

Mental Health Literacy and Psychological Distress Among University Students

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Abstract

Background: Students at Sriwijaya University face various challenges, such as academic pressure, which can lead to psychological distress if not managed properly. **Objective:** This study examines the relationship between mental health literacy (MHL) and psychological distress among undergraduates at Sriwijaya University, hypothesizing that higher MHL correlates with lower distress levels. **Method:** Using a quantitative survey method, data were collected from 361 students and analyzed using the Pearson product-moment correlation ($r=0.122$, $p<0.05$), independent t-test compares two groups, while one-way ANOVA analyzes more than two groups. **Results:** We observed an unexpected pattern, a significant yet negligible positive correlation. This suggests students with higher MHL reported slightly greater distress, contradicting our initial hypothesis. **Conclusion:** Despite this unexpected association, we emphasize the continued importance of MHL education through campus programs. We recommend improvements in mental health literacy, particularly in first-aid skills, help-seeking behavior, and self-help strategies, as early protective measures in universities. Future studies should also examine additional variables that may reduce psychological distress.

Keywords: College student; mental health literacy; psychological distress

Abstrak

Latar Belakang: Mahasiswa di Universitas Sriwijaya menghadapi berbagai tantangan seperti tekanan akademik yang dapat menyebabkan distres psikologis jika tidak dikelola dengan baik. **Tujuan:** Penelitian ini mengkaji hubungan antara literasi kesehatan mental (LKM) dan distres psikologis di kalangan mahasiswa Universitas Sriwijaya, dengan hipotesis bahwa LKM yang lebih tinggi berhubungan dengan tingkat distres yang lebih rendah. **Metode:** Menggunakan metode survei kuantitatif, data dikumpulkan dari 361 mahasiswa dan dianalisis menggunakan korelasi *Pearson's product moment* ($r=0.122$, $p<0.05$), *independent sample t-test* membandingkan dua kelompok populasi, sedangkan *one-way ANOVA* untuk analisis lebih dari dua populasi. **Hasil:** Kami mengamati pola yang tidak terduga, korelasi positif yang signifikan namun dapat diabaikan antara LKM dan distres psikologis. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa dengan LKM yang lebih tinggi melaporkan distres yang sedikit lebih besar, yang bertentangan dengan hipotesis kami. **Kesimpulan:** Meskipun ada asosiasi yang tidak terduga ini, kami menekankan pentingnya pendidikan LKM yang berkelanjutan melalui program-program kampus. Kami merekomendasikan peningkatan literasi kesehatan mental, khususnya pada aspek *first aid skills and help-seeking behavior*, dan *self-help strategies*, sebagai langkah protektif dini di lingkungan universitas. Studi selanjutnya juga perlu meneliti variabel tambahan yang dapat mengurangi tekanan psikologis.

Kata Kunci: Distres Psikologis; literasi kesehatan mental; mahasiswa

Introduction

The period of emerging adulthood (ages 18–25) is a critical developmental stage characterized by identity exploration, instability, and self-focus (Nelson, 2021). University students in this phase face unique challenges, including intense academic pressures (Arum & Wibawanti, 2023; Rabbani & Wahyudi, 2023) and socioeconomic stressors, with financial difficulties accounting for 23% of student stress in Indonesia (Musabiq & Karimah, 2018). These challenges are compounded by individual differences in personality and background, with perfectionistic tendencies linked to heightened vulnerability to depression and anxiety (Collin et al., 2020). The study findings indicate that these factors, combined with specific personality traits (e.g., perfectionism), may contribute to the development of depressive, anxiety, and stress-related symptoms (Hendarto & Ambarwati, 2020). When unmanaged, these pressures often escalate into psychological distress, a state of emotional suffering marked by anxiety, concentration difficulties, sleep disturbances, and somatic complaints (Snoek et al., 2015; St. Mary's College of Maryland, 2015).

International evidence from 12 countries confirms that university students experience significantly higher psychological distress than the general population (Eskin et al., 2016), with recent studies demonstrating worsening global trends (Naylor, 2022). This pattern is acutely evident at Sriwijaya University, where consecutive screenings revealed remarkably consistent distress prevalence: initial 2019 findings identified psychological distress (depression, anxiety, or somatic symptoms) in 96.6% of students ($n=147$), with merely 3.4% symptom-free (Mardhiyah et al., 2019). A subsequent 2021 study with a larger sample ($n=418$) replicated these results, showing a 95% distress prevalence (Mardhiyah, 2021). These datasets collectively demonstrate that Sriwijaya University students experience near-universal psychological distress at rates exceeding both global student averages and general population norms, suggesting either institution-specific stressors or particularly sensitive detection methods may be operational.

Recent findings from Sriwijaya University paint a concerning picture: 95% of students exhibited psychological distress, with 46.6% reporting depressive symptoms and 74.2% experiencing anxiety (Habibah et al., 2021; Mardhiyah, 2021). These rates are consistent across multiple cohorts (Mardhiyah, 2021; Mardhiyah et al., 2019), underscoring the urgent need for evidence-based interventions. Mental health literacy (MHL), defined as knowledge enabling the recognition, management, and prevention of mental disorders (Jorm et al., 1997), has emerged as a promising protective factor. Studies have demonstrated that higher MHL correlates with lower distress (Pehlivan et al., 2021), as it promotes adaptive coping strategies and reduces reliance on harmful behaviors such as substance use (Singh et al., 2022).

Given the persistently low MHL levels among Indonesian university students (Idham et al., 2019), MHL must be continuously promoted in academic settings. At its core, MHL encompasses mental health knowledge (Guo et al., 2020), which can be acquired through multiple channels, including increasingly prevalent social media platforms (Fatahya & Abidin, 2022).

However, three critical gaps limit current understanding: *Geographical Bias*—existing MHL research in Indonesia predominantly examines urban universities (Rozali et al., 2021), neglecting regional institutions like Sriwijaya University; *Measurement Limitations*—prior studies at Sriwijaya focused solely on distress prevalence (Mardhiyah, 2021) without assessing protective factors like MHL; and *Practical Applications*—while MHL's theoretical benefits are established (KANTAŞ YILMAZ & ÜNKÜR, 2023), its implementation in ASEAN university settings remains unexplored. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between mental health literacy and psychological distress among students at Sriwijaya University, employing a cross-sectional design to address existing research gaps in this population. We hypothesized a significant negative association with implications for campus mental health policies in regional Indonesia.

Method

This quantitative study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between mental health literacy (independent variable) and psychological distress (dependent variable) among undergraduate students at Sriwijaya University in Indonesia. We utilized non-probability sampling with a purposive sampling technique to recruit the participants. The researchers employed purposive sampling to select participants who exhibited psychological distress and were enrolled as students at the Sriwijaya University. While the initial sample size estimation used Isaac and Michael's formula (Sugiyono, 2019), the final study successfully recruited 361 participants in total.

Sample or Population

The study population comprised 29,551 active undergraduate students at Sriwijaya University. Our sample selection followed strict criteria: (1) currently enrolled undergraduate students and (2) presence of psychological distress, operationalized as GHQ-12 scores >15 , with a clinical cutoff score of 16. From the initial 379 questionnaires distributed, 18 were excluded during data screening due to incomplete responses, yielding a final analytical sample of 361 complete cases. All participants provided informed consent and voluntarily participated in the study.

Data Measurement

Psychological distress was measured using the Indonesian version of the General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12; Idaiani & Suhardi, 2006), comprising 12 items with a 4-point Likert scale (1="Much less than usual" to 4="Much more than usual"). Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency and test-retest analysis for temporal stability. The instrument demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha=0.827$). It evaluates two key aspects: (1) general dysphoria and (2) social dysfunction.

Mental health literacy was assessed using the Indonesian adaptation of the Mental Health Literacy Questionnaire for Young Adults (MHLq-YA) (Campos & Pt, 2022), which contains 29 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree") and showed excellent reliability ($\alpha=0.972$) measured with Cronbach's Alpha and McDonald's omega. Both the Alpha and Omega coefficients for each dimension and total score were close, ranging from 0.59 to 0.93. The correlations between the dimensions and the total score of the MHLq-SVa ranged from -0.29 to 0.92 . It evaluates four key aspects: (1) knowledge of mental health problems, (2) erroneous beliefs/stereotypes, (3) first-aid skills and help-seeking behavior, and (4) self-help strategies. Data were collected through an online survey administered via Google Forms, which was disseminated through multiple channels, including institutional social media platforms (e.g., Instagram) and personal networks.

Data Analysis

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test with the Monte Carlo resampling method applied to the residual data indicated a normal distribution of the data ($Z = 0.071$, $p = 0.053$). Furthermore, the linearity test confirmed a significant linear relationship between mental health literacy and psychological distress ($F = 5.587$, $p = 0.019$).

This study employed Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis, utilizing SPSS version 25 for data processing and computation. Parametric analyses were conducted after verifying all relevant assumptions (normality and linearity), confirming the appropriateness of these tests for examining variable relationships, and showing a correlation coefficient value of $r = 0.122$ for mental health literacy and psychological distress. This study employed independent samples t-tests to examine gender differences with two independent groups, while one-way ANOVA compared academic cohort, faculty, organizational involvement, psychological help-seeking, and paternal income with three or more independent groups.

Result

Initial analysis examines the sample's demographic characteristics

Table 1. Participants' Socio-demographics

Variables	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	71	19,7
Female	290	80,3
Academic cohort		
2017	1	0,3
2018	2	0,6
2019	40	11,1
2020	67	18,6

Variables	Frequency	%
2021	83	22,9
2022	168	46,5
Faculty		
Economics	13	3,6
Law	9	2,5
Engineering	15	4,2
Medicine	44	12,2
Agriculture	37	10,2
Teacher training and education	140	38,8
Social and political sciences	30	8,3
Mathematical and natural sciences	35	9,7
Computer science	16	4,4
Public health	22	6,1
Organizational involvement		
Currently involved	212	58,7
Was involved	93	25,8
Not involved	56	15,5
Psychological help-seeking		
Formal	59	16,3
Informal	302	83,7
Paternal income		
Low	85	23,6
Medium	108	29,9
High	81	22,4
Very high	87	24,1

Table 1 displays the participants' demographic characteristics. The participants' characteristics were as follows: predominantly female (n=290, 80.3%), from the 2022 academic cohort (n=168, 46.5%), affiliated with the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education (n=140, 38.8%), currently involved in student organizations (n=212, 58.7%), and reporting the use of informal psychological help-seeking methods (n=302, 83.7%).

Table 2. Participants' Independent T-Test

Variables	Mental Health Literacy	Psychological Distress
Gender	F=0,027 p=0,410	F=0,090 p=0,774
Male		
Female		

*)Significant ($p < 0.05$)

An independent samples t-test in Table 2 demonstrated no statistically significant gender differences in mental health literacy and psychological distress levels ($t(1)=3.518$, $p=0.031$) among male and female students.

Table 3. Participants' One-Way ANOVA

Variables	Mental Health Literacy	Psychological Distress
Paternal income	F=4,592 p=0,004*	F=1,060 p=0,366
Low		
Medium		
High		
Very high		

Variables	Mental Health Literacy	Psychological Distress
Academic cohort	F=2,670 p=0,022*	F=1,290 p=0,268
2017		
2018		
2019		
2020		
2021		
2022		
Faculty	F=2,652 p=0,006*	F=3,513 p=0,000*
Economics		
Law		
Engineering		
Medicine		
Agriculture		
Teacher training and education		
Social and political sciences		
Mathematical and natural sciences		
Computer science		
Public health		
GPA	F=2,713 p=0,068	F=3,518 p=0,031*
Satisfactory		
Very satisfactory		
Cum laude		

*)Significant ($p < 0.05$)

The study in Table 3 employed one-way ANOVA to examine differences in mental health literacy (MHL) levels based on paternal income categories. Results indicated significant variations in MHL scores ($F(3, 361)=4.592$, $p=0.004$) across the low, medium, high, and very high income groups. Similarly, one-way ANOVA revealed significant cohort-based differences in MHL ($F(5, 361)=2.670$, $p=0.022$) among students from the 2017–2022 academic years. Faculty-wise comparisons showed significant variations in both psychological distress ($F(9, 361)=3.513$, $p<0.001$) and MHL ($F(9, 361)=2.652$, $p=0.006$) across the university's 10 faculties. Table 3 also demonstrates significant GPA-related differences in psychological distress levels ($F(2, 361)=3.518$, $p=0.031$) among students with satisfactory, very satisfactory, and cum laude academic achievements.

Table 4. Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Variables	Pearson Product Moment	
	R	Sig (2-tailed)
Residual		
Psychological Distress – Mental Health Literacy	0,122	0,021*

*)Significant ($p < 0.05$)

Unlike previous studies (Pehlivan et al., 2021), Table 4 demonstrates a significant yet negligible association between psychological distress and mental health literacy at our study site ($p = 0.021$). However, the positive correlation coefficient ($r = 0.122$) suggests only a modest relationship between these two variables.

Discussion

This study yielded several key findings regarding mental health literacy (MHL) and psychological distress among university students. The analysis revealed a significant yet negligible correlation between MHL and psychological distress ($r = 0.122$), which contrasts with previous research demonstrating a moderate negative correlation (Pehlivan et al., 2021).

This discrepancy may be explained by the distinction between possessing mental health knowledge and effectively applying it, as Jorm (2012) emphasized. Jorm's mental health literacy framework posits that MHL extends beyond mere knowledge acquisition; it must empower individuals to translate understanding into actionable behaviors (e.g., help-seeking) that ultimately improve mental health outcomes for themselves or others. Individuals with limited mental health literacy also demonstrate constrained skills in implementing preventive measures for mental health problems and illness management (Marwood & Hearn, 2019).

This discrepancy may reflect the collectivist norms in our sample, which could invert help-seeking behaviors, where MHL increases awareness of stigma (Nguyen et al., 2018). Indonesian society continues to stigmatize professional mental healthcare utilization, frequently equating psychological consultation with being 'mentally unstable' (*gila*). Prevailing cultural narratives often attribute psychological distress to supernatural causes, such as spirit possession (*kesurupan*) or karma, rather than biomedical factors. Those who disclose mental health struggles frequently face social penalties, such as being dismissed as attention-seekers or becoming targets of mockery, creating substantial barriers to help-seeking (Hartini et al., 2018).

The majority of participants exhibited moderate psychological distress (89.5%), with 10.5% reporting severe distress levels, a concerning finding given the established links between such distress and academic impairment, insomnia, and substance abuse (Gritsenko et al., 2021; Vicario-merino, 2020). The study describes that psychological distress symptoms among university students may include insomnia or sleep pattern changes, concentration difficulties, appetite fluctuations, anhedonia (loss of pleasure), feelings of worthlessness, social withdrawal, diminished self-esteem, panic attacks, or extreme fear of specific situations (South Dakota State University, 2020). First-year students, who comprised 46.3% of the sample, appeared particularly vulnerable, likely due to the challenges they face in adapting to university demands (Rahayu & Arianti, 2020).

Several significant patterns emerged: students with lower GPAs reported higher distress; computer science students showed the highest distress levels, potentially due to rigorous workloads (Nolan et al., 2019); upper-year students demonstrated greater MHL, supporting the educational value of mental health knowledge (Kutcher et al., 2015); and students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds exhibited better MHL (Jiang et al., 2021). Notably, medical and public health students outperform their peers in MHL (Figas et al., 2024), likely due to curriculum differences (Lai et al., 2022). These findings directly address our primary objective of identifying differential mental health literacy (MHL) and distress patterns across academic subpopulations, a critical gap in low- and middle-income country (LMIC) contexts where student mental health interventions remain generalized.

Conclusion

Contrary to our initial hypothesis, the findings revealed a statistically significant yet negligible relationship between mental health literacy (MHL) and psychological distress levels among undergraduate students at Sriwijaya University ($p < 0.05$). Our findings reveal that the MHL gaps observed among non-medical students indicate a need for basic psychoeducation components tailored to different academic backgrounds.

For students, these results underscore the importance of enhancing MHL, particularly by developing first-aid skills, help-seeking behaviors, and self-help strategies to better manage psychological distress. For educational institutions such as Sriwijaya University, this study highlights the need to prioritize early MHL development through comprehensive approaches that extend beyond mere knowledge dissemination.

Future research should expand beyond student populations to examine these relationships in a broader context. Additional demographic factors, including tuition fee categories and family dependents, could provide deeper insights into subsequent analyses. Such investigations would yield more dynamic findings and enhance our understanding of the complex interplay between socioeconomic factors and mental health outcomes in academia.

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