



Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

**MENTAL HEALTH OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN
UNIMAS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Aisha Musse Mohamud

Bachelor of Psychology (Honours)

2022

UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK

Grade: A-

Please tick (✓)

Final Year Project Report

Masters

PhD

DECLARATION OF ORIGINAL WORK

This declaration is made on the 4th day of July 2022.

Student's Declaration:

I, Aisha Musse Mohamud with the matric number 73256, Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development hereby declare that the work entitled, "MENTAL HEALTH OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN UNIMAS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TITLE" is my original work. I have not copied from any other students' work or from any other sources except where due reference or acknowledgement is made explicitly in the text, nor has any part been written for me by another person.

4/7/2022


Date submitted

Aisha Musse Mohamud (73256)

Name of the student (Matric No.)

Supervisor's Declaration:

I _____ (SUPERVISOR'S NAME) _____ hereby certifies that the work entitled, _____ (FYP TITLE) _____ was prepared by the above named student, and was submitted to the "FACULTY" as a * partial/full fulfillment for the conferment of **BACHELOR OF PSYCHOLOGY(HONOURS)**, and the aforementioned work, to the best of my knowledge, is the said student's work



DR JAMAYAH SAILI (DR.PA)
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

_____(SUPERVISOR'S SIGNATURE)____

Received for examination by:

Date: 17.07.22

_____(SUPERVISOR'S NAME)____

I declare this Project/Thesis is classified as (Please tick (√)):

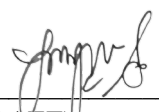
- CONFIDENTIAL** (Contains confidential information under the Official Secret Act 1972)*
 RESTRICTED (Contains restricted information as specified by the organisation where research was done)*
 OPEN ACCESS

Validation of Project/Thesis

I therefore duly affirmed with free consent and willingness declared that this said Project/Thesis shall be placed officially in the PeTARY with the abide interest and rights as follows:

- This Project/Thesis is the sole legal property of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS).
- The PeTARY has the lawful right to make copies for the purpose of academic and research only and not for other purpose.
- The PeTARY has the lawful right to digitise the content to for the Local Content Database.
- The PeTARY has the lawful right to make copies of the Project/Thesis for academic exchange between Higher Learning Institute.
- No dispute or any claim shall arise from the student itself neither third party on this Project/Thesis once it becomes sole property of UNIMAS.
- This Project/Thesis or any material, data and information related to it shall not be distributed, published or disclosed to any party by the student except with UNIMAS permission.

Student's signature 
(4/7/2022)

Supervisor's signature: 
(DATE) 17.07.22

Current Address:
(I-01-05 Puteri Palma Condominium, 62502, putrajaya)

Notes: * If the Project/Thesis is **CONFIDENTIAL** or **RESTRICTED**, please attach together as annexure a letter from the organisation with the period and reasons of confidentiality and restriction.

[The instrument was duly prepared by the PeTARY]

**MENTAL HEALTH OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC**

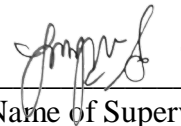
AISHA MUSSE MOHAMUD

This project is submitted
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a
Bachelor of Psychology with Honours

Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK
(2022)

The project entitled '**Mental Health of International Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic**' was prepared by Aisha Musse Mohamud (matric number: 73256) submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Psychology with Honours

Received for examination by:



(Name of Supervisor)

Date:

17 July 2022

Gred

A-

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	1
LIST OF TABLES.....	i
LIST OF FIGURES.....	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
CHAPTER ONE	4
INTRODUCTION.....	4
1.0 Introduction.....	4
1.1 Background of Study.....	4
1.2 Problem Statement	5
1.3 Research Objectives.....	6
1.4 Research Questions	7
1.5 Significance of Study.....	7
1.6 Definition of Term	7
1.6.1 Pandemic.....	7
1.6.2 International Student.....	7
1.6.3 Mental health	8
1.7 Research Framework	8
1.8 Limitation of Study	8
CHAPTER TWO	9
LITERATURE REVIEW	9
2.0 Introduction	9
2.1 Discussion on Theories Related to Mental Health	9
2.2 History of Covid-19.....	10
2.3 Previous Findings.....	11
2.3.1 Mental Health of University Students.....	11
2.3.2 Mental Health of International Students in Western Perspective	12
2.3.3 Mental Health of International Students in Asian Perspective	13
2.3.4 Coping Mechanisms of Students	13
2.3.5 Challenges Faced by International Students.....	14
2.3.6 Emotional and Psychological Support of Students	16
2.3.7 Adjustment Problems of International Students	17
2.3.8 Communication in the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	18
2.3.9 Language Barrier Faced by International Students.....	19
2.4 Summary.....	19

CHAPTER THREE	20
METHODOLOGY	20
3.0 Introduction	20
3.1 Research Design	20
3.2 Population and Sample	21
3.3 Data Collection	21
3.3.1 Procedure	21
3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interview	22
3.4 Pilot Study	23
3.5 Data Analysis Procedures.....	23
3.6 Consent and Ethical Issues	25
3.7 Summary	25
CHAPTER FOUR	26
INTRODUCTION, DEMOGRAPHIC DATA, RESULT AND SUMMARY	26
4.0 Introduction	26
4.1 Demographic Data	27
4.2 Result	27
4.3 Summary	46
LIMITATION, IMPLICATION, RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION	47
5.0 Introduction	47
5.1 Implication of Study	47
5.2 Limitations of Study	53
5.3 Recommendation	54
5.4 Conclusion.....	54
REFERENCES.....	55
APPENDIX A	65
APPENDIX B.....	67
APPENDIX C.....	68
APPENDIX D	70
APPENDIX E.....	74

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1.1	Demographic Data of Participants	Page no 27
Table 4.1.2	Themes, Subthemes and Categories	Page no 28

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Research framework of the study Page no. 5

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the experience of international students along with possible mental struggles faced by international students throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, this purpose of this study is to identify the coping mechanisms utilized by international students in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. The coronavirus was first detected in Wuhan, China in late December of 2019. In the following year, the WHO has officially declared a pandemic which led to multiple countries going in nationwide lockdown and mandating masks. In Malaysia, the movement control order (MCO) was first imposed by the Malaysian government for two weeks. However, coronavirus cases have yet to slow down which lead to multiple extensions of the MCO. With universities switching to online learning as an attempt to reduce the number of infections, many international students abroad are left stranded in a foreign country where they are not able to return home to visit their families.

Keywords: (International students, Mental health, COVID-19 pandemic, Lockdown, Coping mechanisms (5) keywords)

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This research focuses on the mental health of international students in UNIMAS during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mental health can include emotional stability and psychological well-being that can impact an individual's outlook as well as quality of life. When the pandemic first hit back in March of 2020, many countries reacted by shutting down their borders as a way to reduce further transmission of the virus. Schools and universities quickly switched to online learning. Students everywhere were forced to quickly adjust to online learning. In Malaysia, the movement control order (MCO) was first imposed by the Malaysian government for two weeks. However, coronavirus cases have yet to slow down which lead to multiple extensions of the MCO. University students did not start online learning until June of 2020 as suggested by the ministry of higher education. Similarly, UNIMAS student has to adjust to the new norm of learning while the pandemic plays out.

1.1 Background of Study

The coronavirus was first detected in Wuhan, China in late December of 2019. In the following year, the WHO has officially declared a pandemic which led to multiple countries going in nationwide lockdown and mandating masks. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many different sectors including the education system across the world. With universities switching to online learning as an attempt to reduce the number of infections, many international students abroad are left stranded in a foreign country where they are not able to return home to visit their families. Eventually, this has impacted their mental health. In the case of UNIMAS, there is a curfew in a place where all students were

encouraged to return to the campus before a certain time. As for international students in UNIMAS, students were not allowed to leave the country due to the border being closed. International students who mostly lived on college campuses were given three meals a day. The undergraduate students in UNIMAS are from countries such as Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Yemen. Besides that, students were told to observe social distance and wash their hands consistently in order to reduce the spread of the virus.

1.2 Problem Statement

This research adds to the study of mental health and overall psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in multiple ways. Firstly, it provides a different aspect to the research of the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic by including international students in the study. Although there has been much research done to explore the **mental health of international students** during COVID pandemic as reported by (Chen, Li, Wu, & Tong 2020 and Lai, Lee, Wang, Feng, Lai, Ho, Lam, & Lam 2020), there is still a research gap as these studies only provide a perspective of international students in China. For that reason, the report and further study on the mental health of international students in south-east Asian countries are needed as there is a distinct cultural tradition along with a different outlook on mental health. In addition, the research done by Faisal, Jobe, Ahmed, & Sharker (2021) studies the mental health status, depression and anxiety levels of Bangladeshi students. However, this study does not provide insight to a Malaysian point of view, further contributing to the urgency of my research topic. Similarly, the research done by (Malet Calvo, Daniel, 2021) focuses on international students who are from the global south in Portugal during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the exploration of mental health impact and challenges faced by college students during the COVID pandemic was done by both (Khan, Mamun, Griffiths, & Ullah, 2020;

Salimi, Gere, Talley, & Iriogbe, 2021) does not provide an insight into international students' mental health.

Secondly, the participants of this research will be focusing on international students in UNIMAS. Further examination exploration on this topic is needed because, to my knowledge, there is a study that attempts to report the **psychological well-beings of international students** besides (Can, Poyrazli, & Pillay, 2021; Edwards, 2021) where both pieces of research are conducted on students attending the University of Michigan and psychological wellbeing among management students respectively. The lack of focus on international students that are currently studying in Malaysia further contribute to the research gap in this field.

Lastly, when it to methodological aspects of previous studies, Lee, Jeong, & Kim, S 2021 reported on stress, anxiety and depression among undergraduate students during the COVID pandemic using self-administered online survey. Conducting an online survey can have a lack of random sampling that can affect the result of the study negatively. Moreover, online surveys do not provide an opportunity to gain in-depth information on the participants' mental health status. By conducting one-to-one interview sessions with participants, the researcher can gain more details on their mental health status thus improving the accuracy of the research findings.

1.3 Research Objectives

The objective of this research is

- i. To identify coping mechanism of international students in UNIMAS amidst facing the current pandemic.
- ii. To explore the possible mental health issues and struggles faced by international students in UNIMAS.

- iii. To explore the experience of international student in UNIMAS during the COVID-19 pandemic

1.4 Research Questions

- What are the coping mechanisms of international students in UNIMAS during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What is the international student's experience in UNIMAS during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are the mental health struggles faced by international students in UNIMAS during the COVID-19 pandemic?

1.5 Significance of Study

This research aims to explore about the mental state of international students in UNIMAS during the pandemic. By the findings from this research, we will be able establish training programs for future counsellors that help their patient improve their mental state and their quality of life.

1.6 Definition of Term

1.6.1 Pandemic

Conceptual Definition: A disease outbreak that affects large number of people across international borders and countries.

1.6.2 International Student

Conceptual Definition: Students who moved from their home country with the purpose of continuing their studies.

1.6.3 Mental health

Conceptual Definition: The emotional state that allows an individual to acknowledge their capabilities and make positive contributions to their lives and their communities.

1.7 Research Framework

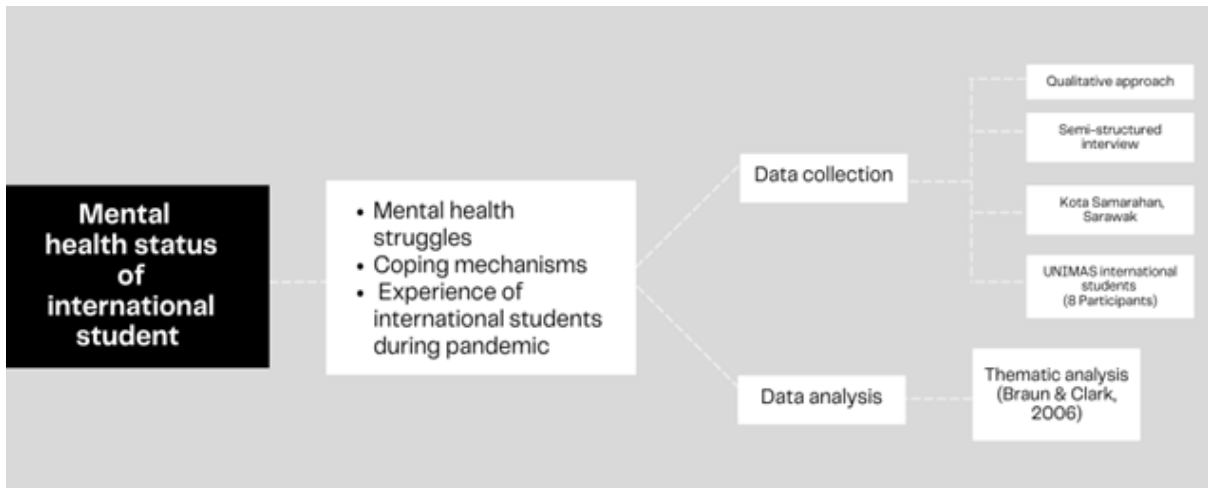


Figure 1.1. Research framework of the study

1.8 Limitation of Study

One of the limitations of the research is the sampling bias that may arise as a result of small number of research participants. This may lead to inaccurate data that are unreliable. In addition, there might be a difficulty of measuring mental health and psychological wellbeing.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

Mental health is described as an emotional state of individuals. According to world health organisations (WHO), there are 450 million people around the world that are suffering from both behavioural and mental disorders. Mental health or mental illness are still stigmatized in many parts of the world. This is because there is a lack of education or awareness about mental health in general. This led to people having hesitation in seeking professional help. Moreover, there are many categories of mental disorders such as mood disorder, personality disorder as well as anxiety disorders. The Ministry of Health (MOH) has conducted a survey that concluded that 1 in 3 Malaysian struggle with a degree of mental illness. Among those number, the age group between the age of 16 to 19 years old have the highest reported of mental health issues according to the minister of health.

2.1 Discussion on Theories Related to Mental Health

When it comes to mental health, there are several theories related to it. For instance, the network theory includes the appearance of mental health disorders in relation to the available symptom. The network theory consists of four principles- complexity, symptom-competence correspondence, direct causal connections and mental disorders follow network structure. The first principle describes mental health disorders based on the relation between components such as symptoms in a certain network. These symptoms are observed in a psychopathology network. The second principle of symptom-competence correspondence measures the components found in the psychopathological network by the diagnostic list of mental disorders. The third principle is the direct casual

connection which creates a known pattern according to observed symptoms of mental disorders in an individual. The last principle is mental disorders-network structure. In this principle, the symptoms that are connected are classified accordingly. This grouping is done in a phenomenological manner (Borsboom, 2017).

The next theory of mental health is basic psychological needs theory. This theory is sometimes known as BPNT. It is derived from the self-determination theory. The BPNT consist of the competence overall basic function of an individual. This help to measure the psychological wellbeing of an individual alongside their achieving capabilities by a scale. The BPNT contains a total of 12 components that are further divided into 3 categories. The first category is competence where it concludes that an individual's ability to perform a particular task. By performing tasks with complexity, an individual by feeling a sense of self-worth or heightened self-esteem. The second category is the autonomy category. Autonomy measures one's capabilities to recognize their action as their own and independent of external factors. The third category is relatedness which describes the social connectivity with other individuals or groups. Relatedness can help individuals to feel secure and ensured in themselves (Fraguela-Vale et al., 2020).

2.2 History of Covid-19

Throughout human history, there have been many outbreaks of diseases that have been classified as a pandemic. There are a total of three pandemics in the 21st century only including COVID-19, MERS and SARS. As of April 2020, there has been a total of almost 2 million reported cases of coronavirus across 177 countries (Khan, Adil, et al., 2020). The Covid-19 virus was first discovered in Wuhan, China. The agent that carries the disease, SARS-CoV-2 can result in respiratory complications ranging from moderate,

mild and severe cases. The overall fatality rate is reported to be at around 3%. The coronavirus infection is classified as airborne which means it can spread rapidly through droplets and human to human contact (Balkhair, 2020). Towards the end of 2020, the new covid variant has been detected in the UK. This variant has a higher transmission rate compared to the initial virus outbreak due to spikes in protein. By December the 13th, there has been over a thousand cases of the new variant in the UK alone (Wise, 2020). Following the next summer, there has been another variant called delta variant in various parts of the USA. According to the CDC, there have been 12,000 reported cases of coronavirus in a week alone by the end of June. The public was encouraged to wear face masks both indoors and outdoors along with socially distance themselves. Besides that, frequent hand washing, and sanitization can help reduce the spread of the virus. By November of 2021, the Omicron variant was discovered in South Africa. Within three months, there have been 40,000 reported cases of coronavirus traced to the new variant (Pulliam et al., 2021). A French study conducted to explore the how the emotions towards the Covid-19 lockdown along with how it changed as time progress with over 1000 participants. This research has concluded that the initial feeling of happiness and other positive emotions have quickly been replaced with feeling of boredom, anxiety as well as fear. As lockdown prolong, the participants report feeling of boredom as a result of lack of activity and bad sleeping patterns (Martinelli et al., 2021).

2.3 Previous Findings

2.3.1 Mental Health of University Students

The study was carried out by Viskovich & Pakenham to investigate the effect of acceptance and commitment therapy on mental health university students. It is found that acceptance and commitment therapy has effectively improved many aspects such as life

satisfaction, stress and anxiety of university students (Viskovich & Pakenham, 2019). Another study that aims to explore the impact of meditation on university students' mental health. From the findings of the research, the meditation has a short-term effect on anxiety. In addition, a long-term analysis of meditation can result in a decrease of anxiety, stress, and depression in the control group of the research (Totzeck et al., 2020). The research conducted to find the link between physical activity such as exercise on the well-being of university students. From this research, it has been concluded that depressive symptoms have significantly improved within 6 weeks of physical activities. Moreover, a decrease in anxiety and stress have been reported in student (Herbert et al., 2020).

2.3.2 Mental Health of International Students in Western Perspective

One study was done to examine several types of stressors that can be closely related to mental health in international students in both the UK and the US found that 85% of the students have reported moderate to high levels of stress. Meanwhile, 12% of the students have reported experiencing moderate symptoms of anxiety and depression. Almost 20% of the participants have experienced insomnia in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic (Lai et al., 2020). Another study conducted by David Firang explores the impact COVID-19 pandemic may possibly have on the mental health of international students in Canada. From its findings, David found that students are in a severe state of anxiety due to both psychological and social distress that can be traced back to the lockdown and social distancing. Students have also reported an impaired sense of self along with a decline in academic performance (Firang, 2020). A German study that explores depressive symptoms in relation to perception of study conditions in the pandemic has concluded that there is a link between better study conditions and lower symptoms of depression in

international students.ess, 47 % of students have agreed to experience higher stress levels as a result of online learning (Matos Fialho et al., 2021).

2.3.3 Mental Health of International Students in Asian Perspective

A research carried by Tao Xu that explores the psychological distress that the international students faced in the pandemic find that almost half of the participants have experienced added economical pressure due to the lockdown. Out of the 289 of research participants, 274 participants have reported feelings of distress as a result of the pandemic (Xu, 2021). Another research done in South Korea aims to explore factors that can be contributed to mental health of international students. Factors in this study include sleeping problems and symptoms of anxiety and depression. From the findings of the study, almost half of the participants have reported having problems regarding sleep while one-third of the participants are experiencing mild symptoms of anxiety. A small number of the participants have reported moderate anxiety. Meanwhile, one-third of research participants have reported mild depression while moderate depression is detected in 15% of the participants (Kim & Kim, 2021). A research done in China that investigates the psychological impact of the Covid-19 on college students revealed that 75% of the participants have reported an average level of anxiety while 21% reported severe anxiety. Anxiety experienced by these college students are linked closely to the outbreak of the Coronavirus (Cao et al., 2020).

2.3.4 Coping Mechanisms of Students

A coping mechanism is defined as a method to reduce tension to allow individuals to reach balance and equilibrium (Hill, 2007). Coping mechanisms or strategies can be used as a way to regulate oneself when faced with emotional turmoil. These coping mechanisms

can be both positive and negative, depending on their nature. A study done on medical students from Midwestern University has concluded that students prefer to share their problems with others as a coping mechanism. In addition, yoga, meditation and listening to music are among the coping mechanism used by students to reduce stress while other students opted for exercising and television. A small number of students have disclosed using medications as a form of reducing stress (Joseph et al., 2020). In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, a study that involves coping mechanisms of nursing students concludes spirituality, resilience and support from family are utilized (Kim et al., 2021). A UK survey to explore body image, eating habits and exercise during the COVID-19 lockdown has concluded that there are changes in eating habits during the COVID-19 lockdown especially in women. Moreover, participants recorded exercising more during the lockdown as a method to reduce anxiety and stress associated with the ongoing pandemic (Robertson et al., 2020). A research done in the US aims to explore the coping mechanisms of adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the findings of this research, it can be concluded that the most common coping mechanism included exercising which can help in promoting overall wellness and self-improvement (Finlay et al., 2021). A qualitative study was done to explore the coping mechanism in adults during the COVID-19 pandemic which concluded that the pursuit of hobbies such as reading, and knitting can help in increasing of positive feelings and reduce stress in difficult, stressful situations (Greenwood-Hickman et al., 2021).

2.3.5 Challenges Faced by International Students

From the research done by Saravanan, Mohamad and Alias back in 2019, it has been found those international students faced some degree of homesickness that comes with living in a foreign country (Saravanan et al., 2019). This prolongs homesickness and can lead to

depression, poor academic performance and loneliness in students studying ad. Another challenge that international students face is a psychosocial adjustment which describes the process of being in harmony with one's environment (Reker & Woo, 2011). It involves being a culturally component that allows an individual to live harmoniously with others. A study was done at Wake Forest University where it studies predictors that impact psychosocial adjustment in undergraduate international students. The predictors that affect psychosocial outcomes include social support, belonging, and friendship (Brunsting et al., 2018). International students studying abroad can face a language barrier. This can cause added stress and further lead to isolation and loneliness (Ali et al., 2020). A study done to explore loneliness, drug use and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic among young adults. It is found that loneliness increases symptoms of both anxiety and depression by almost 80%. The use of drugs in association with loneliness has increased by 56% during the pandemic (Horigian et al., 2020). A study done in three different countries has found that isolation has both physical and mental impacts on individuals. The physical health impact includes an increase in cortisol levels while the mental health impact involves an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression. it concluded that social withdrawal could result in a steady mental health decline (Hwang et al., 2020).

An American study was done to explore the academic struggles that international university students face. The result of this study concluded that there is a drop in cumulative GPA during the Covid-19 pandemic in comparison to the prior to the pandemic (Fass-Holmes, 2021). A study was conducted to explore the factors such as satisfaction levels and stress of online learning that may affect academic performance amongst nursing students. It concludes that 44% of students have reported a considerable decline in their academic performance while 37% report poor academic performance in correlation to online learning. when it comes to stress factors, there is a large number of

students that have reported feelings of stress due to online learning at 92% (Oducado & Estoque, 2021). A study done in the Philippines explores the impact of burnout on the well-being of students. From the findings of the research, it is founded that the impact of burnout can be reduced by different psychosocial interventions in order to promote the well-being of students (Thuruthel & Tungol, 2021). The study conducted in 2020 that explore the effect of burnout on psychological well-being and its impact on motivation. The result of this study concluded that social support is crucial in promoting the well-being of students along with increased motivation. In addition, burnout can be reduced by support (Rehman et al., 2020). A study in India aims to find out what are the causes of academic stress. The findings concluded that inadequate facilities along with interpersonal differences. These factors can affect mental health and increase the stress levels of students (Jayasankara Reddy et al., 2018). A research was done in South Korea that explores the changes in sleeping duration, diet and physical activity has come to the conclusion that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the sleeping patterns of individuals. There is a 12% increase in the duration of sleep for individuals while an insignificant drop in sleeping time is recorded (Mun & So, 2022). Research from the Philippines explored the types of struggles that university students face explored in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. from the study, it has been concluded that financial problems, lack of resources, and poor communication between peers are among the issues that university students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. these factors negatively impact the learning experience of students and reduce productivity levels (Rotas & Cahapay, 2020).

2.3.6 Emotional and Psychological Support of Students

A 2017 study attempts to explore the link between distress and emotional support of medical students. From the findings of the research, it has been concluded that emotional