



Psychological Trauma, Anxiety, and Depression Among University Students During First Phase of COVID-19 Movement Control Order in Malaysia

Siti Raudzah Ghazali¹ · Yoke Yong Chen¹ · Ang Ai Ling¹ · Nur Izzatul Khaleeda Kasnan¹ · Eleanna Simba Driver¹ · Nurul Nasriyah Mahran¹ · Noorain Farihin Mohd Faezal¹ · Fatin Syakirah Mohd Fikri¹ · Nurul Aminah Mohamad Sabuddin¹

Accepted: 27 October 2023

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2023

Abstract

The authors investigated posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depressive symptoms among university students in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in a cross-sectional study involving 375 students. Results showed that 39.5% reported PTSD symptoms, 37.3% anxiety symptoms, and 51.4% depressive symptoms. PTSD is significantly correlated with anxiety and depressive symptoms. Female students reported significantly higher PTSD and depressive symptoms. There was a significant association between race, PTSD, and anxiety symptoms. Participants who stayed at residential college (46.2%) and had underlying health problems (70%) reported having significant anxiety symptoms. A significant association between ethnicity and depressive symptoms and underlying health status was also found. The high rates of PTSD, anxiety, and depressive symptoms call for action for mental health promotion and improving mental health delivery services to higher education students in the wake of COVID-19.

Keywords COVID-19 · Anxiety · Depression · Trauma · MCO

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) on 30 January 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). The Malaysian government took inevitable steps, including imposing its first strict Movement Control Order (MCO) nationwide (Tang et al., 2020). The

✉ Yoke Yong Chen
yychen@unimas.my

¹ Department of Psychological Medicine, Faculty of Medicine and Health Science, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

movement regulations significantly affected daily life among Malaysians. University students were no exception.

COVID-19 and Movement Control Order

The COVID-19 MCO affected higher education curriculum delivery. Various challenges were reported (Dill et al., 2020), and the impact on student mental health was evident (Kafka, 2020; Meda et al., 2021). The first MCO was implemented on March 18, 2020 (Immigration Department of Malaysia, 2020). The MCO restricted international and local travel, closed many economic and social sectors, and halted all higher education face-to-face teaching and learning activities (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2020). Subsequently, classes were conducted online. Many recent studies report that prolonged online class affected the mental health conditions of university students, including suicidal ideation (Balachandran et al., 2020), anxiety (Jehi et al., 2022), stress (Werner et al., 2021), loneliness (Faisal et al., 2021), overall mental health challenges, and well-being (Kafka, 2020; Sahu, 2020). In the Malaysian context, a few studies found that university students experienced psychological stress as a result of prolonged online classes (Azmi et al., 2022; Kumaran et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2023). For example, Azmi et al. (2022) found that online classes were associated with psychological stress and depression. Kumaran et al. (2022) attributed the high prevalence of depression and anxiety among Malaysian university students to drastic changes in online higher education delivery. The objective of this study was to determine the rates of psychological trauma, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among university students. We also attempted to determine if there are sex differences in reporting psychological trauma, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Establishing the rates of mental health issues faced by university students can provide some perspective on the scope of their psychological struggles during MCO.

Psychological Trauma

Psychological trauma among university students was reported prior to COVID-19. Kratovic et al. (2020) reported that PTSD symptoms were associated with suicidality among 819 university students. Cusack et al. (2019) found that 34.4% of university students ($n = 2310$) met the criteria for probable PTSD as a result of various types of lifetime trauma. Studies on PTSD symptoms during COVID-19 MCO are very limited. Tang et al. (2020) reported 2.7% of students ($n = 2485$) had PTSD symptoms. However, Sun et al. (2021) found a higher rate of PTSD symptoms, in which the majority of participants in China (67.05%, $n = 1912$) reported experiencing COVID-19-related traumatic stress symptoms within the clinical range (mild or higher).