

Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Youth in Times of Crisis: A Study on Job and Financial Insecurity Post-COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on various aspects of social and economic life. One area that has been particularly affected is the mental health of young people. This study aims to investigate the factors that contribute to mental illness in youth in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. A sample of 300 youths participated in the study by completing a questionnaire that was developed based on the Young Minds Malaysia initiative. The questionnaire explored the perceptions of young people on various factors that can contribute to mental illness, including job and financial concerns. The study findings shed light on the unique mental health perceptions of youth in comparison to other age groups. The study highlights the need for targeted intervention strategies to address the mental health issues faced by youth, particularly in the areas of job and financial insecurity. The findings have significant implications for policymakers and mental health professionals in Malaysia and beyond.

Keywords: Mental Health, Youth, Covid-19, Malaysia, Pandemic

Introduction

At the end of 2019, the world was rocked by the existence of a virus known as Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). The virus was first detected and diagnosed in the Chinese city of Wuhan (Sajed & Amgain, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) has labelled the virus a pandemic as a result of its spread. Malaysia, like the rest of the world, has been dealing with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. For more than two years, the government has taken a number of steps to halt the spread of COVID-19. Beginning 1st April 2022, Malaysia has transitioned to the Endemic Phase following the effectiveness of public health prevention and control measures by implementing the National Recovery Plan, with the MCO Phase

Transition enforced only in stages at this moment (MKN, 2022). This implementation necessitates a few steps, such as the ability to not wear facial masks in public open spaces, as well as allowing no limit to the number of ceremonies that can be held. As a result, youths must be astute in their adaptation to the current situation. COVID-19's presence, which appears to have no end, has had a tremendous impact on every young person's physical, emotional, and social well-being, as well as affecting their everyday norms in life. The Ministry of Health (MOH) shared a set of relaxed standard operating procedures (SOPs) that would take place in the country effective 1st May 2022 (Sunday). This is part of the country's transition to the endemic phase. In this article, HRO will focus on the generic updates applicable to the general public in terms of the wearing of facial masks, maintaining physical distance, and practicing good hygiene, as well as a list of prohibited activities.

Mental Health

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health refers to an individual's ability to manage the stresses of daily life, work effectively, and contribute to society (World Health Organization, n.d.). However, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has presented numerous challenges to young people who are just starting their careers, as they struggle to navigate the job market and prepare for the demands of the workforce (Mat Wajar & Hamzah, 2020). The ability of young people to respond to stress is variable, and excessive stress can result in feelings of isolation, sleep disturbances, heightened anxiety, and other physical symptoms that have an indirect impact on their daily lives (Subramaniam, 2015; Johari & Ahmad, 2019).

Youth are the backbone of society, and they will become the future leaders who shape the nation. As such, it is essential to take their mental health seriously and not dismiss it based on their age. Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify the factors that contribute to the mental health of young people in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature

Factors that Cause Mental Health Disorders

The unstable economic situation has made it challenging for young people to secure a stable source of income, which has led them to turn to the gig economy for more flexible work options. However, the gig economy often lacks the benefits of traditional jobs, such as predictable hours, wages, and promotion opportunities, which contribute to financial stress and ultimately lead to mental health issues among youth (Baruch & Bozionelos, 2011). In addition, family happiness is a critical factor in the emotional well-being of children and adolescents. Sham (2005) found that a happy home environment promotes stable adolescent emotions, whereas an unhappy family environment can disrupt teenage emotions, leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Adolescents are particularly susceptible to intense feelings of isolation (Labrague et al., 2020). A sense of loneliness is a common indicator of stress in students (Wright, 1967). Zhang et al (2020) found that students were experiencing sleep disturbances during the COVID-19 pandemic, which can lead to post-traumatic stress symptoms (Liu et al., 2020), making it difficult for them to confide in others about their problems. The lack of social support exacerbates this problem (Son et al., 2020).

This study aims to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the mental health of Malaysian youth, particularly children and teenagers, by identifying the factors that contribute to their mental health during the pandemic.

Methodology

In March and April 2022, a survey was conducted among 300 young people who follow Young Minds Malaysia's online initiatives. To collect large amounts of data, a questionnaire was used as a data-gathering device (Ismail & Al Bahri, 2019). According to Pranatawijaya et al (2019), one way to use questionnaires over the web is by creating a Google Form questionnaire, which eliminates the need to print and distribute physical questionnaires, reducing costs and saving time. Therefore, a Google Form questionnaire was used in this study to obtain feedback from the respondents. The questionnaire for this study consists of four sections, including the demographics section and Parts A, B, and C. Part A covers the demographics of the respondents, while Parts B and C delve into the factors that influence the mental health of young people in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of online surveys has become increasingly popular due to their convenience and accessibility (Kessler & Luedtke, 2019). This method of data collection has proven to be effective, efficient, and cost-effective (Tehseen et al., 2017). Furthermore, web-based surveys are capable of reaching a wider range of respondents, as they do not require physical contact or travel (Heerwegh, 2017).

Study Findings and Discussion

The results of the section on the demographics of respondents indicate that females predominate in this study, with 150 (51%) female respondents compared to 149 (49%) male respondents. With approximately 300 respondents between January 2022 and March 2022, the Young Minds Malaysia programme represents the largest proportion of respondents for the study. Based on the platform used during the study, it was found that the majority of respondents preferred Zoom with 120 (40%), followed by YouTube with 100 (33%), and Facebook Live with 80 (27%).

Part A: Factors in the Problem of Obtaining a Permanent Job

Is there an effect between the problem of obtaining a permanent job and depression?

Table 1 displays the mean factor scores on Youth Workers regarding the influence of job security on mental health. The findings reveal that young people with permanent employment have a mean score of 4.235 (SD = 0.769), while those who have not secured permanent employment have a slightly higher mean score of 4.27 (SD = 0.787). On the other hand, young people who do not work have a significantly lower mean score of 2.46 (SD = 1.41). These findings align with the results of a study conducted by Son et al. (2020), in which obtaining a job was found to interfere with the mental health of students. Moreover, by demographics, students, females, and those with poor financial conditions are more vulnerable to mental health symptoms (Labrague et al., 2020). The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in increased psychological distress among adolescents due to economic consequences, changes in academic activities, difficulties adapting to online distance learning methods, and uncertainty about academic and career prospects. The evidence presented in Section A of this study suggests a link between unemployment and depression, which highlights the urgent need for increased attention to detect and provide intervention strategies to combat the rising rate of mental health problems among young people.

Table 1

Mean factor scores on Youth Workers

Item	Section	Mean	Standard deviation
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1.	Youth with permanent employment	4.235	0.769
2.	Youth No permanent jobs	4.27	0.787
3.	Youth who do not work	2.46	1.41

Part B: Living Arrangements

Is there an effect between living arrangements and depression?

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has led to policies of exceptional physical isolation in many nations, including Malaysia. The implementation of work-from-home regulations and virtual meetings has had a significant impact on businesses, and individuals continue to suffer psychologically due to economic implications, limits on social activities, and prolonged seclusion in their homes. Housing conditions have been shown to have a significant impact on various aspects of adolescent mental health, although this link may be obscured by their social network. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the interaction between living arrangements and social networks and their impact on the mental health of Malaysian adolescents. Table 4 displays the mean factor scores on Living Arrangement. According to the results, young people who receive full support from their families have the highest mean score of 4.005 (SD = 0.926). Meanwhile, those who take care of sick family members have a mean score of 2.475 (SD = 1.120). Adolescents who adjust their routines back to normal life have a mean score of 3.625 (SD = 1.192), and those from shattered families or with no family have the lowest mean score of 2.433 (SD = 1.092). The average adolescent agrees that lacking a family or having a fractured family contributes to mental health difficulties. The evidence presented in Section B of this study suggests that there is a link between living arrangements and depression. Adolescents who lack family support or come from broken families may be more vulnerable to mental health problems, highlighting the need for increased attention to support vulnerable young people during the ongoing pandemic.

Table 2

Mean factor scores on Living Arrangement

Item	Section	Mean	Standard deviation
1.	Youth get full support from family	4.005	0.926
2.	Youth take care of sick family members	2.475	1.120
3.	Youth adjusting their routines back to normal life	3.625	1.192
4.	Youth from no family or broken Family	2.433	1.092

Part C: Income Range

Is there an effect between income and depression?

The relationship between income and depression was investigated in several studies included in a meta-analysis, which found that individuals with low incomes had a significantly higher risk of depression (1.81) than those with higher incomes. Low household income is also associated with a higher risk of lifetime mental disorders and suicide attempts, and a decrease in household income increases the risk of incident mental disorders. Table 5 summarizes the findings of the time management factor. According to the results, young people from lower-income families (B40) with a monthly household income of less than RM4,850 have the lowest mental assessment mean score of 2.975 (SD = 0.859), as shown in Table 3. Young people from

middle-class households with a monthly household income between RM4,851 and RM10,970 (M40) have a slightly lower mean score of 3.445 (SD = 1.068). In contrast, young people from upper-class households with a monthly household income exceeding RM10,971 (T20) have a higher assessment of mental wellbeing with a mean score of 3.805 (SD = 1.965). The results of the questionnaire also revealed that young people from lower-income families (B40) were significantly more depressed in the post-pandemic phase due to the country's economic challenges, such as higher inflation and lower currency values compared to other countries (Ahad et al., 2020). Thus, the findings of Section C suggest that there is a link between income and depression, emphasizing the need for policymakers and mental health practitioners to provide support and interventions to help vulnerable young people from lower-income families.

Table 3

Mean score against income range

Item	Section	Mean	Standard deviation
1.	Lower-income household income is below RM4,850 per month (B40)	2.975	0.859
2.	Middle-class household income is between RM4,851 and RM10,970 per month (M40)	3.445	1.068
3.	Upper-class household income exceeds RM10,971 a month (T20)	3.805	1.965

Part D: Social Media Factors

Is there an effect between social media and depression?

Table 4 summarizes the findings on the factors affecting social media time management, based on the responses from the survey participants. The mean factor scores for youth who use 1-5 hours of social media per day is (M=2.975, SD=1.859) while for youth who use 5-10 hours or more of social media per day, the mean factor score is (M=1.445, SD=0.068). On the other hand, youth who do not use social media have a mean factor score of (M=3.975, SD=0.965). The results of the survey revealed that even the youths who used social media for the most hours per day were the most susceptible to mental health issues. These findings are consistent with a study by Ahad et al (2020) which showed that excessive use of social media is associated with mental health problems. The excessive use of social media can result in anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Moreover, excessive use of social media can also lead to addiction, which can further exacerbate mental health problems. Thus, the results in Section D suggest a correlation between social media use and depression. In summary, the findings suggest that social media use, income, living arrangements, and employment status are all significant factors that influence the mental health of young people in Malaysia during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It is crucial to provide intervention strategies to address the mental health issues faced by young people, particularly those who are from lower-income families, have unstable employment, live in fractured families, or use social media excessively. These interventions could include providing mental health support services, creating job opportunities, improving social support networks, and promoting responsible use of social media.

Table 4

Mean factor scores on social media Use

Item	Section	Mean	Standard Deviation
1.	Youth using 1–5 hours of daily social media	2.975	1.859
2.	Youth using 5–10 hours or more of daily social media	1.445	0.068
3.	Youth with no social media	3.975	0.965

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has identified four primary causes of mental health issues among adolescents during the post-pandemic period. These causes are the inability to obtain a permanent position, living conditions, income range, and social media usage management. The findings suggest that financial resources, employment opportunities, and living arrangements significantly influence the mental health of youth in Malaysia. The majority of the respondents were male and female youths who participated in Young Minds Malaysia's Mental Health programme, which provided support for the items on each studied aspect. The results indicate an urgent need to address the mental health issues faced by young people, particularly those who come from lower-income families, have unstable employment, live in fractured families, or use social media excessively. One recommendation for reducing stress during the post-COVID-19 pandemic period is for the government to actively host job fairs for young people and promote the growth of the gig economy. Additionally, further research can investigate additional relevant factors that influence the mental health of young people.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of addressing the mental health challenges faced by young people during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. It is crucial to provide appropriate interventions and support services to promote the mental well-being of young people and prevent long-term mental health issues.

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