

## Mental Health among Undergraduates from Malaysia and Pakistan: A Cross-Cultural Study

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### Abstract

Mental health issues were reported with increased prevalence across the globe during the COVID-19 pandemic era. The present research is focused to study the cross-cultural prevalence of mental health among Malaysian and Pakistani undergraduates during the pandemic phase in 2021. A cross-sectional online survey was conducted on a total of 533 graduates, 263 (49.30%) Malaysian and 270 (50.70%) Pakistani from different universities, with age range 20 - 30 years old ( $M = 22.81$ ;  $SD = 2.30$ ) and including males = 87 (16.30%) and females = 446 (83.70%). The purposive sampling technique was implied and the Mental Health Inventory (MHI-18) was administered to collect data. The results revealed that there was a significant relationship related to the psychological distress dimension of mental health among Malaysian and Pakistani respondents. Males scored lower than females in both Psychological Distress and Psychological Well-Being. Malaysian scored higher in Psychological Well-Being but lower in Psychological Distress as compared to Pakistanis students. Finally, there was no difference in both Psychological Distress and Psychological Well-Being when age is compared. In light of these results, we can conclude that Malaysian has a higher score on psychological well-being as compared to Pakistani undergraduate's students. These findings could provide cross-cultural theoretical implications and contribute to evidence-based social policy and social work intervention to promote adults' mental well-being to reduce psychological distress.

**Keywords:** Malaysia, Pakistan, mental health, graduate, pandemic

### Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid of society and technology, personal flexibility is becoming increasingly important. People need to learn how to adapt to a changing world quickly for their well-being, in recent years due to COVID-19 disease, the social, psychological, and financial concerns have changed drastically (Hong et al., 2020). People are struggling to conserve their mental health (Gold, 2020) along with challenging social and financial difficulties. Mental health has vital importance in the overall wellbeing and quality of life of adults in different cultures.

Currently the mental become a significant indicator of adults' health life and productivity. University students seeking services related to mental health or counseling centers who are dealing with mental health issues like suffering from depression and/or anxiety at times present with vocational concerns that may affect, or be affected by, their mental health status (Alves & Marco, 2020). Although educators who have backgrounds in mental health can recognize the mental health struggles of their students, they do not serve in a counseling role. Good mental health has been regarded as the desired outcome of healthy life and satisfaction in life. (Zu et al.,

2020) Individuals seeking counseling might not recognize the interconnectedness of health, mental health, work, and life concerns. Psychologists are mindful that a person's wellness is interwoven with their work, life roles, and health (Meyers & Woerkm, 2017). Although quantitative studies have established that mental health should be a priority given the universities students as they have high risks of mental health problems (Hanafiah & Bortel, 2015). There are many studies focused on the cross-cultural differences related to mental health among countries and undergraduates' students. Mental health problems may prevalent differently across cultures (Xu et al., 2020) but mental health is significantly important for the overall functioning and productivity of student's achievements. Mental health varied significantly based on socioeconomic status and ethno cultural group, with those with lower incomes and Arab participants reporting higher psychological distress (Mutair et al., 2018).

Tending to the emotional well-being necessities of understudies in universities among networks is a higher priority than at any other time. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the pressure and stress faced by numerous scholars while bringing new difficulties, such as social isolation, lack of social interaction, unexpected health and social crisis, loss of social support, and uncertainty. The collective toll of stressors is likely to cause significant consequences on this vulnerable population (Hassan et al., 2018) and the students are getting vulnerable. Indeed, even before the pandemic, it was known that university undergraduates were encountering an increasing amount of stress and mental health problems (Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2007). Mental health issues represent a major contributor to the disease burden worldwide it also affects the economic burden. Universities have reported unprecedented numbers of students in psychological distress in recent years. This might be because students are incapable of solving problems in interpersonal relationships, academic challenges, and career development (Sharpe et al., 2021). Nevertheless, mental illness can affect anyone regardless of age, income, social status, race-ethnicity, religion/spirituality,

background, or anything others aspect of culture.

The Republic of Pakistan is a Southeast Asian country with a population of over 140.7 million. Its population is fast growing and the majority (70%) lives in rural areas with a feudal or tribal value system. The economy is dependent on agriculture and 35% of the population lives below the poverty line (Hamdani et al., 2021). In Pakistan, mental disorders are accounted for more than 4% of the total disease burden, with the mental health burden higher among women. It is estimated that 24 million people in Pakistan require psychiatric assistance (Begum et al., 2020). The mental health challenges are affecting the adult's strengths and life adaptability. However, the clinical support is not supportive to facilitate healthy life outcomes. Pakistan has seen a 30% impale in mental illnesses caused by the coronavirus in recent months, in recent surveys and professional growth is similarly fragmented (Munawar et al., 2020). In Malaysia according to the latest National Health and Morbidity Survey, every three in 10 adults aged 16 years and above suffer from some form of mental health issue (Shanmugam et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, there is still a lack of understanding of the mental health issues especially in terms of common mental disorders (Perveen, 2017), the causes and possible consequences as well as recognizing the early signs of major mental problems in many countries including Malaysia and Pakistan. There is the social stigma associated with mental illness (Hanafiah & van Bortel, 2015), from a cultural standpoint shaped by superstitious beliefs and misconceptions within both countries. This negative perception often leads adults to silently suffer from their mental health issues, which can deteriorate their functioning for better life and outcome (Hassan et al., 2018). Several policy reforms in the past decade have led to advances in the Malaysian mental health system, which has had a huge impact to reduce the mental health burden among adults. In Pakistan, the mental health facilities and policies are also advancing to embark on the challenges for youth potential engagement and activities for healthy life and outcome. The issues and challenges of mental health in

Malaysia are explored to give a big picture of the current situation that happen today. Awareness and usage of support services and resources for mental health can reduce psychological distress among Malaysian adults (Shanmugam et al., 2020). In comparison in Pakistan, there is a required support system and resources to improve the mental health and psychological well-being among adults in different institutional sectors were associated with lower psychological distress (Bibi et al., 2020). The current focus is on improving the mental health of individuals to help to lead a better quality of life. The protective factors for mental health include male gender, staying with children employment, confidence in doctors, high perceived likelihood of survival, and spending less time on health information (Wang et al., 2021). Present study is exploring the prevalence of mental health among undergraduates of Malaysian and Pakistani Universities. Study highlighted the importance of mental health components among undergraduates students at cross cultural level of two Asian countries, Malaysia and Pakistan.

### Research Objective

This research aimed to study the prevalence of mental health among Malaysian and Pakistani undergraduate's students during the pandemic phase

### Method

Study was conducted through online cross sectional survey from the undergraduates of Malaysia and Pakistan universities. The link was distributed among undergraduate students of the universities of Pakistan and Malaysia. Total 533 students' participated through purposive sampling method in this study. The link was share on the social media link of universities after obtaining the permission. The ethical approval was obtained from Research Innovation and Management Center of Sultan Idris Educational University.

**Sample:** A total of 533 students of tertiary levels participated in the study with males = 87, 16.30% and females = 446, 83.70%. Malaysian = 263, 49.30% and Pakistani = 270,

50.70%. The age range = 20 - 30 years old with  $M = 22.81$  ( $SD = 2.30$ ).

**Instrument:** The demographic questionnaire contain the information about age, gender, years of graduation, university and nationality, the second instrument was MHI-18, which is simplified version of the original 38-item (Veit & Ware, 1983) used to measure mental health. It has two dimensions, psychological distress (e.g Item 14: Have you been in low or very low spirits?) and psychological well-being (e.g. Item 15: Were you a happy person?) with 10 and 8 items respectively. All items under psychological well-being were reverse-scored (i.e Item 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 13, and 15). MHI-18 uses a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (all of the time) to 6 (none of the time). The higher total score of MHI-18 indicates a better mental health status. MHI-18 was found valid and reliable in enormous studies (Meybodi et al., 2011) This instrument has been found reliable and valid with  $CR = .891$ ,  $AVE = .543$ ,  $\alpha = .868$  for psychological well-being and  $CR = .876$ ,  $AVE = .50$ ,  $\alpha = .865$  for psychological distress.

**Procedure:** After ethical approval from Research Innovation and Management Center of Sultan Idris Educational University, the link of questionnaire was distributed on the social media platform of different universities of Malaysia and Pakistan. Data was collected during the period: July – September 2021, which was covid-19 pandemic phase. After completing the Informed consent the respondent was able to answer the questionnaire, the responses were recorded through Google form. The data privacy and anonymous was maintained. The data was analysed using SPSS and SEM AMOS software to highlight the interaction of variables among the demographics and nationalities.

### Results

Data was analysed using the SPSS and SEM AMOS. From the preliminary analysis, item MHI1, MHI16, and MHI17 were deleted due to factor loading less than .50. The fitted model is shown in Figure 1. Meanwhile, the results of hypotheses testing are shown in Figure 2 and summarized in Table 1.

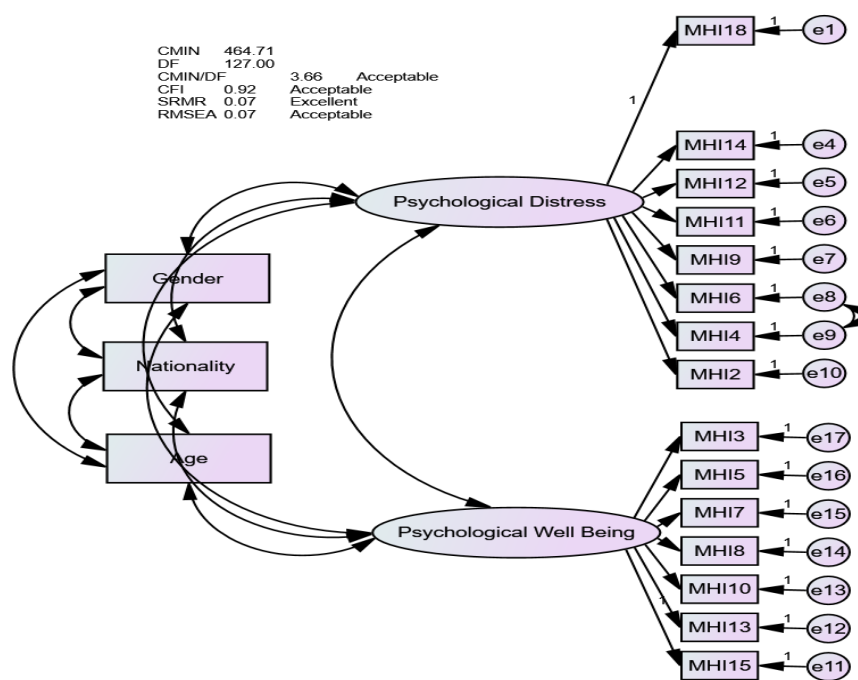


Figure 1: Model Fit Indices

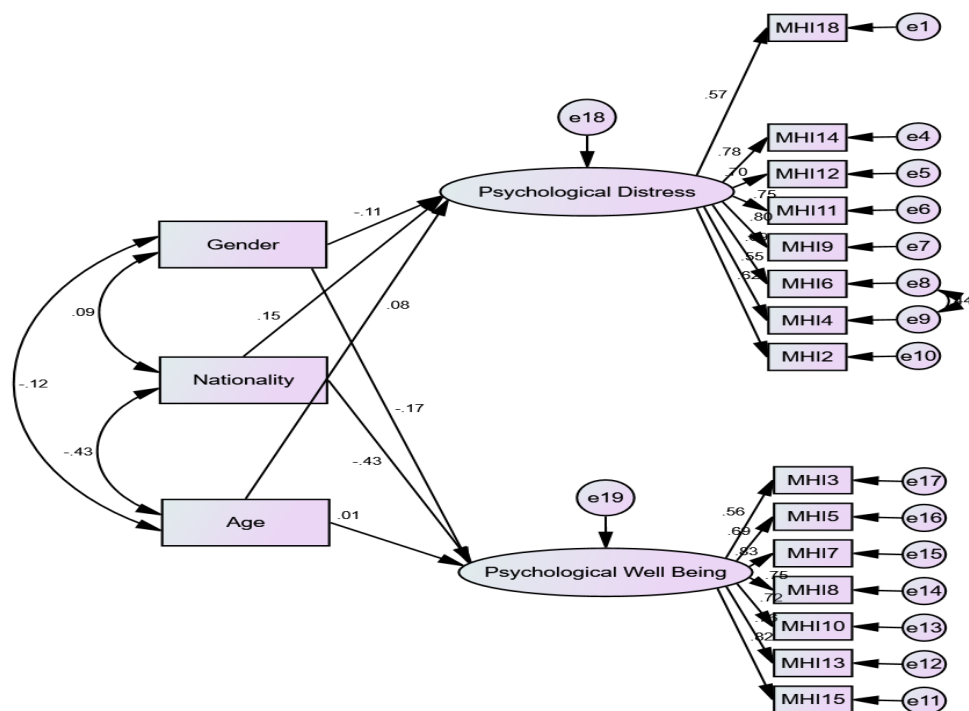


Figure 2: Results of Hypotheses Testing

**Table 2: Summary of Results**

Demographic Variable	Psychological Well-Being	Psychological Distress
#Gender	-.167***	-.105*
Nationality	-.431***	.147**
Age	.009	.084

#Note: 1 = Male; 2 = Female; 1 = Malaysian; 2 = Pakistani

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

The results indicated that male respondent score lower than female on psychological well-being and psychological distress as compared to females. The hypothesis was accepted there is significant relationship between gender and psychological well-being dimension of mental health among Malaysian and Pakistani respondents. The hypothesis to measure the relationship between age and psychological well-being dimension of mental health among Malaysian and Pakistani respondents was rejected. The findings indicated that there was significant relationship between nationality and psychological well-being dimension and psychological distress dimension of mental health among Malaysian and Pakistani respondents. The hypothesis was accepted that there is a relationship between nationality and psychological well-being dimension of mental health among Malaysian and Pakistani respondents. The male respondent shows higher score in psychological distress dimension so the hypothesis was accepted that there is a relationship between gender and psychological distress dimension of mental health among Malaysian and Pakistani respondents. The results indicated that there is no a relationship between age and psychological distress dimension of mental health among Malaysian and Pakistani respondents, so the hypothesis was rejected.

## Discussion

The current study finding indicated that there is a significant prevalence of mental health among both adults in Malaysia and Pakistan. Results indicated that males scored lower than females in both Psychological Distress and Psychological Well-Being among Malaysian

and Pakistani adult's undergraduates. Previous pieces of literature found that the stressors of the pandemic among the undergraduates, including the economic crisis, female gender, academic delays, disruption in daily life, and social support, are significantly higher (Miconi et al., 2021; Sharpe et al., 2021). Females are struggling in Asian cultures to balance, education work, and family. The women reported stress, anxiety, and restlessness, due to the double burden of work and separation from their children and lack of family support, as compared to males (Moracco et al., 2004). The behavioral and social activities are significant contributors to diversion for male activities, which help them to handle the emotional and psychological issues differently than women (Lee et al., 2021). Studies have highlighted that mental health issues have also been reported higher, especially among females, there are many psychosocial elements (Akhter et al., 2017) that cause the issues higher than in men. Family and financial difficulties were commonly found to be an associated factor for anxiety, depression, and stress among females (Ali et al., 2021). the findings of current study has contrary impact by indicating that currently male has reported lower level of psychological well-being as compared to females.

The findings of this study also highlighted that the Malaysian score higher on psychological well-being as compared to Pakistani graduates students. In Malaysia, the management and awareness are increasing as many platforms are raising the concerns of mental health and psychological well-being for a healthy life. The quality of life (Shahar et al., 2019) in terms of daily living is better in Malaysia as

compared to Pakistan (Javed et al., 2020). The Pandemic did affect the psychological health and normal functioning, social life, and daily routine among Malaysian adults, the study revealed that the Malaysian adults are showing mental health prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression at different levels (Perveen et al., 2020). The current findings indicated that there is increased psychological well-being and decreased psychological distress among Malaysian undergraduates compared to Pakistani students. Staying connected with friends was seen to have helped in the management of psychological distress, which might lead to support for the current finding of the increased level of psychological well-being as compared to psychological distress among Malaysian (Ibrahim et al., 2020). Many previous studies from Pakistan suggest a high prevalence of anxiety and depression among this population during the pandemic phase (Imran et al., 2021). In Pakistan according to recent reviews confirm that lower socioeconomic status is correlated with worse mental health outcomes among adults (Maselko et al., 2018).

There was no age difference reported related to mental health among the graduates of Malaysia and Pakistan. The mental health concern is shown in all the age groups and evident stress and mental health reported among university graduates (Pasic et al., 2020). Now a day there is higher pressure on university graduate students as there is an increased concern related to job finding (Rafi et al., 2019), social status, and economic stability, all these issues can compromise the graduated psychological well-being and can increase the psychological distress.

This current study highlighted the importance of mental health related to psychological well-being and psychological distress across two countries Malaysia and Pakistan. The cross-cultural study has the impact to draw attention to the psychological well-being and psychological distress issues among undergraduates as they are the strong pillar for social and economic stability in any country. Universities should consider adding or increasing the number of peer educators, and psychologists who can provide psychological support during the pandemic era (Roshaidai Mohd Arifin et al., 2022). However, stress and

mental health issues are real concerns among adults and it is affecting their productivity and social involvement in the welfare of countries' development.

## Conclusion

The cross-sectional study has highlighted the importance of mental health among undergraduate's students of Malaysia and Pakistan. Results revealed that the Males scored lower than females in both Psychological Distress and Psychological Well-Being, Malaysians scored higher in Psychological Well-Being but lower in Psychological Distress as compared to Pakistanis. There was no difference found related to age between Psychological Distress and Psychological Well-Being among students. The study finding has highlighted those undergraduate adults, need strategic guidelines and therapeutic management for their mental health care and psychological well-being. It is important to see the significant of mental health among the adults to support and prepare them for a healthy future and healthy life. This research can help practitioners and psychologists to see the mental health significance in cross-cultural perceptive.

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