05. Conversely, for Factor A, Factor C, and Factor E, the ANOVA test does not indicate any significant differences across racial groups, as the p-values exceed 0.05.

Table 4

*Correlation Between Social Support and Mental Health Among Students*

		Mental Health
<b>Social Support</b>	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	0.122
	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	0.164
	<b>N</b>	132

**Discussion**

Social support is evaluated in detail, encompassing four key aspects, emotional support, informational support, instrumental support, and social support. The study's findings indicate that all four forms of support are at a moderate level. These findings underscore the importance of social support, which plays a crucial role in describing supportive behaviors. This aligns with the results of a study conducted by Fadzil (2019), which revealed that students lacking social support are more prone to experiencing high levels of stress and depression compared to those who have a strong support system from their social circles. Students with adequate social support tend to excel in their university life by effectively balancing academic responsibilities and personal decision-making. Social support is recognized as a fundamental need that empowers individuals to achieve their goals, meet their needs, and attain overall well-being. In the context of this research, social support emerges as a vital construct, serving as a determinant of both physical and mental health. Such support can be derived from the care and assistance of individuals in one's close social network, including family and close friends.

As highlighted by Hamzah (2020), social support stands as a significant facet within the University Student Life Happiness Model. The study's findings indicate that there is no significant difference in the level of mental health based on age. Aspects such as feelings of anxiety, worry, tension, incompetence, low self-esteem, depression, despair, difficulty in facing illness, loss of enthusiasm, and loss of social functionality do not exhibit significant variations with age. Previous studies have found that, having a strong overall social support system, being in a spousal or partner relationship, residing with family members, maintaining a broad social network, and instrumental support are all associated with reduced depressive symptoms (Mohd et al., 2019). In terms of race, there is no significant difference in feelings of anxiety, worry, tension, depression, despair, and loss of social functionality. However, factors related to incompetence, low self-esteem, difficulty in facing illness, and loss of morale demonstrate significant differences across racial groups. Previous studies, such as the work conducted by Johnson et al (2003), have demonstrated variations in sleep patterns based on social support, with noteworthy differences observed among racial groups.

In relation to gender, a significant difference in mental health levels is observed. Factors such as feeling anxious, experiencing difficulty in facing illness and losing enthusiasm, worry, tension, and depression and despair do not exhibit significant differences by gender. However, factors related to the loss of social functionality, inefficiency, and low self-esteem demonstrate significant differences based on gender. This finding is also in line with the study of Yoon et al (2023) where, adolescents, especially girls, face a heightened vulnerability to

mental health challenges between the ages of 11 and 14. Girls reported notably higher overall levels of difficulty compared to boys, encompassing various mental health issues and subjective well-being. There is a significant difference between mental health with differences in race and gender (Prichett et al., 2023), and that Gender-diverse youth (GDY) experience significantly higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidality, and eating disorders compared to the general population (Gallagher & Axelrad, 2023).

Concerning the place of residence, there is no significant difference in mental health levels. Specifically, feelings of anxiety, loss of social functionality, worry, tension, incompetence, low self-esteem, hopelessness, difficulty in facing illness, and loss of enthusiasm do not show significant variations with regard to housing. Finally, the study's findings reveal no significant difference in mental health levels based on caregivers. A study conducted by Eraman et al (2021) emphasized the significance of mental health as an essential indicator, as it has a notable influence on an individual's behavior. Notably, significant changes in behavior and actions can impact a person's overall functioning. Based on the Pearson Correlation Test conducted, there is no significant relationship between social support and students' mental health. The two aspects are not correlated; social support does not appear to have a consistent impact on students' mental health. These findings contradict the results of a study conducted by Farhan et al (2021), which reported a significant relationship between social support and mental health among students at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). In that study, mental health was a focal point, contributing to a better campus life.

### **Conclusion**

The primary aim of this study was to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the relationship between social support and the mental health of students. Various aspects of student social support and mental health were thoroughly examined, with a focus on their interplay with demographic factors. The findings of this study indicate that there is no discernible relationship between social support and students' mental health. In other words, social support does not appear to be significantly correlated with students' mental well-being. This study suggests that the mental health of students is relatively stable. These results can be a valuable resource for relevant parties, particularly counsellors, as they seek to design initiatives aimed at enhancing both social support and students' mental health. It is hoped that this study will draw the attention of various stakeholders, particularly educational authorities, to the importance of prioritizing students' mental health, ensuring they are equipped to face any challenges that may arise. Preserving the mental health of students necessitates the implementation of stringent and practical operational methods. Equally important is the provision of adequate support to ensure students feel valued and cared for, which, in turn, can contribute to a more meaningful and fulfilling life for them. This indirectly leads to greater satisfaction and success in their academic achievements. Overall, this study underscores the significance of maintaining and enhancing the mental well-being of students as they navigate their educational journeys.



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